

*Unio Magica:*  
Part II: Plotinus, Theurgy, and  
the Question of Ritual

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In a previously published portion (Part I) of this paper,<sup>1</sup> I suggested that Plotinus had derived his notion of union with the One at least in part from contemporaneous ritual practices—practices of a sort well attested in the Greek magical papyri and mysteriosophic literature—that were intended to conjoin the soul of the practitioner with a deity. This implied in turn a far greater interdependence than often imagined between philosophical or religious mysticism on the one hand and ritual praxis on the other. In this second and final portion (Part II) of the paper, I would like to examine Plotinus' general attitude towards ritual, and to suggest a reconceptualization of his own situation in the larger context of the enigmatic complex of Neoplatonic religious practices known as theurgy. I shall suggest that the contemplative praxis Plotinus used to attain the ultimate phase of union with the One shared precise structural features with theurgy, and that he had in fact derived his own methods from contemporaneous theurgical techniques. This is as much a matter of taxonomy as it is of historical analysis, and will, I hope, help to recontextualize Plotinus' thought more accurately in the religious sphere of his time.

1. INTRODUCTION: PLOTINUS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THEURGY

If my suggestion in Part I of this paper is correct—that Plotinus developed his conception of mystical union with the One in part from contemporaneous rituals of conjunction—then we would do well to reconsider the broader question of his attitude towards ritual in general, but also, in particular, to those Neoplatonic ritual practices known as “theurgy” (*theourgia*, *hieratikê*, *telesitikê*). In fact the issue of Plotinus' involvement with magico-religious practices has already been the subject of a perennial, and often repetitive, scholarly

1. Z. Mazur, “*Unio Magica*: Part I: On the Magical Origins of Plotinus' Mysticism,” *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 23–52.

debate.<sup>2</sup> Yet it seems that much of the scholarship has been motivated by an almost anxious desire to preserve Plotinus from what is perceived to be a morass of irrationalism in his wake.<sup>3</sup> With a few notable exceptions (to be discussed below), the tendency has been to minimize the significance of his involvement with magic in general but also—and especially—to disavow any relationship between his transcendental mysticism and ritual practices.<sup>4</sup> Thus

2. On Plotinus and magic generally, see, *inter alia*, P. Merlan, "Plotinus and Magic," *Isis* 44 (1953): 341–48; A.H. Armstrong, "Was Plotinus a Magician?" *Phronesis* 2 (1957): 73–79; D.P. Taormina, "Filosofia e magia in Plotino," in *Momenti e Problemi di Storia del Platonismo* [Symbolon 1] (Catania, 1984) 55–83; L. Brisson, "Plotin et la magie" in *Porphyre: la vie de Plotin*, vol. 2, ed. L. Brisson *et al.*, *Histoire des doctrines de l'antiquité classique* 16 (Paris: Vrin, 1992) 465–75; J. Finamore, "Plotinus and Iamblichus on Magic and Theurgy," *Dionysius* 17 (1999): 83–94. Some have dismissed Plotinus' theoretical interest in magical practices as unworthy of philosophical attention; e.g., L. Gerson, *Plotinus* (London: Routledge, 1994), for whom such topics are "distractions from the philosopher's concerns" (xvii).

3. Thus, for example (with a typical sneer), E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1951) 286: "Plotinus is a man who, as Wilhelm Kroll put it, 'raised himself by a strong intellectual effort above the fog-ridden atmosphere which surrounded him.' While he lived, he lifted his pupils with him. But with his death the fog began to close in again, and later Neoplatonism is in many respects a retrogression to the spineless syncretism from which he had tried to escape."

4. For a tiny but representative sample: Th. Hopfner, in *Paubys Realencyclopädie* (1936) 260, renders Porphyry's description of Plotinus' mystical union in *Vita Plotini* 23.17 as "... und zwar durch einen unbeschreiblichen Akt, nicht durch irgendwelche (magische) Kraft." Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) 286: "As to the Plotinian *unio mystica*, it must surely be clear to any careful reader of passages like *Enn.* 1.6.9 or 6.7.34, that it is attained, not by any ritual of evocation or performance of prescribed acts, but by an inward discipline of the mind which involves no compulsive element and has nothing whatever to do with magic." P. Boyancé, "Théurgie et téléstique néoplatoniciennes," *Revue de L'Histoire des Religions* 147 (1955): 189–209: "Parmi les néoplatoniciens la théurgie ... est ignorée de Plotin, qui est bien au-dessus de cette forme inférieure de mysticisme." E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Norton, 1965) 86: "[Plotinus'] approach is severely intellectual, not physiological as in some oriental sects or sacramental as with some Christian mystics. He prescribes no breathing exercises, no navel-brooding, no hypnotic repetition of sacred syllables; and *no ritual is needed to provoke the experience*" (italics added). A.H. Armstrong, *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967) 260: "There can be no place, or at least no important place, for rites or sacraments in the religion of Plotinus ..." A. Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition: a Study in Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1974) 124: "Artificial magic does not seem for Plotinus to be of any use in the salvation of the soul." A. Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy," *Classical Quarterly* 32.1 (1982): 212–24: "It is still a common view that with [Iamblichus'] advocacy of theurgy a decline sets in and the rational basis of Plotinian mysticism is abandoned [in the Neoplatonic school]." R. Majercik, "Plotinus and Greek Mysticism," in *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience East and West*, ed. D.H. Bishop (London: Associated UP, 1995) 53: "Plotinus eschews all techniques of magic as having any positive effect on the soul's ascent"; and "The later Neoplatonists recognized the difficulties in Plotinus' strictly intellectual ascent and thus turned towards more popular forms of religiosity as a way of universalizing Plotinus' system" (55). J. Laurent, "La Prière selon

it is frequently asserted that Plotinus was able to obtain union with the One solely through 'rational' methods of pure contemplation, methods which are then contrasted with those of his ostensibly less philosophically-sophisticated successors, who were (according to this scheme) obliged to resort to the supposedly 'irrational' ritualism of theurgy in order to attain this goal.

However, as we have seen in Part I of this paper, the reality of the historical relationship between Plotinus and ritual practices is far more complex than this convenient scheme suggests, and there are additional factors which complicate the issue. The most basic problem is that of terminology. Plotinus himself does not explicitly discuss theurgic-type rituals (though I shall discuss one possible exception below), he does not mention the word *theourgia* or any of its synonyms, and he makes no certain reference to the *Chaldaean Oracles* (which are largely, if ambiguously, coextensive with the concept of theurgy).<sup>5</sup> In his analysis of magical theory (IV.4.30–44), he uses the words *mageia* and *goêteia* to describe only sorcery, malicious enchantment, binding spells, and so on, but not the more positive or soteriological uses of ritual power thought by later Neoplatonists to comprise theurgy. Although the word *theourgia* and its cognates probably occurred earlier, it becomes commonplace only in the writings of Plotinus' immediate successors, by which point the concept is already highly controversial. Similarly, the biographical data is of little help, since Porphyry does not explicitly describe Plotinus' attitude towards theurgy. In a much-discussed passage of *Vita Plotini* 10, however, Porphyry does mention Plotinus' refusal to accompany Amelius on a round of temple-sacrifices at temples on the feast of the New Moon; but also, in the same breath, he relates the celebrated anecdote about the evocation of Plotinus' guardian *daimôn* at the Iseum of Rome, which Plotinus attends "eagerly" (*hetoimôs*). Yet Porphyry describes the latter event neither as *theourgia* nor with the generic terms *mageia* or *goêteia*, but rather as a *klêsis* (a "calling" or "invocation"). Therefore, to say that Plotinus disavows 'magic' (*mageia*) as a suitable means of ascent to the One is perhaps self-evident, but irrelevant, while to say that he either did or did not approve of *theourgia* itself can only be hypothetical; this must be deduced from his explicit statements on other topics. Moreover, the terminological difficulties surrounding theurgy are exacerbated by the persistent and often unexamined presumption of a clear boundary between rationality and ritual (I shall return to this issue later).

Plotin," *Kairos* 15 (1999): 99–106: "Rien n'est dit dans les *Ennéades* concernant la nécessité de pratiques religieuses. L'Expérience mystique s'absente de tout culte." And so on.

5. On the history of the term 'theurgy' and its synonyms, see H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic, and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire* (nouvelle édition) éd. M. Tardieu (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978) 461–66, excursus 4.

## 2.1 THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST PLOTINUS' INVOLVEMENT IN MAGIC

Despite these difficulties, I would eventually like to suggest that Plotinus transformed ritual techniques of conjunction into a variety of interiorized praxis which was akin to theurgy in certain respects but was in greater conformity with his metaphysics. Before proceeding, however, we must examine the counter-argument, namely that Plotinus rejected theurgy, however it is defined, as a means for mystical ascent. In the absence of any direct discussion of the topic in the *Enneads*, scholars have typically attempted to exonerate Plotinus from involvement in theurgy by deduction from his explicit comments. The most influential arguments have been those of A.H. Armstrong, who attempted to defend Plotinus from Philip Merlan's notorious charge that he was a practicing magician.<sup>6</sup> Armstrong adduces Plotinus' own theory of magic (a category which Armstrong does not clearly distinguish from theurgy) to demonstrate that he believed that magical action was confined to the cosmic sphere and thus could not be used to effect any contact with the intelligible realm or to attain a transcendent union with the One. The crux of Armstrong's point is that Plotinus maintains that magic (*mageia*, *goêteia*) operates through the harmony and sympathy (*sumpatheia*) of "the All" (*to pan*). Armstrong notes that for Plotinus the "All" specifically means the *physical* cosmos, conceived as a single, ensouled organism.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in IV.4 Plotinus provides two mechanical models of magical action. On the one hand, an effect on one part of an organism will be transmitted through a consecutive series of adjacent parts so that a distant part will ultimately be affected, just as a vibration imparted to one end of the string of a lyre will reach the other end.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the inherent sympathy of the whole cosmos will ensure that an action on one part of the organism will have a corresponding affect on a distant but similar part, just as the sound of one lyre string will cause a distant but harmonically attuned string to vibrate.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, Plotinus states that magic would not work if the magician were outside of the All, since the sympathy here is restricted to physical phenomena within the limits of the cosmic sphere.<sup>10</sup> Plotinus then derives two parallel conclusions from this argument. At the microcosmic level, sorcery might affect the body and the irrational part of the soul, but cannot harm the true philosopher who has ceased to identify himself with his bodily nature and has come to live in accordance with his higher self, i.e., the intellect; only the activity of *theôria*, he maintains, is "unenchantable" (*agoêteutos*).<sup>11</sup> At the macrocosmic

6. Armstrong, "Was Plotinus a Magician?" *contra* P. Merlan, "Plotinus and Magic," *loc. cit. supra*, n. 2.

7. Armstrong, *op. cit.* 77.

8. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.4.41.1–4.

