

Saying and Having in Plotinus

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Is theological discourse possible? This familiar problem is met both with philosophical rigour and with speculative genius by the father of Neoplatonism. In treating of the One (*Enneads* 5.3 [49].14.1-3) Plotinus asks:

How then do we speak about it? Indeed we say something about it (τι περὶ αὐτοῦ), but we do not say the One itself (οὐ μὴν αὐτὸ λέγομεν), nor do we have knowledge or thought of the One itself.¹

In this passage Plotinus distinguishes two forms of speech concerning the One: (1) To speak about the One, or discuss the One (*legein peri* and the genitive); (2) to say the One, or disclose the One (*legein* and the accusative). He allows that we may discuss the One, but not in such a way that we may disclose it. In 6.7 [38].38.4-5), he says: "We predicate the good concerning it without saying itself" (Λέγομεν δὲ τὰγαθὸν περὶ αὐτοῦ λέγοντες οὐκ αὐτό). Harder² construes: Λέγομεν τὰγαθὸν περὶ Αὐτοῦ i.e. Λέγομεν. Αὐτό ἐστι τὸ ἀγαθόν ("We say or predicate the good of it, i.e. we say, it is the Good"). Thus *legein peri* (discuss) means to make a statement about, using the (in this case) inadmissible copula. It is not so much that Plotinus distinguishes between *legein peri* (discuss) and *legein* (disclose) as two modes of discourse about the One. Rather, he argues that, in this instance, *legein* must always be the equivalent of *legein peri* which involves the copula and is therefore unacceptable. Therefore the attempt at disclosure will always be resolved in mere discussion.

Are the two uses of *legein* as "discuss" and "disclose" ever compatible in such a way that the distinction between them is preserved? Indeed they are. In 3.7 [45].6.17-19 Plotinus, speaking of Nous, says that the statement "ἔστιν" ("it is") is most true of the things that we may say about it (τῶν περὶ αὐτό) and indeed

1. All references are to *Plotini Opera*, ed. P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzler, 3 vols. (Oxford 1964-1982); cf. Plato *Timaeus* 28C3-5 where it is denied that it is possible to disclose (*legein* and the accusative) the father of the universe to all mankind; for other references to the distrust of speech (and writing) in Plato see *Parmenides* 142A; *Epistle VII*, 341C-344D (which Plotinus takes to be genuine).

2. *Plotins Schriften*, übersetzt von R. Harder, Neubearbeitung mit griechischem Lesetext und Anmerkungen fortgeführt von R. Beutler und W. Theiler, III b, Anmerkungen zu den Schriften 30-38 (Hamburg 1964) 514.

is itself (καὶ αὐτό).³ The rigours of Eleatic logic preclude that both senses should ever be applicable to the One.

We have so far concentrated upon the difference between discuss and disclose. We have seen that Plotinus concludes the first sentence of this chapter (5.3 [49].14) by saying “nor do we *have* knowledge or thought of [the One] itself”. He proceeds to exhaust the possibilities of saying and having: (1) We may have the One in such a way that we may discuss it, but not disclose it (lines 4-8):

Indeed, if we do not have (ἔχομεν) it in knowledge, do we not have it at all? But we have it thus that we may speak about [discuss] it, but not say [disclose] it. Indeed we say what it is not, but we do not say [disclose] it, so that we speak about [discuss] it from what follows upon it. But we are not prevented from having it, even if we do not say [disclose] it.

Plotinus doubtless means that we may engage in discursive thought and speech concerning the One without achieving a disclosure of its true nature (as is possible in the case of Nous). The “having” which he will allow refers to that relationship which we have to the One in the act of discussing it at all. The central question must be, why do we continue to discuss the One if our discussion may never disclose it? Is this not a fruitless and idle enterprise?⁴ (2) Plotinus then introduces a fresh distinction. We may speak while being disposed toward, literally while we “have toward” (*echein pros*) the One (lines 8-19):

But as those who become inspired and possessed (ἐνθουσιῶντες καὶ κάτοχοι) may know this much, that they have something greater [than themselves] within them, even if they do not know what, but from what they are moved and what they say derive

3. In this instance the sense of *legein peri* as “discuss” is expressed with the accusative rather than with the genitive case, as in 5.3 [49].14.1-2, but the effect is the same. J. H. Sleeman and G. Pollet, *Lexicon Plotinianum* (Leiden 1980), col. 833 give “about, concerning” for *peri* with the genitive case and “in regard to” for *peri* with the accusative; see also the article under *legein* for *legein peri* and the genitive and *legein peri* with the accusative, col. 594.

