Neoplatonism and Contemporary French Philosophy[1]

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I wish to show that a central aspect of twentieth-century French philosophy, theology, and spiritual life is not only the retrieval of Neoplatonism but specifically of the variety which the Anglo-American world finds most foreign: the theurgical and strongly apophatic Neoplatonism which arises with Iamblichus and of which the most influential figure is Proclus. That Neoplatonism should be a moving force in contemporary philosophy will no doubt shock those whose educations have been strictly censured in accord with what Anglo-American Protestant and secular academe defines as reason. With rare exceptions it excludes as part of philosophy and its history the 1500 years between the ancient and the modern scepticisms.[2] This millennium and a half is the period during which Neoplatonism and a Neoplatonised Aristotelianism prevailed. Still, to know a little about Plotinus and even to express some attraction to his philosophy would not exclude you from the Senior Common Room—provided you did not propose that he belonged in the curriculum. In contrast Iamblichus and his successors were associated with reason which had surrendered in the face of anxiety and had fallen into irrational superstition, and, in general, with a mixing of religion and reason which made philosophy impossible—their mixing in Plato, Aristotle, or indeed in almost all the ancient philosophers did not count! Nonetheless, although unnoticed except by a very few, a retrieval of Neoplatonism generally and of post-Iamblichan Neoplatonism specifically is an important aspect of contemporary French philosophy, theology, scholarship, and spirituality, productions the French by no means keep to themselves.

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2. It may even leap from Aristotle directly to Descartes; see Robert Todd's essay in this volume.

HENRI BERGSON: THE END IS IN THE BEGINNING

The Neoplatonic retrieval begins about one hundred years ago with Henri Bergson (1859–1941) with whom also its purposes and the modifications Neoplatonism undergoes in being adapted to the contemporary world begin to show. The retrieval is generally opposed to the Western metaphysical tradition insofar as this is understood to determine modernity, and it is also generally anti-Idealist, endeavouring to link the sensuous and corporeal immediately with the first Principle. This second characteristic sets the twentieth-century retrieval in opposition to that in the nineteenth century, when Germany was its centre, and even to the ancient and medieval Neoplatonisms generally.

The fundamental character as well as both the intellectual and the institutional logics of this retrieval are established in the first half of the century. Crucial are 1) Bergson, 2) what he and Émile Bréhier, the great historian of philosophy and the sole figure in the French history who adopts an Hegelian interpretation of Neoplatonism, have in common and that wherein they differ, and 3) the relations between Bréhier and André Festugière, the Dominican priest, who in contradistinction from Bréhier and Bergson worked on hermetic and post-Iamblichan Platonism, fusing Plato the mystic and Plato the intellectual. A full account of the figures influencing and even determining the most recent actors in this history would require treating Maurice Blondel (1861–1949) and his Jesuit followers like Henri de Lubac (1896–1991). However, an essay of this length cannot include them.

Bergson finds in Plotinus both a fulfilment of the errors of classical metaphysics, and a counterbalance to them. He prizes not the goals which he supposes that the intellectualist Plotinus seeks but rather 1) a mystical ecstasy which, because his is mere *theoria*, Bergson judges to be beyond Plotinus, in the way that Moses views from a distance the promised land he cannot enter, 2) the harmonious self-moving and self-explicating life of Soul, which Plotinus takes from Stoicism and which lies at the bottom of his spiritual hierarchy, 3) the Plotinian attention to the experience of the individual soul.[3] In other words, Bergson reverses Plotinus, placing him on his feet. Removing the intellectual mediation, he tends to join immediately the bottom to the top, i.e., the vital to a One beyond the Plotinian One because its reality is practice. For Bergson, the intellectual is not, as in Plotinus, the realm of perfection which the vitality of soul imitates weakly, but rather intellectual effort shares the character of psychic life. There is an exact parallelism between the intellectual and the vital: "Life and thought are … always, and in conformity to the Plotinian scheme of 'procession,' a passage

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3. See R.-M. Mossé-Bastide, *Bergson et Plotin* 3–9; L. Kolakowski, *Bergson* 82.