9. IV.4.41.5–10; IV.4.45.

10. IV.4.40.17.

11. IV.4.44.1.

level, the visible gods (i.e., the celestial bodies) do not hear or respond to prayers or conjurations. Since they possess undescended souls, they cannot be affected by magic, nor can they be deliberate participants; rather, the magician employs their effluences without their conscious volition.<sup>12</sup> On the basis of this treatise, Armstrong assumes that Plotinus would have considered magic all the more useless for conjunction with the hypostatic Nous and certainly the transcendent One, since these entities are situated in the hypercosmic realm and thus outside of the domain of magic.<sup>13</sup>

It seems, however, that Armstrong's argument is somewhat problematic. First, he conflates magic with theurgy and thus misapplies to the latter Plotinus' explicit arguments against the former. Plotinus' discussion of *mageia* and *goêteia* in IV.4 is solely concerned with antagonistic magic, not with soteriological ritual. We have seen that Plotinus considers magic to operate through a Stoicizing model of cosmic sympathy.<sup>14</sup> It therefore seems self-evident that the hypercosmic powers are immune to magical assault. Yet the theoretical basis of theurgy, at least as it is outlined by Plotinus' successors, relies upon a different model. Briefly, the later Neoplatonists believed that the One perpetually creates and sustains the sensible world by means of a hierarchical cascade of influence extending down through the various entities—supracelestial gods, celestial bodies, *daimones*, or souls—which abide on each of the progressively inferior ontological strata. Each of the gods is responsible for the enlivening of an "order" (*taxis*) or "series" (*seira*) of ontologically-inferior beings, and this order eventually culminates in a particular subset of terrestrial objects, e.g., one of the various species of animals, plants, or minerals. By virtue of the continuous emanation of divine energy from the gods down through their respective chains, the inherent relationship between an object of a given order and the presiding god is more than superficial: the terrestrial object was thought to participate dynamically in the deity. Certain objects were selected for their particular qualities and were ritually manipulated in order to establish a special connection between the theurgist's soul and a specific god. These objects—called *sumbola* or *sunthêmata* in theurgical terminology—could take the form of artificial representations, such as words, sounds, or images, but they could also be natural objects such as plants and minerals, which themselves would be of ontologically inferior rank but linked through some inherent likeness with the deities atop their respective chains.<sup>15</sup>

12. IV.4.41–2.

13. Armstrong, *op. cit.* 77.

14. On Stoic *sumpatheia*, e.g., Cicero, *De Divinatione* II.33–35.

15. For the theory of theurgy in primary Neoplatonic sources see, *inter alia*, Iamblichus, *De Mysteriorum* I.11; II.11; V.7–10; VII.1–4; Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum Commentaria* I.209–12 Diehl; also *idem*, *On the Priestly Art According to the Greeks*, with translation

This 'vertical' scheme is largely consistent with Plotinus' metaphysics, but is entirely distinct from his theory of antagonistic magic, which relies instead upon 'horizontal' chains of causality within the organismic unity of the cosmos.<sup>16</sup> In IV.4 Plotinus discusses magic without implicating theurgy, and one may presume that he does not explicitly oppose the two here simply because his immediate argument in this passage is not concerned with soteriology. That magic and theurgy could in fact be considered theoretically distinct is suggested by a passage of the *De Mysteriis* in which Iamblichus explicitly attributes the efficacy of theurgic sacrifice to the inherent vertical connection between an object and its generative cause (a deity) while specifically denying responsibility to cosmic sympathy, which, like Plotinus, he restricted to the physical world.<sup>17</sup> Plotinus' conclusion that aggressive magic is limited to the cosmic domain therefore does not vitiate theurgy.

Moreover, Armstrong claims that Plotinus restricts the efficacy of all *ritual* action to the physical cosmos, and yet a careful reading of Plotinus' discussion of magic casts doubt on this interpretation. The explicit purpose of Plotinus' argument is to exculpate the celestial gods from deliberate participation in harmful magic.<sup>18</sup> He therefore argues that the higher powers are entirely impassible and that they cannot be affected in any way by their inferiors. He is obliged to admit the efficacy of malicious astral magic, since he himself, apparently, was at one point a victim;<sup>19</sup> and he explains this by arguing that although the celestial bodies are not themselves affected by magic or prayer, it is nevertheless possible for magicians to employ their effluence for harmful ends without their complicity.<sup>20</sup> Now this argument has an implicit corollary at odds with Armstrong's assumptions about theurgy. It seems here that Plotinus' admission—that the incorporeal<sup>21</sup> efflux of the impassible celestial bodies could be ritually manipulated—calls into doubt Armstrong's claim that Plotinus considered *all* ritual action useless outside of the domain of the physical cosmos. In other words, if the ritual manipulation of incorporeal essences is possible, why could the corresponding effluence

and discussion in B. Copenhaver, "Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus, and the Question of a Philosophy of Magic in the Renaissance" in *Hermeticism in the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. I. Merkel and A.G. Debus (Washington: Associated UP, 1988) 79–110.

16. Using terminology suggested by A. Smith, *Porphyry's Place* 90 ff.

17. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* V.6–9, on which see also C. van Liefferinge, *La Théurgie: des Oracles Chaldaïques à Proclus*, Kernos Supplément 9 (Liège: Centre International d'Étude de la Religion Grecque Antique, 1999) 88. Iamblichus believes the basic mechanism of theurgy to be *philia* instead, e.g., V.9 [209.9].

18. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.4.42.

19. Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 10.1–14.

20. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.4.41.10–15; 42.15–30.

21. II.1.7.28; II.3.9; IV.4.35.43–44; IV.4.42.

or “emanation” (*aporroia*) from the hypercosmic and hypostatic gods (Soul, Nous or even the One)<sup>22</sup> not be similarly attracted?

Although Armstrong does not address this possibility, there is evidence from a related treatise (IV.3) that Plotinus believed divine energies could be ritually adduced. He makes his only explicit (and apparently rather sympathetic) reference to what would elsewhere be called theurgy in the context of a discussion of the encosmic activity of the Soul:

And I think that the wise men of old (*hoi palai sophoi*), who made temples and statues in the wish that the gods should be present (*pareina*) to them, looking to the nature of the All, had in mind that the nature of soul is everywhere easy to attract, but that if someone were able to construct something receptive (*prospathe*) to it and able to receive a part of it, it would of all things receive soul most easily (*braiston*). That which is receptive (*prospathe*) to it is what imitates it in some way, like a mirror is able to catch a form.<sup>23</sup>

The magical consecration (or ‘animation’) of statues is attested in the Hermetic corpus, the magical papyri, the *Chaldaean Oracles*, and later Neoplatonic literature, and was thought to serve soteriological as well as more practical ends.<sup>24</sup> Plotinus’ image of the attraction of soul through likeness resembles the general theory of theurgy expounded by his successors according to which *sumbola* ‘vertically’ draw down divine energy into the practitioner’s soul and thereby permit a union with the gods.<sup>25</sup>

Plotinus’ apparent concession to ritual praxis in this passage has understandably caused some embarrassment for those scholars who might wish to preserve Plotinus from the taint of ‘magic.’ Thus Andrew Smith and E.R. Dodds found it necessary to explain IV.3.11 away by arguing that Plotinus really intends it only as an example of the more general phenomenon of the participation of soul in *all* material things suited to receive it, without granting any special privilege to ritual objects.<sup>26</sup> Yet even if this is what Plotinus means, the view that all objects naturally participate in the divine would nevertheless

22. Emanation from the One, e.g. VI.7.22–3; from *Nous*, e.g. II.3.11.8 (in the context of astral effluences!); III.4.3.24–28.

23. IV.3.11.1–7 in Armstrong, *Plotinus* vol. 4 p. 71; n.b. however that Armstrong renders *prospathe* consistently as “sympathetic,” which is misleading in this context; Plotinus may be deliberately avoiding the use of *sumpatheia* here. Henceforth all Plotinus translations will be Armstrong’s, with minor changes.

24. E.g., the Hermetic *Asclepius* 37; PGM III.282–409; IV.296–466, 2359–72, 2373–440; XII.14–95; *Chaldaean Oracles* fr. 224; On this practice in later Neoplatonism, *inter alia*, Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* V.23; Eunapius, *Vitae Sophistarum* 475; Damascius, *Philosophical History* fr. 76E [= *Suda* IV.469,26] and 89A [= *Suda* II.127,21] Athanassiadi; see also Boyancé, “Théurgie et téléstique,” *loc. cit.* n. 4. *supra*.