4. Language is a mode of difference and the One is itself different from all that which is derived from it. Therefore language, neither by means of negation, nor in metaphor, can adequately describe the One. Yet since these are the highest capability of speech, we should not regard them from the perspective of sufficiency to the subject which they describe, but from the horizon of view, they are both original (rather than derivative) and adequate, cf. W. Beierwalter, *Denken des Einen. Studien zur Neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main 1985) 106-107. Language can still, however, not disclose the One.

a sensation of that which moves them while they are different from that, thus we are apt to be disposed toward (ἔχειν πρὸς) it [i.e. the One], when we have pure intellect, divining that this is the inner mind, which bestows essence and the other things which are of that rank, itself not being such, as it is not these, but something greater than that which is called "being", but fuller and greater than what-is-said, because it is itself greater than speech and mind and sensation, bestowing these, while not itself being these.

Pure intellect (νοῦς καθαρός) and the inner mind (ὁ ἕνδον νοῦς) refer to a phase or power of Nous which transcends its own nature, a sort of ambassador of the One within the structure of Nous. Thus in 6.9 [9].3.26-27 we behold the One with pure intellect καθαρῷ τῶνῶ) and with the first principle of intellect (τοῦ νοῦς τῶ πρώτῳ).⁵ Of course, the human soul may co-incide with this phase in its ascent toward the One. It is to be observed that all the predicates here attributed to pure intellect may also be assigned to the One itself with which pure intellect, as transcendent phase or power of intellect, is in union. Thus the One is greater than being, than what-is-said and than speech, mind and sensation. It is the One which ultimately bestows all of these, while being none of them.

The One then (observing the equation we have just undertaken), while it is greater than being, than what-is-said and than speech (*logos*) and thought and sensation, bestows these (παράχων ταῦτα). Thus the One gives us speech. To the question, why should we undertake to discuss the One if we already know that we may not disclose it, this offers a partial answer. The very fact that language belongs to the creation and is the gift of the One to us carries with it the mandate and even the imperative of theological discourse. Language, especially theological language, is not altogether our project

What are we to make of the fact that Plotinus says that we may speak of the One in inspiration? Armstrong⁶ remarks:

This passage seems to owe something to Plato's description of the inspiration of poets in *Ion* 533-4 (cp. especially ἐνθεοὶ ὄντες καὶ κατεχόμενοι 533E6-7). It is interesting that Plotinus finds this poetic possession (for Plato a state far inferior to the clear knowledge of the philosopher) a suitable analogy for our highest awareness, that of the One, and that it is for him a kind of

5. Cf. 5.5 [32].8.22-23; 6.7 [38].35.19-23 and J. M. Rist, "Mysticism and Transcendence in Later Neoplatonism", *Hermes* 92 (1964) 213-225.

6. *Plotinus*, ed. and tr. A. H. Armstrong, vol. 5 (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1984) 120, note 3; we may also think of Plato *Apology* 22C1.

knowledge (though not knowledge of the One) which it certainly is not for Plato.

Is Plotinus in this passage praising poetry at the expense of philosophy? He would, on this interpretation, be advancing poetry as a way of truth at the very moment at which he has despaired of philosophy as a means of disclosing the One. There are three vocations which may make their presence felt in this passage: Prophecy, poetry (as it arises from reference to the *Ion*) and philosophy (which we have been exploring as an instrument for disclosing the One).

Who are the "we" (*hêmeis*, line 13) who are the subject of the analogy which Plotinus is drawing? Not prophets, for that is the other term of the analogy: "We" are *like* prophets, i.e. it is not the case that we *are* prophets. Are "we" poets? The fact that Plato in the *Ion* compares poets with prophets and that Plotinus is dependent here upon the *Ion* need not of itself mean that he is inviting us to construe "we" here as "poets". He may simply borrow from the *Ion* the idea that a comparison may be undertaken between prophets and others if certain conditions are met. What conditions? The absence (as in the *Ion*) of science and knowledge. Nothing in the context of this passage would (apart from an oblique borrowing from the *Ion*) lead us to make an abrupt transition to the truth of poetry or to a preference of poetry to philosophy. Plotinus and his seminar have been discussing how we may speak of the One. It has been asserted that discussion does not disclose the One. The "we" in question must then be ourselves as philosophers, i.e. as those who really are committed to discussing the One.