from unity to multiplicity."[4] Bergson places this aspect of Plotinus against
what in him is characteristic of intellectualist metaphysics: i.e., objectifica-
tion and the reduction of the moving to the static. In common with those
who succeed him in a turn to Neoplatonism, Bergson wishes to rescue both
the world and the self from these objectifications and reductions. Like those
leaders of the French phenomenological tradition who later stand within
this turn to Neoplatonism, Bergson attacks traditional metaphysics and at-
tributes the problem pervading its history to the self-closure of a subjectivity
caught in its own intellectualist objectifications. Equally in common with
them, the required escape involves the anti-intellectualist elevation of the
One and Good, charity realized in practice, and a voluntarism. Freeing the
subject from the absoluteness of the subject-object dialectic of reason will
enable recovering the philosophical conditions of an "expérience intégrale,"
experience which is genuinely open to what is other.

Bergson's Neoplatonism has nineteenth-century French and German
connections but they are not as significant as his relation to Maine de Biran
(1766–1824) whom he recognised as the first authentique "positiviste spiritu-
aliste."[5] De Biran is an essential element in our history—at its end, as well as
at its beginning, he finds followers, the latest is Michel Henry (1922–2003).[6]
Maine de Biran gives in an early form what reappears in the Phenomenology
of figures like Emmanuel Lévinas, Henry Duméry, Jean-Luc Marion, and
Henry who borrowed importantly from Neoplatonism. At both ends of the
history, the attempt to open what modern metaphysics is supposed to have
closed motivates a unification of a disciplined attention to experience with
crucial elements of Neoplatonism. In de Biran, Bergson found something of
what he also found in Plotinus, namely a moving introspective experience
in which the connection and distinction of the corporeal, the psychic, the
vital, and the divine appeared.

Bergson's connection with German Idealism is in the tradition of Schelling
where he differs from Hegel by refusing the identification of being, thought,
and God.[7] With Schelling as against Hegel, Bergson criticises previous
philosophy for its reduction of reality to the noetic. In order to circumvent
that reduction, Bergson turns to experience, to action and will, and to "true"
mysticism. For him, true mysticism is not Greek, because, in mystic union,
contemplation and productive action are one. Plotinus is too intellectualist
for this. Because of his crucial role in the French retrievals of Neoplatonism
later in the twentieth century, it is significant that, although important differ-

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4. Mossé-Bastide, *Bergson et Plotin* 9.
5. D. Janicaud, *Une généalogie du spiritualisme français* 4.
6. See M. Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*.
7. See J.-F. Courtine, "La critique schellingienne de l'ontothéologie" 217–57.

ences remain, what Bergson seeks seems closer to what Iamblichus proposed as the human goal. For Iamblichus our ultimate goal is beyond theoretical knowledge and lies in the soul's association with the gods, joining in the divine productivity.

Bergson was not the last to turn to Plotinus from within the remains of "German romanticism which was accompanied by a parallel renaissance of Neoplatonism."[9] Émile Bréhier (1876–1952) was among the few who attended Bergson's *conférences* on Plotinus at the Collège de France, which began with Bergson's first *cours* there.[10] Bréhier recalled those commentaries on the *Enneads* "with gratitude and admiration" and doubtless they partly inspired his own very important work on Plotinus.[11] Like Bergson, Bréhier sees in philosophy the freedom of humanity and refuses to reduce it to anything else, whether natural science, religion, or historical circumstances. Still, we must distinguish him from Bergson, who paid little attention to the history of philosophy and certainly did not unite history and philosophy, as Hegel did. Bréhier, says of himself that although, in the end he is a philosopher rather than an historian, his work is first of all a recitation as faithful as possible of the history. However, it is not just a recitation, he says, "my ultimate goal is progressively to extricate, in its purity, the essence of philosophy."[12] With Bréhier, as with Bergson, the Idealist background is present. With the great historian of philosophy the connection is more explicit: Hegel (and Comte) provide the basis and Hegel (and Leibniz) give the model for unifying philosophy and history.[13] Beyond this difference from Bergson, there is also a rejection of Schelling's "positivisme intuitioniste."[14] Bréhier's interpretation and judgement about Neoplatonism owe much to Hegel.