25. Note also Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.7.22.

26. A. Smith, *Porphry’s Place* 127 and n. 8; Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational* 306 and n. 83.

be consistent with post-Plotinian theurgical theory—what would eventually become the foundation of Renaissance *magia naturalis*—in which all objects, even natural ones, could be considered *sumbola* of the gods, although certain objects, presumably those with a greater degree of ‘likeness’ to the superior entities, would be more suitable than others for attracting particular energies from above. Furthermore, lest one imagine that Plotinus means that the psychic influence drawn down into terrestrial likenesses is merely cosmic—in other words, that it derives not from the intelligible but only from the stars or from the inferior, generative aspect of the soul—he makes it clear in the subsequent passage that objects within the physical cosmos are naturally conjoined not only with each other but also, by means of the Soul, with the intelligible gods.<sup>27</sup> Regardless of whether Plotinus intended this passage as an explicit admission of theurgic ritual or merely as an argument for the immanence of divine energy in any appropriate terrestrial object, it appears to belie Armstrong’s contention that for Plotinus, ritual cannot breach the essential division between the cosmic and the hypercosmic realms, and more generally undermines the rationale for maintaining that Plotinus would have rejected soteriological ritual.

## 2.2. Plotinus contra Gnostic magic

Although Armstrong’s arguments concerning *Ennead* IV.4 fail to support the conclusion that Plotinus would reject theurgy, Plotinus does make other criticisms of magic elsewhere which have also been cited as evidence of his supposedly rationalistic rejection of theurgical praxis.<sup>28</sup> In his anti-Gnostic treatise (II.9), he launches a frontal attack on the Gnostics’ attempts at magical interaction with the gods, complaining, first, that they are wrong to coerce the gods or heavenly powers through magical incantations, and second, that the incorporeal deities cannot be affected by physical sounds:

27. IV.3.11.8–13 in Armstrong, *Plotinus* vol. 4, 71: “Yes, the nature of the All, too, made all things skillfully in imitation of the realities of which it had the logoi, and when each thing in this way had become a logos in matter, shaped according to that which was before matter, it linked it (*sunēpsato*) with that god in conformity with whom it came into being and to whom the soul looked and whom it had in its making.” Cf. however Ficino’s opposite interpretation, described in B. Copenhaver, “Iamblichus, Synesius and the *Chaldaean Oracles* in Marsilio Ficino’s *De Vita Libri Tres*: Hermetic or Neoplatonic Magic?” in *Supplementum Festivum: Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies vol. 49, ed. J. Hankins, J. Monfasani, and F. Purnell (Binghamton, NY, 1987) 441–55.

28. E.g., B. Pearson, “Theurgic Tendencies in Gnosticism and Iamblichus’ Conception of Theurgy” in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern 6, ed. R.T. Wallis (Albany: SUNY, 1992) 253–76.

For when they write magic chants (*epaiodas*), intending to address them to those powers, not only to the soul but to those above it as well, what are they doing except making the powers obey the word and follow the lead of people who say spells (*goiteias*) and charms (*thelbæis*) and conjurations (*peiseis*), any one of us who is well-skilled in the art of saying precisely the right things in the right way, songs (*melê*) and cries (*êchous*) and aspirated (*prospnuseis*) and hissing (*sigmous*) sounds and everything which their writings say has magic power in the higher world? But even if they do not want to say this, how are the incorporeal beings affected by sounds?<sup>29</sup>

One might imagine this to mean that Plotinus excludes all theurgical contact with the gods. Yet again, upon close examination, it becomes evident that he does not attack the Gnostics for the use of ritual itself. Rather, his accusation reveals his real bone of contention: a differential view of the ontological hierarchy. The first element of his complaint is that the Gnostics allow that any one of us—even an imperfect human—could *compel* superior beings to do one's bidding. It is worth noting here that the complaint that magicians coerce the gods was already commonplace by Plotinus' time, and served almost as a 'definition' of magic.<sup>30</sup> The Gnostics (according at least to Plotinus' interpretation) believe that the celestial powers are obstacles to salvation and must therefore be dominated with hostile magic. In his own system, by contrast, this is neither necessary nor possible. As I have argued elsewhere, Plotinus' entire metaphysics is in some sense governed by a tacit axiom (what I call his "axiom of continuous hierarchy") which entails that an ontologically-inferior principle can never control an ontologically-superior one, and, concomitantly, that no ethically-inferior entity could end up in a position of dominance over an ethically-superior one.<sup>31</sup> This obtains because the regular order of procession ensures a correspondence between ethical and ontological status. Since (according to Plotinus) the celestial entities are entirely impassible and occupy a position superior to humans in the cosmo-

29. II.9.14.2–9 in Armstrong, *Plotinus* vol. 2, 277–79.

30. On this point, see, *inter alia*, van Liefferinge, *Tbéurgie* 42–52; F. Graf, "Prayer in Magic and Religious Ritual" in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. C. Faraone and D. Obbink (Oxford UP, 1991) 188–213; A. Segal, "Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition," in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, ed. R. van den Broek and M.J. Vermaseren (Leiden: Brill, 1981) 349–75. Although invocations and *voes magicæ* do occur in the two extant Gnostic tractates known in Plotinus' circle (*Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*), in neither case does the context of these utterances imply the *coercion* of the heavenly powers; the distinction between these passages and hymnic prayer remains imprecise; see *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII,1) 52.17 ff., 88.10 ff., 118.9–27, 127.1–7; *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3) 53.32–55.11. On the other hand, there do exist other Gnostic texts (e.g., the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Book of Jeu* in the Codex Bruce) which seem to advise the coercive adjuration of malevolent archons presiding over each successive cosmic sphere, and this is possibly the sort of thing Plotinus is complaining about.

31. Z. Mazur, "Plotinus' Philosophical Opposition to Gnosticism and the Implicit Axiom of Continuous Hierarchy," in *Plato Redivivus: Studies in the History of Platonism*, ed. J. Finamore and R. Berchman (New Orleans: UP of the South, 2005) 95–114 [forthcoming].

logical and ontological hierarchy, they are both morally superior to humans and incapable of being affected, adversely or otherwise, by human agency.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the second item of Plotinus' complaint is that the Gnostics wrongly presume that corporeal sounds can affect the incorporeal powers. We have seen that according to his theory of magic, a ritual action which changes the physical configuration of the cosmos will have an effect at a distance due to the sympathy of the entire cosmic organism. But clearly the physical sounds of Gnostic incantations will have no effect upon the noetic gods, who are, by definition, entirely incorporeal, and thus incapable of being affected by any (ontologically inferior) material causes. Thus Plotinus criticizes the Gnostics not for their use of ritual *per se*, but for what he sees as their arrogant, impious, and entirely futile attempts to manipulate their superiors.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, this practice bears no theoretical relationship to the model of theurgy elaborated by Plotinus' successors, which—according to its proponents—cannot coerce or constrain the gods; indeed, merely adorning the incorporeal radiation from a deity does not affect the deity at all.

### 2.3 "Theourgia" versus "theôria"

Besides Plotinus' own arguments, scholars have often cited a few comments of ancient authors to demonstrate that Plotinus rejected ritual in favor of a solely 'contemplative' union with the One. Thus, for example, reference is commonly made to the passages of Augustine's *City of God* which cite Porphyry to the effect that theurgy was useful for the purification of the lower soul, but had no effect on the superior, "intellectual" soul; this, Porphyry believed, could return to God without theurgical assistance.<sup>34</sup> Porphyry's position is often fathered onto Plotinus without explicit evidence. There is also the frequently-cited statement, now attributed to Damascius—thus three centuries after Plotinus—that Iamblichus and Proclus valued "the hieratic art" (*hieratikê*) over philosophy, while Plotinus and Porphyry preferred philosophy instead.<sup>35</sup> But it is unclear what we should make of this assumption *ex silentio*, since Damascius may have named Plotinus along with Porphyry merely to add greater authority to his own opinion, namely that philosophy,

32. So too in Plotinus' discussion of Gnostic magico-medical exorcism at II.9.14.12–35; his underlying objection is that he does not believe that *daimones*, which are invariably higher on the ontological scale than humans (thus II.4.5.25–28), are *ever* causes of disease; see also R.M. van den Berg, "Plotinus' Attitude to Traditional Cult: a Note on Porphyry VP 10," *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999): 345–60.

33. As H. Remus writes in "Plotinus and Gnostic Thaumaturgy," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 39.1 (1983): 13–20, "While Plotinus may have denigrated some of the Gnostics' beliefs and practices as 'magic,' this does not mean he rejects them because they are 'magic.'"

34. Augustine, *City of God* X.9 with J. O'Meara, *Porphyry's Philosophy from Oracles in Augustine* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1959) 36–37; also Porphyry, *De Abstinentia* II.49.1–2.

35. Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Phaedonem* 123.3–6 Norvin.

which attains the original cause, trumps theurgy, which, though important, reaches only as far as the level of generation.<sup>36</sup>

These exiguous testimonia have frequently given scholars the impression that the Neoplatonists already imagined a fundamental contrast between theurgy and ‘real’ philosophy, a contrast often anachronistically mapped onto the modern antinomy between rationality and ritual. But one might now ask: what exactly did these ancient authors mean by theurgy? Here we confront a fundamental problem of historical semantics. We do not know that the terms *theourgia* or *hieratiké* (and their various synonyms) meant the same thing to every post-Plotinian author—indeed, even Iamblichus admits disagreement among his contemporaries<sup>37</sup>—nor can we tell precisely where an individual author drew the line between theurgical and non-theurgical praxis. The ambiguity about what exactly theurgy entailed is immediately evident from a perusal of the modern scholarship,<sup>38</sup> but even in antiquity theurgy seems to have been a ‘polythetic’ category whose labile semantic range shifted over time and which, like other problematic concepts such as ‘magic’ and ‘ritual,’ encoded tacit value judgments, either positive or negative.