Plotinus here would offer us a middle ground between discussing and disclosing the One. Philosophical language may, on the analogy of mantic inspiration, declare the One. We have thus three ways in which we may consider discourse about the One: To disclose, to discuss and to declare. While disclosure may be impossible, we may yet discuss or declare.

What could it mean to say that philosophical language may declare the One? We need not think that declaration excludes discussion. Indeed if it is philosophical language which declares the One then the language of declaration must embrace the language of discussion. What then can it mean to discuss the One in such a way that we also declare it?

Plotinus (6.7 [38].22) discusses the presence of the One to Nous in illuminationist language. The beauty (*kallos*) of Nous is dormant until it receives the light of the One (lines 11-12). The One in the act of illumination confers grace (*χάριτας δόντος*, line 7) upon

the Forms. The word “grace” (*charis*) may, as Hadot⁷ observes, be taken both in the classical Hellenic sense of the grace of beauty and in the Christian theological sense of gift without condition. A wonderful illustration is provided (lines 21-24):

If [the soul] remains in Nous, it sees many beautiful (*kala*) and august things, but it does not yet have that which it seeks. It is as if it approaches a face which, while beautiful, may yet not excite vision, in which there is not conspicuous a diffusion of grace (χάρις ἐπιθέουσα).

Plotinus proceeds (lines 24-29) to argue that beauty consists, not in symmetry or proportion, but in the beauty which shines upon symmetry in spiritual illumination. Thus the face of a corpse may have symmetry and yet not enjoy the beauty of a living countenance.⁸

In the next chapter (6.7 [38].23.1-4) Plotinus says:

There indeed, that which the soul pursues and which bestows light upon Nous and the trace which fell from it and is stirring — we should not be amazed if it has such a great power, drawing to itself [the soul] and summoning (ἀνακαλουμένου) it from all wandering, so that it [the soul] may find its repose in disposition toward itself [i.e. the One].

Plato in the *Cratylus* 416D derives *kalon* (“beautiful”) from *kalein* (“to call”). Plotinus doubtless, in his use of *anakaleisthai* (“summon”), engages the Platonic etymology.⁹ This would suggest that beauty may be a word from the One which summons us toward itself in a moment of illumination and grace. He reasons (lines 17-18):

The other things which they say are goods (λέγουσιν ἀγαθά) [they say are such] with reference to this [i.e. the Good], but they say that this is good with reference to nothing [of these].

Here we have again the problem of 5.3 [49].14 that language, as it proceeds from sequents which follow upon the One, may not disclose the One. He proceeds (lines 18-20):

What then does such a principle create? Indeed it created mind, it created life, souls are from this [principle] and all other things which participate in language (*logos*), or intelligence, or life.

The One is also described (lines 23-24) as “inspiring mind, inspiring life”. Here we have, as in 5.3 [49].14, the notion that speech is itself a part of creation.

7. P. Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard* (Paris 1963) 65-68.

8. Cf. 1.6 [1]. 37-40.

9. Cf. H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (Cairo 1956) 439.

In 6.7 [38].22 and 23 we are presented with three senses of *legein*, "to say": Disclosure, discussion and declaration. As in 5.3 [49].14, discussion will not of itself yield disclosure. Yet language is a part of creation and as such a gift of the One.

In the notion that beauty may call or summon us to the One from which it descends, we may see the function of language as declaration. The beauty of the Forms may, in an act of illumination, grace and transcendence declare the One. Even so may our words, charged with divine energy, become language of and from the One, declaring the first principle and summoning us toward it.

In 6.9 [9].7 Plotinus speaks of how the soul, in union with the One, must abandon sense, form and self and (lines 21-26):

Having come together with it and sufficiently, so to speak, having achieved communion with it, should go forth and proclaim, if it may, to another the association which it had there. It was with respect to such [an association] that Minos, who was famed to have become the familiar of Zeus, recalling it [that association] established the laws, as images of it, having been filled by contact with the divine unto the institution of laws.