A fundamental problem arises from the fact that ‘theurgy’ cannot simply be equated with the soteriological rituals—that is to say, *material* rituals—performed in the context of Platonism. Several incontrovertibly theurgical sources suggest that the most elevated phase of divine union was often sought not through the manipulation of physical objects but rather through certain ‘spiritual’ (or rather, immaterial) acts of consciousness. Thus, for instance, the *Chaldaean Oracles* describe contemplative exercises alongside apparently ‘magical’ rituals;<sup>39</sup> Iamblichus grants a superior form of theurgy that is “intellectual and incorporeal” (*noeron kai asômaton*),<sup>40</sup> and Proclus seems to indicate that a theurgical union with the transcendent gods occurred noetically.<sup>41</sup> Several scholars have therefore posited a division between a ‘lower’ theurgy which employed material rituals, and a ‘higher’ theurgy which involved rather more ‘spiritual’ techniques (following the terminology proposed by Laurence Rosán). While most scholars consider even the supreme phase of theurgical union to have been entirely distinct from Plotinus’ ‘pure’ form of contem-

36. Damascius, *Philosophical History* fr. 4A [=Suda II.614,14] and 88A [=Suda II.577,21] Athanassiadi.

37. *De Mysteriis* VIII.1.

38. See R. Majercik, *The Chaldaean Oracles: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1989) 21–46 for an excellent overview of the debate.

39. Instructions for ‘contemplative’ acts: *Chaldaean Oracles*, frs. 1, 2, and 9a, 112; also, possibly, frs. 95, 97, and 128; for ‘magical ritual,’ e.g., frs. 110 and 224.

40. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* V.18 [225.3]; also V.15 and VIII.3–4; G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995) 189–215.

41. See the arguments of L. Rosán, *The Philosophy of Proclus* (New York: Cosmos, 1949) 213 ff. and A. Sheppard, “Proclus’ Attitude to Theurgy,” *loc. cit.* n. 4 *supra*.

plation,<sup>42</sup> others envision more or less of a convergence between 'higher' theurgy and the Plotinian method, whose own contours are often—but not always—assumed to be paradigmatic and thus more or less self-evident.<sup>43</sup> Yet it should be stressed that Plotinian *theôria* is no less ambiguous a category than *theourgia* and cannot be simply equated with philosophical cogitation or mental 'concentration,' as is often suggested. Indeed, it is generally recognized that Plotinus rejected ordinary intellection at the final stages of ascent and sought union with the One through non-discursive techniques; but precisely what those techniques involved remains a tantalizing question.<sup>44</sup>

I shall return to the precise topic of these techniques later. For the moment, however, we should note that the semantic ambiguities of both *theourgia* and *theôria* have rarely been acknowledged simultaneously. Rather, in support of the ostensible dichotomy between Plotinian contemplation and theurgical ritual, scholars have often cited a passage of the *De Mysteriis* (II.11) where Iamblichus says that "thought" (*ennoia*) alone is insufficient for union

42. Those who (along with the consensus of Plotinian scholarship) consider theurgy and Plotinian-style contemplation to be mutually exclusive, non-convergent paths include, *inter alia*, Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles*, esp. 4626–3; A.-J. Festugière, "Contemplation philosophique et art théurgique chez Proclus," in *Studi di Storia Religiosa della Tarda Antichità* (Messina, 1968) 7–18; F. Cremer, *Die Chaldäischen Orakel und Jamblich De Mysteriis*, Beiträge zur Klassischen Philologie 36 (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1969) and, with qualifications, C. Zintzen, "Bemerkungen zum Aufstiegsweg der Seele in Jamblichs De Mysteriis," in *Platonismus und Christentum: Festschrift für Heinrich Dörrie*, ed. H. Blume and F. Mann (Münster: Aschendorff, 1983). Those who see some convergence with Plotinian contemplation but maintain that 'ritual' was still necessary even at the highest phase of theurgy include, among others, A. Smith, *Porphyrus's Place* 98 and S. Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, American Classical Studies 21 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990): esp. 80–85.

43. Thus Rosán, *op. cit.*; Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude"; Majercik, *Chaldaean Oracles*. Even those scholars who grant that Plotinus rejected rationality at the final phase of ascent in favor of some non-discursive form of meditation still tend to differentiate this praxis firmly from theurgic ritual. It is thus often implied that a Plotinian union with the One cannot be brought about 'automatically' like the putatively *ex opere operato* rituals of the theurgists, but rather must be awaited passively; the presumed *passivity* of contemplation, appropriate to a 'genuine' philosopher or mystic, is opposed to the *activity* of the rituals used by magicians and 'less-spiritual' religious practitioners. Thus J. Rist, "Mysticism and Transcendence in Later Neoplatonism," *Hermes* 92.2 (1964): 213–25; also A.H. Armstrong, *Cambridge History* 259–60. Yet this opposition, too, dissolves under examination. On the one hand, Iamblichus insists that theurgic acts do not imply effective control of the gods but instead merely conform to the divine will; e.g., *De Mysteriis* I.12, 15; III.18; V.8–9, etc. The magical papyri also frequently describe ritual procedures followed by instructions to await the god's arrival in a state of apparent passivity; e.g., PGM IV.930–114; VII.478–90; VII.528–39; XIII.343–646; XIII.646–734, etc. On the other hand, while Plotinus certainly believed that the *ultimate* moment of union was a matter of utter receptivity, he repeatedly describes the penultimate phases of the hyper-noetic approach as a deliberate, if interiorized, praxis.

44. See discussion and references in "Unio Magica: Part I." On the peculiarly non-discursive aspect of Plotinian *theôria*, see J. Deck, *Nature, Contemplation, and the One* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1967) appendix 2.

with the gods; for otherwise, he says, it would be possible for “theoretical philosophers” (*tous theôrêtikôs philosophountas*) to attain a “theurgical union” (*theourgikên henôsin*) with them (which, in his view, is contrary to fact). In the remainder of the passage, Iamblichus stresses that theurgy is superior to discursive philosophy because a true union with the gods cannot occur without the requisite ineffable *sumbola*, which transcend the limits of our merely human dianoetic capabilities.<sup>45</sup> This passage has often been presumed to confirm a categorical division between the ritual acts performed by theurgists like Iamblichus himself and the ‘pure contemplation’ of Plotinus, the ‘contemplative’ philosopher *par excellence*.

Yet there are several factors which suggest that *De Mysteriis* II.11 does not in fact support such a facile opposition between theurgy and contemplation. First, historically speaking, we cannot be sure that Plotinus himself was aware of any such categorical division. This was emphasized only later: first, it seems, in Porphyry’s polemic reaction (in the *Letter to Anebo*) to Iamblichus’ systematization of theurgy; then by Iamblichus himself, in response to Porphyry, but not necessarily with Plotinus in mind. It is, therefore, not at all certain that Iamblichus meant to include Plotinus (whom he does not name) among the merely “contemplative philosophers” he disparages.<sup>46</sup> Second, it seems that Porphyry’s initial complaint—the one that elicited Iamblichus’ response—opposed contemplation not with ritual itself, but rather with the magician’s potential ignorance of the gods. Iamblichus therefore agrees that knowledge is necessary, but insists that discursive philosophy alone is insufficient to attain the divine. Third, it is unclear what Iamblichus means here by contemplative philosophy. It cannot mean *any* kind of noetic approach to the gods, for we have seen that Iamblichus, too, believed that the most challenging and exalted form of theurgy was effected through certain

45. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* II.11 [96.9-97.3], trans. from E. Clarke, J. Dillon, and J. Hershbell, *Iamblichus: De Mysteriis*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 4 (Atlanta: SBL, 2003) 115: “Granting, then, that ignorance and deception are faulty and impious, it does not follow on this that the offerings made to the gods and divine works are invalid, for it is not pure thought that unites theurgists to the gods. Indeed, what, then, would hinder those who are theoretical philosophers from enjoying a theurgic union with the gods? But the situation is not so: it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of the unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union. Hence, we do not bring about these things by intellection alone; for thus their efficacy would be intellectual, and dependent on us.”

46. An example of Iamblichus’ tacit admiration for Plotinus may be found at *De Mysteriis* V.22, where Iamblichus hints at Plotinus’—and perhaps Porphyry’s own—experiences of mystical union with the One, a state which is attained only “late in life” (cf. Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 23.12–17); here, Iamblichus affirms that this is the highest goal of *hieratikê*. It often seems as if Iamblichus is trying to out-Plotinize Porphyry; compare, for example, *De Mysteriis* IV.10 with *Enneads* IV.4.41.

ineffable yet “intellectual” acts.<sup>47</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is evident that Plotinus himself would agree that intellection is insufficient to attain union with the gods. It is abundantly clear that Plotinus believes that ordinary knowledge must be transcended and replaced with a more direct form of contact in order to unite with the One. In one passage, he suggests that at the ultimate stage contemplation *itself* must be discarded.<sup>48</sup> But even when he does advocate *theôria*, he does not mean abstract ‘theoretical’ philosophy; rather, he explicitly conflates it with efficacious action (*praxis*). For him, *all* creative acts, even those of Nature, are in fact imperfect attempts at contemplation.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Plotinus’ curious notion of productive contemplation dissolves the apparent dichotomy between thought and action, and thus blurs the distinction between philosophical and ritual praxis.