Obviously the laws of Minos are cast in words and yet they are not simply a product of his own deliberative or discursive thought, but a declaration of his contact with Zeus. It is here not simply the case that the words of Minos have the intention of describing Zeus. His words are laws meant for men. Yet they reflect his ineffable contact with Zeus. If the words of legislation may reflect Zeus and proceed from Zeus without embracing the intention directly to represent Zeus himself, how much more may the language of theological discussion, which does have that intention, proceed from and reflect divine contact, even in the absence of disclosure?

Plotinus (5.8 [31].5.20-6.15) compares the Forms in Nous with the ideogrammatic symbols on Egyptian temple walls (lines 6-9):¹⁰

Inscribing in their temples one particular image of one particular thing, they manifested the non-discursiveness of the intelligible world, that is, that every image is a kind of knowledge and wisdom and is a subject of statements, all together in one and not discourse or deliberation.

It is only later that this unity of vision is divided in discursive script and discourse (lines 9-12).

10. See E. de Keyser, *La Signification de l'art dans les Ennéades de Plotin* (Louvain 1955) 60-62.

Plotinus then assigns a certain status to language at the level of Nous. Thus (5.8 [31].5.21-22) "all of the things which are said there are beautiful images". Because Nous is identity in difference, Plotinus may imagine that it *could* say, "I am being", "I am thought". Being and thought are modes of manyness and difference which may be portrayed in a sentence in which the copula binds subject and predicate to unity. If the One, however, were to say, "I am this", it would, by the use of a predicate, introduce an inadmissible difference and manyness. Even to say "am am" or "I I" would suggest the copula and multiplicity.¹¹

We have examined three passages to illustrate the sense of speech as "declaration". In two of these¹² speech is preceded by vision. In another, speech is anticipated by touch or contact.¹³ This is to say that speech as declaration reflects experience. We may always see at work in Plotinus a triadic structure of tradition, reason and experience.¹⁴ It is never to be thought that he makes an authoritarian, mystical appeal to experience at the expense of reason. We have also seen that the inability of speech to disclose the One does not allow us to forego discussion. The very status of speech as a gift from the One carries with it the imperative of theological discourse.

In the passage concerning the Egyptian ideogrammatic symbols¹⁵ we have seen how, on Plotinus' view, the priests proceeded from the symbols which communicated the immediacy of intuitive vision to cursive script and discursive thought. This movement from intuition to discursive speech or generally the transition from vision, touch and experience to language must not be thought to run only in one direction. Plotinus sees in the soul an inborn deficiency.

11. Cf. 5.3 [49].10.32-37; 13.21-28; 6.7 [38].38.11-25 and W. Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen*, note 4 above, 102-103; the higher souls, before the descent into body, make no use of discursive reasoning, but do enjoy a kind of silent and intuitive communication, cf. 4.3 [27].18 and W. Theiler, "Die Sprache des Geistes in der Antike", *Forschungen zum Neuplatonismus* (Berlin 1966) 305-307; Theiler locates this idea in the history of ancient theories of language. While the thought of Nous is non-discursive, this does not mean that it need be non-propositional, cf. R. Sorabji, "Myths about non-propositional thought", *Language and Logos, Studies in ancient Greek philosophy presented to G. E. L. Owen*, ed. M. Schofield and M. C. Nussbaum (Cambridge 1982) 295-314, *pace* A. C. Lloyd, "Non-discursive thought — An Enigma of Greek Philosophy", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s. 70 (1969-70) 261-274.

12. 6.7 [38].22-23 and 5.8 [31].5-6.

13. 6.9 [9].7.

14. See A. H. Armstrong, "Tradition, Reason and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus", *Plotino e il Neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente* (Rome 1974) 171-194.

15. 5.8 [31].5-6.

It can never be content to achieve unity with its object of contemplation, but must always step back and see it as other, examining it in discursive thought and speech.¹⁶ Thus the relation between intuition and speech is dialectical.

To understand this, we have only to imagine a very good conversation. We analyse and divide our subject with all the weapons of discursive reason. Suddenly, if the conversation is indeed a fine one, we feel that we have transcended ourselves in a moment of deepening understanding and intuition, as if our speech had touched profundity. Yet that very intuition, after a moment of silence, reflection, excitement and enjoyment may give birth to yet other discourse as it in turn is analysed and considered discursively. This must be a model of philosophizing which will remain unpopular with those who see philosophy as being the task of nailing down ideas in what would advertise itself as a definitive form. For those who see such conversation as a continuing fusion of horizons, the Plotinian dialectic of intuition and language will be more welcome.

Crome¹⁷ distinguishes between metaphor and symbol as distinct modes of discourse concerning the intelligible world. He uses the term "symbol" in a technical sense of his own definition. A "symbol" is a word or image which may function as a theurgic instrument capable of summoning or manipulating divine power. Crome's point of departure is Iamblichus. In Iamblichus the original Assyrian or Egyptian name of a god is to be preferred to its Hellenic equivalent on the grounds that it is charged with theurgic power.¹⁸ In nature, the sensible world may, as image of the intelligible world, exalt the soul of man to the divine. It is the task of theurgy to fashion "symbols" which will imitate this process.¹⁹ The imagery (for example) of myth, mathematics, sacrament and light may discharge this "symbolic" function. Symbol as an expression from the divine and a means of return to the divine is to be distinguished from metaphor which uses imagery and transferred sense as a means merely of representing the divine to ourselves.

Crome then attempts to discover a kind of Iamblichean theurgy in Plotinus. In so doing he tends to confuse the anagogical character of beauty or goodness in nature with theurgic power.²⁰ There is also a general confusion about the relation between image and

16. Cf. 3.8 [30].6.21-24 and de Keyser, *La Signification de l'art*, note 10 above, 63-64.

17. P. Crome, *Symbol und Unzulänglichkeit der Sprache* (Munich 1970).

18. *De Mysteriis*, ed. Parthey (Berlin 1857, reprint Amsterdam 1965) 7.4;5 and Crome, *Symbol etc.*, note 17 above, 56-58.

19. *De Mysteriis* 7.1 and Crome, *Symbol etc.*, note 17 above, 51-52.

20. See e.g. his treatment of 3.2 [47].14 in *Symbol etc.*, note 17 above, 101.

language.²¹ Departing from the theurgic power of the divine name in Iamblichus, Crome proceeds to see the image as a function of language. Beierwaltes²² gets it right: Language as a phenomenon of difference is a species or function of imagery (“Sprache ist ein Phänomen der Differenz und damit auch ein Phänomen des Bildes”).

Crome²³ argues that in 5.3 [49].14 “having” the One without being able to “say” it demonstrates how we may have a suprarational contact with the One which metaphorical language may not express. Thus Plotinus must resort to “symbolic” speech.

I have argued previously in *Dionysius*²⁴ that Plotinus uses two models of discourse when he discusses the relations between the intelligible and the sensible world: Representation and reflection. In representation we analyse and divide the intelligible model very much as an artist might resolve the attributes of his model into discrete qualities which in their aggregate may display an appearance of unity. Representation is useful to the philosopher who seeks to understand the intelligible world in terms of the relations of participation and likeness which exist between the intelligible and sensible worlds. Plotinus redresses the language of representation through the language of reflection which stresses the continuity of sensible with intelligible reality and the real presence of the intelligible in the sensible world. The colour in a mirror image is a projection of an attribute which really is in the model and is continuous with that attribute. Thus an object in the world of sense may (in Crome’s sense) discharge a “symbolic” function. It does so, however, not as a function of speech, but because it is itself an image charged with divine energy.²⁵

What I am arguing here is that speech, as its various sensible referents, itself belongs to the creation. All of speech, whether it employs the model of representation or of reflection, is not merely

21. *Symbol etc.*, note 17 above, 90-91.

22. *Denken des Einen*, note 4 above, 102.

23. *Symbol etc.*, note 17 above, 87-88.

24. “Representation and Reflection in Plotinus”, 4 (1980) 37-60.

25. I am delighted that the eminent scholar of Neoplatonism, W. Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen*, note 4 above, 73, n. 1, expresses a general sympathy with the project of this article. He discovers, however (94, note 56), a distinction in this article which it was not my intention to draw, viz. between imitation and representation. I rather see artistic imitation as both representational and reflective. Reflection, however, embraces and amplifies the complex of relations which is to be found in representation. I wish to express my warm gratitude to the Office of Research Services of Queen’s University who funded my attendance at the meeting of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies at the World Philosophy Congress in Montreal on August 24, 1983 where I read an earlier version of this paper.

an instrument, but is itself a created thing. As such, it may, as may any other created thing, either describe or reflect the One. In its aspect as declaration, language may be said to reflect the One as it is charged with real presence and establishes continuity with its creator.

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