### 3. PLOTINUS AND RITUAL

Despite these ambiguities, however, scholars have persisted in maintaining that Plotinus rejected ritual techniques for union with the One, presumably in an attempt to harmonize him with our contemporary image of the ‘rational’ philosopher, or at least with the most respectable, least ‘ritualistic’ religious practitioner. There are, I believe, two fundamental errors which have contributed to this mistaken image of Plotinian mysticism. On the one hand, historians of philosophy have generally conceived of the relationship between philosophical rationality and religious ritual according to a Cartesian dichotomy between thought and action. Thus ‘genuine’—which is to say, *rational*—philosophical cogitation is imagined to be the absolute antithesis of religious ritual.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, scholars of religion typically rely upon a rigid and conceptually impoverished definition of ritual, limited to the repeated performance of physical actions involving material objects and bodies. Since ritual too is still typically understood according to the conventional dichotomy between thought and action (or even according to the now-unfashionable duality of mind and body), it is seen as the physical

47. See also Iamblichus’ own positive references to contemplation (*theôria*) in the context of theurgic praxis, e.g. at *De Mysteriis* I.12 [41.10]; I.19 [59.10]; II.4 [77.3]; II.10 [93.1]; III.2 [104.8]; III.6 [112.11]; III.28 [167.11].

48. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.9.11.22–25.

49. Thus III.8.14. The notion that the entire hypostatic structure of Plotinian metaphysics may be understood as a kind of *experience* has been suggested by R.T. Wallis, “Nous as Experience” in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. R. B. Harris (Albany: SUNY, 1976) 121–53 and A.C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 126 ff.

50. Not to mention the problems inherent in the notion of ‘rationality,’ from both a philosophical and an anthropological perspective; a familiar embarkation point might be H. Penner, “Rationality, Ritual, and Science,” in *Religion, Science, and Magic: in Concert and in Conflict*, ed. J. Neusner, E. Frerich and P. Flesher (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) 11–24.

complement of a corresponding cognitive system (i.e., a belief or a myth), but not as a cognitive process itself.<sup>51</sup>

Contemporary ritual theory and the conventional history of philosophy thus unwittingly support the same false dichotomy between mental processes and ritual acts. According to this division no purely mental ‘act’ can be ‘ritual,’ which also means that the deliberate discipline of subjective consciousness, as in guided meditation, is similarly excluded from the category of ritual even if—as I would suggest in the case of Plotinus—it significantly retains the formal structure of the more external rituals from which it was originally derived. The arbitrary nature of this division becomes clear from even a cursory look at the numerous liminal examples from other traditional contexts—Kabbalah, Sufism, Tantra, and so on—in which ritual actions or utterances are progressively interiorized until they are iterated in thought or imagination alone.<sup>52</sup> In other words, if we follow the historians of philosophy who subsume both discursive rationality and non-discursive cognitive processes into the broad category of ‘contemplation,’ and we also accept the definition of ritual proffered by ritual theorists, then we are obliged to concur with those who would say that Plotinus eschewed ‘ritual’ as a means of ascent to the One; by default he becomes a ‘rational’ mystic. This is particularly misleading as the final phase of his contemplation is a prescribed technique of meditation or visualization which (as I argued in Part I) is closely modeled on ritual patterns, although it nevertheless also corresponds with his metaphysical system. Our categorical division between thought and action has made this mode of ritual praxis very difficult to imagine in a philosophical context.

It would be useful for the study of both religion and philosophy in late antiquity to find a way to articulate this liminal category of practice. For

51. See, for example, E. Zuesse’s entry on “Ritual” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 405–22, also C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 19 ff., and the remarks of J.Z. Smith, “Great Scott! Thought and Action One More Time,” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 141, ed. P. Mirecki and M. Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 73–91. On the origins of modern attitudes towards ritual in Protestant anti-Catholic polemic, see J.Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990). Even scholars hyper-conscious of the theoretical problems with the categories ‘magic’ and ‘mysticism,’—such as N. Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2002)—tend to leave the scholarly category of ‘ritual’ itself unquestioned and treat its boundaries as self-evident. I am indebted to Jonathan Z. Smith for helpful discussion on this topic.

52. For all the attention given by scholars of ritual to Austin’s “speech acts,” it is a pity that the possibility of ritualized “thought acts” seems not to have been considered, especially given the proximity of thought to speech. Also excluded by this definition of ritual are the various practices believed to occur on a pneumatic or subtle-physiological level: for ritual may be of the body, but body according to whose definition?

the moment, then, I would like to propose a working category, that of “inner ritual,” to describe the numerous traditional techniques in which the subjective consciousness is deliberately controlled in a prescribed manner for a discrete period of time, and whose experiential content is patterned upon more outward ritual procedures. In certain cases, these techniques are accompanied by corresponding physical acts, but given this new definition, inner ritual would need no overt physical expression for it to be considered ‘ritual.’ This general category of ritual practice, as far as I know, has not been explicitly theorized by historians of either late antique religion or philosophy,<sup>53</sup> although some helpful discussion does occur in the scholarship on Hindu and Buddhist Tantra (which is, in many other ways too, a useful heuristic device for thinking about Plotinus’ non-discursive practice).<sup>54</sup> Inner ritual—of which Plotinus’ praxis is a prime example—would thus occupy a liminal position between the cognitive processes employed in discursive philosophy and the physical actions which comprise religious ritual.

#### 4. PLOTINIAN THEURGY

If at this point we grant that Plotinus was not quite the anti-ritualist he is often imagined to be, there still remains our original question about the relationship of his own praxis to theurgy. In what has been a gradual but much-needed rehabilitation of his successors, recent scholars have suggested that the theurgy of the sort developed by Iamblichus and Proclus

53. Unfortunately, Hadot’s discussion of “spiritual exercises” in *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1987) tends to conflate this sort of praxis with the philosophical life in general and consequently obscures the close relationship of these techniques with discrete ritual procedures. For varieties of internalized ritual in late antique Hellenistic religiosity, see, *inter alia*, J.D. Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism” in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures and Texts*, SBL Symposium Series 12, ed. J.D. Turner and R. Majercik (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2000) 82–139, esp. 128 ff.; G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: a Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986) 142–50; and H. Jonas, “Myth and Mysticism: a Study of Objectivization and Interiorization in Religious Thought,” *Journal of Religion* 44 (1969); for subtle-physiological ritual in Manichaeism, see J. BeDuhn, *The Manichaean Body in Discipline and Ritual* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000).

54. On interiorized ritual in Tantra, see esp. A. Sanderson, “Meaning in Tantric Ritual” in *Essais sur le rituel III*, E.P.H.E. Section des sciences religieuses vol. 52, ed. A.-M. Blondeau and K. Schipper (Louvain: Peeters, 1995) 15–95; D.G. White, *The Kiss of the Yogini: “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003) esp. 219 ff.; J. Heesterman, “Brahmin, Ritual, and Renouncer,” in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) 26–44; M. Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 111–14 *et passim*; for Kabbalah, see M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: SUNY, 1988) 20 ff.; and finally, for cross-cultural comparison, see A. Geels, “Divine Visualisations: Mystical Techniques in Judaism and Tantric Buddhism” in P. Schalk and M. Stausberg, eds. *Being Religious and Living Through the Eyes: Studies in Religious Iconography and Iconology: a Celebratory Publication in Honour of Professor Jan Bergman* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1998) 137–62.

was a legitimate response to certain aspects of Plotinian metaphysics.<sup>55</sup> According to this model, the contemplative technique Plotinus had employed to attain union with the One would have been more or less supplanted by the theurgical ritual of his successors, which would strain to approach the exalted purity of Plotinian contemplation only at its very apex, if at all; and any similarity between post-Plotinian theurgy and Plotinus' own practice would have been a result of the former's historical dependence upon the latter. This is certainly an improvement on the earlier view of theurgy as the result of a general decline of rationality in late antiquity. Yet we have seen (in Part I of this paper) that Plotinus' mysticism was a development of prior techniques of ascent and conjunction with deities, which means that ritual praxis also lurks somewhere in the background of his own thought. If we agree that his 'contemplative' or 'philosophical' union was simply replaced by a 'theurgical' one, then we are forced to accept the implausible conclusion that he represents something of an anomaly in an otherwise continuous tradition of ritual practices: practices shared by both his predecessors and his successors, but miraculously absent in Plotinus himself.

What I would like to propose instead—following the excellent suggestions of Gregory Shaw<sup>56</sup>—is that the highest phase of Plotinus' contemplation was not only structurally homologous to certain theurgical rituals, but that it had in fact been derived from some prior ritual of this type; and indeed that its only substantive difference with later theurgy was its exclusively 'interior' performance. We have seen that in the final stages of ascent Plotinus rejects discursive reason in favor of a kind of meditation. He usually describes this phase in evocative but apparently metaphorical terms; in a few cases, however, he directly enjoins the reader to engage in specific visualization exercises.<sup>57</sup> A few scholars have recently suggested some relationship between this sort of visualization and theurgy.<sup>58</sup> Specifically, in one much-discussed passage

55. Thus, for example, most recently, G. Shaw, "After Aporia: Theurgy in Later Platonism," in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures and Texts*, SBL Symposium Series 12, ed. J.D. Turner and R. Majercik (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2000) 57–82; D.P. Taormina, *Jamblique, critique de Plotin et de Porphyre* (Paris: Vrin, 1999) 133–58; G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, also *idem*, "Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus," *Traditio* 41 (1985): 1–28; A. Smith, *Porphyry's Place* (1974); C. Zintzen, "Bemerkungen zum Aufstiegsweg der Seele in Jamblichs *De Mysteriis*"; also *idem*, "Die Wertung von Mystik und Magie in der neuplatonischen Philosophie," *Rheinisches Museum* 108 (1965): 71–100.

56. G. Shaw, "Eros and Arithmos: Pythagorean Theurgy in Iamblichus and Plotinus," *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999): 121–43.

57. E.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* V.1.2.12–23; V.1.4.1–11; V.1.6.9 ff.; V.8.11–12; VI.4.7; VI.5.7; VI.7.15–25 ff.

58. Besides Shaw, *op. cit.*, see S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000); and now J. Dillon, "The Platonic Philosopher at Prayer," in *Metaphysik und Religion: zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens* (Akten des Internationalen Kongresses vom 13–17 März 2001 in Würzburg), Beiträge

(V.8.9.1–28), Plotinus exhorts the reader to construct a luminous mental image (*phantasia*) of the cosmic sphere, at which point it must be replaced with an identical yet now incorporeal sphere. The instruction suggests a theurgical evocation:

Calling (*kalesas*) on the god who made that of which you have the mental picture (*phantasia*), pray (*eucast*) him to come. And may he come, bringing his own universe with him, with all the gods within him, he who is one and all, and each god is all the gods coming together into one; they are different in their powers, but by that one manifold power they are all one or rather, the one god is all ...<sup>59</sup>

More important than the ritual undertones of this passage,<sup>60</sup> however, is the fact that the fundamental mechanism of the visualization has distinct parallels with theurgical doctrine. We have seen that the basic premise of theurgy is that an affinity between the *symbolon* and its respective deity attracts the energies of that deity into the soul of the practitioner. Now Shaw has suggested that the mental image in this visualization exercise itself serves the function of a theurgical *symbolon*, as it summons into one's soul the god who created its archetype; although in this case the symbol is, of course, not a material object but rather an 'internal,' phantasmal likeness.

Significantly, Shaw's theurgical interpretation of this visualization may also illuminate other aspects of Plotinian mysticism. I would suggest that several passages in the *Enneads* describing the approach to the One follow a similar pattern.<sup>61</sup> First, at the penultimate stage of ascent, (1) the dualistic vision of

zur Altertumskunde 160, ed. T. Kobusch und M. Erler (München: Saur, 2002) 279–95.

59. V.8.9.1–28 in Armstrong, *Plotinus* vol. 5, 265–67.

60. Note the reminiscence of the technical term for a ritual "calling" of a god—*kēlēsis*—that Porphyry uses (at *Vita Plotini* 10.20) to describe the blatantly theurgical evocation of Plotinus' guardian *daimōn*; see also Lewy's discussion of the theurgical nature of "calling," *Chaldaean Oracles*, excursus V; note also the verbal similarity to a number of prayer formulae in the magical papyri which typically summon cosmogonic gods "Come, you who created such-and-such ...," e.g., PGM VII.551; IV.1167–226; IV.3086–124. On this visualization as prayer see J. Rist, *Plotinus: the Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967) 209–12, although I am not as certain as Rist that the god to whom this prayer is directed in this case is strictly Nous and not also the One; Plotinus' ambiguity here may be deliberate. A theurgical sense of "prayer" in this passage has also been noted by Dillon, *op. cit.* 286 and n. 21, who compares this to a silent prayer Plotinus advises at V.1.6.10 (evidently in deliberate contradistinction with the audible incantations of magicians); this is to be effected by "extending ourselves" (*ekteinasin heautous*) in soul towards the One. The description of prayer as the "extension" of the soul is immediately reminiscent of a similar construction, with possible Stoic origins, that is attested in the magical papyri (e.g., PGM III.592–93), Valentinian Gnostic sources (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Eclogae Propheticae* X.1), and the *Chaldaean Oracles* (frs. 1.9a, 112, and 128); see also Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles* 373 and n. 232.

61. E.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* V.5.8.3–22; V.8.11.1–19; VI.7.36.10–26; VI.9.7.17–22; VI.9.9.50–60; VI.9.10.9.21; VI.9.11.10–25 and discussion in "Unio Magica: Part I."

the One corresponds to the conjuration of a mental *symbolon*, either as the result of a deliberate phantasmic visualization (as at V.8.9), or instead as a gradual refocusing of attention upon what Plotinus considers to be a pre-existing, congenital image of the One in the soul. At the ultimate stage, (2) the mystical union with the One corresponds to the theurgic conjunction with the deity established through the contemplative *symbolon*. This twofold scheme is especially clear in the passages where Plotinus exhorts the reader to visualize an icon or cult-image of the god (or of one's divinized self), but then to transcend the duality inherent in perception and thus come to an ineffable unity with the divine archetype of the image.<sup>62</sup> One may wonder what this means in practice, since the One is, of course, utterly formless and would not have been accurately symbolized by the image of a statue; perhaps Plotinus' images of the sudden irruption of light or his frequent geometric metaphor of the convergent center-points of concentric circles more closely approximate the despatialized and apophatic abstraction suitable for a *symbolon* of the One.<sup>63</sup> And even this may not be enough; many of these descriptions suggest yet another moment of total annihilation, a final *aphairesis* in which one must negate even this synthemetic vision.<sup>64</sup>

In any case, although Plotinus himself does not explicitly theorize these practices, they are consistent with two fundamental principles of his metaphysics, principles which also would support theurgy as it was envisioned by later Neoplatonists. First, there is Plotinus' emphasis on the conjunctive and dynamic (or even erotic) attraction between an entity on a superior ontological level and its manifestation on an inferior one. Significantly, the visualization

62. E.g., VI.9.11.17–22: “Like a man who enters into the sanctuary and leaves behind the statues (*agalmata*) in the outer shrine; these become again the first things he looks at when he comes out of the sanctuary, after his contemplation within and intercourse there, not with a statue or image but with the Divine itself.” See also V.8.1; V.1.6; VI.7.35; VI.9.11.

63 Light, e.g., V.3.17.25–37; VI.7.36.10–26; center-point and circle metaphor, e.g., V.1.11.8–15; VI.8.18.1–32; VI.9.6.1–15; VI.9.8.1–29. Shaw has suggested the theurgical use of mathematical (arithmetic or geometric) *symbola*, of which I consider Plotinus' visualized center-point one possible example; see G. Shaw, “The Geometry of Grace: a Pythagorean Approach to Theurgy,” in *The Divine Iamblichus: Philosopher and Man of Gods*, ed. H. Blumenthal and E. Clark (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1993) 116–37; *idem*, “Eros and Arithmos”; also *idem*, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 199–215. An explicit pre-Plotinian equation of the arithmetic monad (or geometric point) with a theurgical *symbolon* occurs in the *Theologoumena Arithmeticae*, attributed to the second-century CE Neopythagorean Nicomachus of Gerasa, in C. Janus, *Musici Scriptores Graeci* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1895) 276–77, and cited in B. Pearson, “Gnosticism as Platonism: with Special Reference to Marsanes (NHC 10,1),” *Harvard Theological Review* 77.1 (1984): 55–72. Incidentally, this passage may also be one of the first uses of the word *theourgai*.

64. For mystical *aphairesis*, see e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* V.3.17.39; VI.9.7.1–24, 10.11–17, 11.10–23. This too has a Iamblichean parallel in a theurgic context; see *De Mysteriis* VII.2 [250.11–13] trans. in Clark, Dillon, and Hershbell 291: “... banish (*apheis*) the image of the symbolic things themselves, which depends on imagination and hearsay, and raise yourself up towards the intellectual truth.”

exercise at V.8.9 occurs in one treatise of the so-called *Großschrift*, which was composed broadly in opposition to the Gnostics. Throughout this long treatise Plotinus repeatedly berates the Gnostics for introducing a radical discontinuity between the divine Pleroma and the cosmos, and emphasizes instead the dynamic link between the cosmic “image” and its intelligible archetype. Ironically, although Plotinus complains elsewhere about the Gnostics’ use of coercive magic in opposition to the celestial powers, this argument supports precisely the kind of link supposed by later Neoplatonists to sustain theurgy.<sup>65</sup>

The second principle of Plotinian metaphysics that is consistent with theurgical praxis involves a concept parallel to that of the *symbolon*. Although Plotinus does not use the technical terms *symbolon* or *sunthêma*, he frequently describes a “trace” (*ichnos*) or an “image” (*eikôn*) of the One within the individual soul. The trace functions like a theurgic *symbolon* as it enables union through the inherent attraction of an image to its original.<sup>66</sup> The trace may also be understood as the supreme, hyper-noetic portion of Intellect by which one is able to make an ineffable connection with that which utterly transcends intellect.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the trace is not limited to the intellect; Plotinus describes analogous traces or *logoi* manifesting each ontological stratum on the subjacent one.<sup>68</sup> Just as theurgical *sunthêmata* are understood both as artificial tokens and also as the naturally-occurring residue of divine energy

65. Defending the heavens against Gnostic criticism, Plotinus argues at II.9.16.10–12 that the celestial bodies are themselves divine because of their perpetual contact with the intelligible gods and the hypostatic Soul; see also IV.4.45.15–18. The discussion of beauty throughout the *Großschrift* is also consistent with this view; thus he insists that beauty “down here” participates in the noetic beauty “up there,” and—again, like a theurgic *symbolon*—serves to redirect our soul towards what is above; thus III.8.11.25 ff.; V.8.1.1–33 *et passim*; V.5.12; II.9.17; cf. I.6 *passim*, following Plato, *Symposium* 210a–211e, *Phaedrus* 252c–253d, *Ion* 533d–534e. Note that the *Chaldaean Oracles* fr. 108 equates the divine *symbola* “sown” in the cosmos with images of the Ideas, which are “unspeakable beauties” (*kalê aphanasta*). Plotinus even readmits the anagogic value of art to a degree at odds with the typical Platonic suspicion of mimetic representation, and, at V.8.1.33–38, provides a single example: the famous statue of Zeus by Pheidias; see also II.9.16.44–56, with J. Pépin, “L’Épisode du portrait de Plotin, VP 1.4–9,” in *Porphyre: la vie de Plotin*, vol. 2, ed. L. Brisson, *et. al.* (Paris: Vrin, 1992) 301–34. This image recalls the teletic statues of IV.3.11, whose rationale (in lines 8–13, cited in n. 27 *supra*) similarly depends upon the dynamic link between the divine principle and its terrestrial image.

66. See Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.7.22 on the trace as a kind of “grace” given by the One; also VI.8.18.23 for the image of a centre-point giving traces (*ichnê*) of itself to the radii and circumference of a circle.

67. E.g., VI.7.23: “There, surely, one need not wonder if that which the soul pursues and which gives light to Intellect and in falling upon it stirs a trace of itself has so great a power, and draws to itself and calls back from all wandering to rest beside it.” See also I.6.2.8–11; III.8.5; III.8.9.18–24; VI.7.31.8–11; VI.9.4.28–30. For the superior portion of intellect, see V.3.14.15; V.5.8.22–23; VI.7.35.19–25; VI.9.3.26–27.

68. Trace of intellect in soul, e.g., V.1.7.44; trace of soul in body, e.g., IV.4.29.50.

in terrestrial objects (and thus in some ways related to immanent Forms),<sup>69</sup> so also in Plotinus the anagogic traces are understood both as intentional objects of consciousness and also as the inevitable, eidetic result of procession. Although it is generally assumed that Plotinus' successors adopted this doctrine from him to justify theurgy, his own frequent description of these traces in terms of divine possession or cult-icons (*agalмата*) suggest that he had himself derived it from some prior cultic context.<sup>70</sup>

Lest one distinguish too sharply between what is more commonly called theurgy and the interiorized praxis that I am suggesting Plotinus employed, one should note that the concept of 'inner' *sumbola* or *sunthêmata*, inherent in the mind, soul, or imagination of the practitioner—and not consisting of external objects—does also occur in an unambiguously theurgical context among later Neoplatonists. Thus, for example, Iamblichus described ineffable intrapsychic "images" which unite the theurgist with the gods.<sup>71</sup> Proclus, too, conceived of the highest form of *sumbola* as certain mental objects which permit union with the divine "henads" (the principles mediating between the One and the subsidiary hypostases), and also posited a superior portion of the soul—the "One in the soul" or "flower of intellect" (*anthos nou*)—as a *sumbolon* of the One itself.<sup>72</sup>

The existence of this sort of 'higher' theurgy has presented some difficulty for those scholars who would prefer to dissociate any sort of ritual practice categorically from Plotinus' contemplative mysticism. And even those who tend rather to assimilate 'higher' theurgy to Plotinian *theôria* generally suppose (at least in historical terms) that Plotinus' successors were developing his 'pure' form of contemplation in a theurgical direction, and not that Plotinus' own practice had derived from some pre-existent theurgic-type ritual.<sup>73</sup> Yet

69. On the relation of *sunthêmata* to the Forms see Smith, *Porphyry's Place* 106–07 n. 11; also *Chaldaean Oracles* fr. 108 with Numenius fr. 13 Des Places.

70. E.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* V.5.5.13, V.8.1, V.8.5–6.

71. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* VII.4 [255.13–256.2], trans in Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 297: "...we preserve in their entirety the mystical and arcane images (*tên mustikên kai aporrêton eikônâ*) of the gods in our soul; and we raise our soul up through these towards the gods and, as far as possible, when it has been elevated, we experience union with the gods."

72. Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum Commentaria* I.209–12; *idem*, *Platonic Theology* I.25; *idem*, *Eclogae e Proclo de Philosophia Chaldaica* frs. 4–5 Jahn; *idem*, *In Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria* 1044–47, 1071; *In Platonis Cratylum Commentaria* 113.66; with A. Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude"; Smith, *Porphyry's Place* 120; J. Rist, "Mysticism and Transcendence" 213–20; W. Beierwaltes, "Der Begriff des 'unum in nobis' bei Proklos," *Miscellanea Medievalea* 2 (1963): 255–66.

73. Thus Rosán, Sheppard, Majercik, and Shaw, among others. Proclus' synthematically *anthos nou* has a pre-Plotinian parallel in the *Chaldaean Oracles* (fr. 1), the "flower of intellect" needed to perceive the divine Intellect. Rist, Sheppard and Majercik all notice the parallel between the Plotinian hyper-intellect and both the Chaldaean (i.e., pre-Plotinian) and Proclan (i.e., post-Plotinian) *anthos nou*, but do not consider the possibility of a historical connection between the idea as it occurs in Plotinus and in pre-Plotinian sources.

this latter possibility must be considered, since Plotinus' influence cannot account for the immaterial theurgy in the *Chaldaean Oracles*,<sup>74</sup> which almost certainly predate him.<sup>75</sup>

More precisely, there appears to have been a pre-Plotinian tradition involving the theurgical visualization of interiorized *sumbola*, and Plotinus himself, I would suggest, may have been dependent upon this tradition. Thus, for example, his use of phantasmic *sumbola* is foreshadowed by the exhortation in the *Oracles* (fr. 2) to "cast (*balein*) into your *phrenes* (midriff/imagination/mind) the entire *sunthêma* of the triad," which suggests that certain Chaldaean rituals had already employed interior *sumbola* of the supreme, triadic deity within the imaginative faculty.<sup>76</sup> One might compare the phraseology of the Chaldaean fragment back to Plotinus' instruction to internalize the divine contemplation at V.8.10.40–44: "one must transport (*metapherein*) what one sees into oneself, and look at it as oneself, as if someone possessed (*kataschetheis*) by a god, taken over by Phoebus or one of the Muses, could bring about the vision of the god in himself, if he had the power to look at the god in himself," and his more general statement of this principle, earlier in the treatise, at V.8.1.1–4: "One who has entered into contemplation (*en theai*) of the noetic cosmos and understood the beauty of the true Intellect will also be able to bring (*balesthai*) into his thought (*eis ennoian*) its Father which is beyond Intellect." That this type of 'calling to mind' cannot mean ordinary philosophical reflection is evident from the fact that Plotinus does not believe the One can be known intellectually; these instructions imply rather a deliberate technique for internalizing synthemetic visualizations.<sup>77</sup> One might also note the parallel with various rituals in the magical papyri designed to summon the deity into the mind, consciousness, or heart of the

74. Scholars have wrestled with the complex relationship between material and contemplative ritual in the *Oracles*, some insisting that they were practiced simultaneously, others that they respectively represented preparatory and final phases of ascent; see Majercik, *Chaldaean Oracles* 30–46; Johnston, *Hekate Soteira* 76–89.

75. There has been some debate as to whether or not Plotinus himself was aware of the *Oracles*; see the affirmative opinion of J. Dillon, "Plotinus and the *Chaldaean Oracles*?" in *Platonism in Late Antiquity*, ed. S. Gersh and C. Kennegieser (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1992) 131–40, with criticisms by R. Majercik, "The *Chaldaean Oracles* and the School of Plotinus," *Ancient World* 29.2 (1998): 91–105, who defends the (seemingly implausible) notion that Plotinus did not know of the *Oracles*, and the response by J. Finamore, "Plotinus, Psellus, and the *Chaldaean Oracles*: a Reply to Majercik," *ibid.*, 107–10, who suggests that Plotinus knew of them but chose not to cite them.

76. *Sumbolon* occurs in *Chaldaean Oracles* fr. 108; *sunthêma* in frs. 2 and 109.

77. This may also be understood in terms of the kind of unitive, "living contemplation" (*theôria zôsa*) Plotinus describes at III.8.8; also, at VI.7.15.26–33, the visualization of Nous as a sphere of shining faces: "if one imagined it like this one would be seeing it somehow as one sees another from outside; but one must become that, and make oneself the contemplation."

practitioner,<sup>78</sup> and the (potentially pre-Plotinian) use of internalized *sumbola* and anagogic visualization in Hermetic<sup>79</sup> and Sethian Gnostic<sup>80</sup> sources.

It therefore seems that the final phase of Plotinus' mystical contemplation is profoundly indebted to some prior body of theurgic-type ritual practices. It is not necessary to suppose he was dependent upon the *Chaldaean Oracles* in particular, or, for that matter, upon any other specific text. Nor am I suggesting reading back a full-fledged Iamblichean theurgy into Plotinus. Yet the notion of ritual *sumbola* linking the human and the divine realms was, it seems, already widespread, and occurred (in practical if not theoretical form) in less learned sources as well. Implicit in several spells in the *PGM* is the notion that in the process of creating the world the gods leave hidden, spermatric traces of generative energy (sometimes actually called *sumbola*) in the various orders of being. The manipulation of these traces—in the form of *vores magicae*, inscribed figures, or various natural objects—was thought to confer the respective deity's power upon the practitioner.<sup>81</sup> A related magical conception even seems to lie somewhere in the background of the general philosophical notion of emanation.<sup>82</sup> The burden of proof appears to lie on those who would isolate Plotinus from this tradition.

78. E.g., *PGM* III.415, VII.560–63, XIII.790, 927–31, and discussion in “*Unio Magica: Part I*” 40.

79. An explanation of anagogic visualization in terms of magical attraction occurs at *CH* IV.11, trans. from B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 17: “If your vision of [God] is sharp and you understand it with the eyes of your heart . . . you shall discover the road that leads above, or rather, the image itself will lead the way. For the vision [of God] has a special property. It takes hold of those who have had the vision and draws them up, just as the magnet stone draws iron, so they say.” Also, references to spiritual sacrifice, inner *sumbola*, and silent prayer occur in the Hermetic *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI,6) 55.23–61.17.

80. See the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III,2 and IV,2) 66.23 ff., with the implication of interiorized *sumbola* in the form of secret names in the soul; *Marsanes* (NHCX,1), which describes various configurations of the ascending soul in terms of shapes and phonemes akin to theurgical *sumbola*, with J.D. Turner's essay in *Marsanès* (NH X), Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, sec. “textes” 27, ed. W.-P. Funk, P.-H. Poirier, and J.D. Turner (Louvain: Peeters, 2000) esp. 231 ff.; and *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3) 59.36 ff., where the ascent is enabled by a series of pre-existent patterns or images in the soul; see also the discussion in Majercik, *Chaldaean Oracles* 44–45.

81. E.g., *PGM* III.494–611; IV.1596–715; VIII.1–63; XIII.1–343 and 343–646. A possibly pre-Plotinian theory of theurgy is apparent in the Hermetic *Asclepius* 3–4, 19, 24, 34–40. On the tradition of magical *sumbola* prior to Iamblichus, see the new work of Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004) ch. 6.

82. The word *aporroia* has this sense in the magical papyri, while the concept seems to have at least some of its roots in the learned astrological doctrine of the second century CE, according to which the celestial bodies did not merely signify events on earth but actually influenced them through the emission of a subtle, quasi-physical efflux or radiation; this was often referred to as an *aporroia*; e.g., Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 1.2.3, 3.10.128; Vettius Valens, 151.27, 238.17, 258.14, 319.9, 330.9 Pingree; cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.4. This stellar effluence may be comparable to the more blatantly magical planetary energies or the beneficial *aporroia* of Helios invoked at *PGM* IV.217, or those of the stars, at XII.254; see also G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* 77–78.

In his important 1999 article in *Ancient Philosophy*, Shaw demonstrated structural parallels between Iamblichean theurgy and Plotinian visualization, and he suggested that we expand the notion of theurgy to include Plotinus' praxis.<sup>83</sup> This reconceptualization rightly reduces the apparent distance between Plotinus and his successors. Yet I think now we may also push the robust historical connection between Plotinus' contemplative techniques and theurgic-type ritual a little more forcefully, and also trace it backwards, chronologically speaking, into the murky pre-Plotinian period. We have seen that the same agglomeration of theory and practice influenced both Plotinus' predecessors and his successors. Rather than supposing that Plotinus developed this praxis independently, it is more reasonable to assume that he was an integral part of this very tradition. It seems that Plotinus was already well aware of some ritual practice akin to theurgy (although perhaps not so called) and that he self-consciously interiorized it into a 'contemplative' praxis, whose traces may be discerned, with difficulty, throughout the *Enneads*.

#### 5. INNER RITUAL AND THE NEW INTERIOR LOCUS OF THE DIVINE

Here I have only scratched the surface of the *Enneads* for the theurgical framework of Plotinus' praxis; this merits more detailed research in the future. But if I am correct thus far, one may still legitimately wonder—if indeed 'ritual' was *not* the problem—why his praxis differed at all. It has often been suggested that Plotinus' supposed rejection of theurgy was a consequence of his belief in the 'undescended soul,' i.e., that the individual soul is eternally, if not always consciously, in contact with the hypostatic Intellect, and therefore able to return to itself intellectually, so to speak, without the use of material rituals.<sup>84</sup> While this may explain certain differences between Plotinus and Iamblichus with respect to so-called 'lower' theurgy, it does less to explain their differences concerning the 'higher' phase, that of union with the transcendent gods. I would conjecture instead that Plotinus' interiorization of previously exterior ritual in the service of union with the One may be understood as the consequence of his metaphorical interiorization of the locus of the divine. According to him, the hypostatic Intellect and even the One are to be found—in some robust but non-spatial sense—'within.'<sup>85</sup> The spatial prepositions expressing divine transcendence in terms of "above" (*hyper*) and "beyond" (*epekeina*) are for Plotinus interchangeable with prepo-

83. G. Shaw, "Eros and Arithmos."

84. Thus C. Steel, *The Changing Self: a Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius, and Priscianus* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1978) 37 ff.; Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* 94–96.

85. *Nous* within, e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* I.1.10.15; IV.4.2; IV.8.1.1–11; IV.8.3–4, 7–8; IV.8.7–8; V.1.3, 6, 10–12; V.3.5.22; VI.4.14; VI.7.31.8; VI.9.8–11, etc. One within: V.1.10; V.3.14, 16; VI.9.7, etc.

sitions denoting interiority (*to eisô*). Thus turned inside-out, as it were, the entire divine hierarchy abides *within the self*, whose pre-eminent (or equivalently *innermost*) portion was believed to be in some sense identical with the supreme god: a god who is, as Plotinus says, “another Self” (*allon auton*) or “primarily Self, and Self beyond being” (*prôtôs autos kai hyperontôs autos*).<sup>86</sup> In this respect, Plotinus’ world-view was less “utopian” than some have suggested;<sup>87</sup> rather, while having unmoored the divine from socio-geographical place, he has firmly relocated it within the individual human subject.<sup>88</sup>

Plotinus’ transcendental anthropology and his concomitant notion of the interior locus of the divine is consistent with his interiorization of ritual praxis. His disinterest in exterior ritual is not due to its ‘irrationality’—an anachronistic, post-Enlightenment notion<sup>89</sup>—but rather its involvement with the *exterior* (hence ontologically *inferior*) world of matter and physical causes. This may also be illustrated by the comparison of the two much-discussed biographical anecdotes in Porphyry’s *Vita Plotini* 10, where Plotinus on the one hand is an eager participant in ritual directed at his personal *daimôn*—his divine self located *within* and hence *beyond*—but on the other hand refuses to sacrifice to the planetary, encosmic deities, who are worshipped in the temple and thus firmly situated in both social and cosmic place.<sup>90</sup> Excessive concern with the exterior world is, according to him, a form of undesirable enchantment.<sup>91</sup> That is to say, Plotinian praxis is no less ‘ritual’ than that of his theurgical successors; the difference lies in the nature and locus of the *sumbola* involved. Indeed, to a far greater extent than either his predecessors or his successors, Plotinus’ focus—his “end and goal,” to repeat Porphyry’s words—was upon the transcendent Absolute. The ineffable singularity of the One meant that an appropriate *sumbolon* would have the quality of be-

86. V.1.11.10; VI.8.14.42.

87. For the ‘utopian’ view of Plotinus—following the terminology of J.Z. Smith, “Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up,” in his *Map is Not Territory* (Leiden: Brill, 1978) 147–71—see Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* 9–15, with qualifications in *idem*, “Eros and Arithmos” 124 ff., and now also van den Berg, “Plotinus’ Attitude to Traditional Cult” 353.

88. In this way he conformed to a more general late antique tendency to conceive of divine power as progressively transcendentalized and thus dissociated from the worldly socio-political hierarchy, although capable of being mediated to society by exceptional individuals; see J.Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory* (Leiden: Brill, 1978) 186 ff.; P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978) 11 ff.; G. Fowden, “The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 33–59.

89. Thus G. Shaw, “Theurgy: Rituals of Unification”; J.Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*.

90. On the importance of place and the changing locus of the divine in late antiquity see J. Z. Smith, “Towards Interpreting Demonic Powers in Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.16.1 (1978) 425–39; W. Schoedel, “‘Topological’ Theology and Some Monistic Tendencies in Gnosticism,” in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Alexander Böhlig*, Nag Hammadi Studies 3, ed. M. Krause (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 88–108.

91. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.4.44.

ing as unitary as possible, a degree of unity found not in material objects but conceivable only in the innermost sanctuary of the human soul. Yet Plotinus did not believe that the inwardness of ordinary intellection alone was sufficient to attain the ultimate goal, and consequently sought other means. Despite the frequent claim that Plotinus was a 'rational' mystic, we have seen that for him, as for Iamblichus, the ultimate contact with the One was, emphatically, *not* rational, but *supra*-rational. Plotinus would have had good reason to adapt the structure of ritual techniques to the solution of a problem insoluble by means of discursive philosophy alone: techniques which themselves, in their original form, were also used to enable the close conjunction of entities of radically different ontological orders.

#### 6. CONCLUSION: RESTORING PLOTINUS TO HIS RIGHTFUL PLACE

At long last, then, we may begin to see that the significance of Plotinus' involvement in ritual has been minimized by historians of philosophy wishing to emphasize the inherently rational nature of his thought as well as by those partial to religious mysticism (of which he is considered a prime example) but who wish to keep this form of spiritual expression distinct from the putatively 'lower' practice of magic. The artificial extrication of Plotinus from his ritual context ingeniously preserves him for the history of 'genuine' philosophy and/or 'high' religion while implicitly contrasting his thought with the ostensibly un-philosophical ritualism of his successors. The unfortunate persistence of this idea is reinforced in part by its conformity to the oft-questioned but still influential notion of the decline of Greek rationalism during what has been called the "age of anxiety." But the real "age of anxiety," it seems, is our own: for it is our own, characteristically modern, anxiety to maintain rigid epistemic boundaries that has led us, albeit often subliminally, to remake our late antique idol Plotinus into what we comfortably imagine a real philosopher, or a real mystic, should be.<sup>92</sup> With a subtler awareness of the ritual context of Plotinus' mysticism and for the proximity of his mysticism to subsequent traditions of theurgy, we may reinsert him into the religious and philosophical continuum from which modern scholarship has attempted, almost magically, to extricate him. To do so, however, will require us to reconsider our implicit assumptions about the putative dichotomy between philosophical contemplation and ritual praxis and, more generally, to dissolve whatever residual notion we still have of 'magic' as either a degenerate or a prototypical phase of 'religion.' The case

92. This anxiety is evident, for example, in Dillon's excellent "The Platonic Philosopher at Prayer" 293, where he apologizes for bringing up "such extra-rational considerations" (i.e., theurgic visualizations) at "an otherwise respectable scholarly gathering." Would someone feel the need to apologize for doing the equivalent at a scholarly panel on, say, Buddhism?

of Plotinus illustrates the complex dialectical relationship between these categories, which still, today, remain inexorably intertwined.