From Bréhier to Festugière: Plato becomes a Mystic

After Bréhier, the development of French Neoplatonic scholarship occurs first within and then in reaction against the Neothomism of the Leonine revival. In the last third of the twentieth century, for critics both inside and outside the Thomism, the dead Neoscholasticism of the nineteenth-century revival appeared to have been thoroughly infected with modern objectifying rationalism. At its heart some of them discerned the onto-theology whose

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8. Iamblichus, *Protrepticos* 3.10, 47,25ff.; 3.11, 58,8–19.

9. P. Hadot, "Introduction," in *Le Néoplatonisme* 2.

10. É. Bréhier, "Images plotiniennes, images bergsoniennes" 292; Mossé-Bastide, *Bergson et Plotin* 2.

11. Most notably, Plotin, *Ennéades*, texte établi et traduit par É. Bréhier and É. Bréhier, *La philosophie de Plotin*.

12. É. Bréhier, "Comment je comprends l'histoire de la philosophie" 7 and 9.

13. Ibid. 2.

14. Ibid. 4 and É. Bréhier, *Schelling* 306.

fate is exposed by Heidegger.[15] Aquinas' identification of God with subsistent being came to be regarded as profoundly problematic. About 1960, the French discovered that Heidegger had not made, indeed, would not and could not make, an exception for Thomas in the fate he prescribes for Western metaphysics so far as knowledge, being and God are equivocally equated in it.[16] Neoplatonism, in contrast, especially the Procline and Dionysian variety, and medieval thought so far as it is thus Neoplatonic, is conceived as a better means of responding to the problems to which modernity has come.

On the way into these reversals the work of André Festugière o.p. (1898–1982) is indicative and essential.[17] Having turned to Neoplatonism in the hope of adapting Aristotle to Christian ends, Père Festugière's scholarly life was a constant engagement in a deeply troubled religious quest. He studied the forms of the Hellenic search for personal salvation and sought there answers to his own questions. In his *Personal Religion Among the Greeks*, when Festugière comes to what he calls reflective piety, he first speaks of Plato. Of his doctrine of the Good beyond thought and being in the *Republic* and that of the *VIIth Letter*, he writes:

> I am for my part convinced that this is the expression of a personal experience. In sum, the supreme object of knowledge, the final degree of our metaphysical investigations, the term on which all the rest depends, is an object which defies definition, and hence cannot be named. It is the Unknown God.[18]

Festugière thus identifies the origin of the "Undefinable God," the "Ineffable God," in Plato:

> both in Plato and in his successors … the noeton is certainly the intelligible … But at the same time it is the object above the intelligible ... which we attain only by mystical contact…. [I]t is an ocean of joy in which we submerge ourselves…. Plato stands at the beginning of the great mystical tradition which, through Plotinus and Proclus, inspired Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena ….[19]

With every word of this description, Festugière is setting himself against Bréhier and Hegel for whom precisely this aspect of Neoplatonism was attributed not to Greek philosophy but to "Orientalism." Despite his love of Pla-

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15. This summarizes the argument of my "Dionysian Hierarchy in St. Thomas Aquinas" 405–38.

16. See W.J. Hankey, "Denys and Aquinas" 146–47 and idem, "From Metaphysics to History" 184–86.

17. See H.-D. Saffrey, *Mémorial André-Jean Festugière*, which contains a bibliography. His "Portrait" in this volume is by H.-D. Saffrey.

18. A.-J. Festugière, *Personal Religion* 44.

19. Ibid. 45.

tonic mysticism, Festugière was not attracted by all the religious phenomena of late Antiquity. *Personal Religion Among the Greeks* does not go far beyond Plotinus. Like his friend E.R. Dodds (1893–1979), Festugière connects the religious turn in Later Neoplatonism with the political and social decadence and the misery of late Antiquity.[20] Only with the three priest scholars, the Sulpician Jean Trouillard (1907–1984), Henry Duméry, and Joseph Combès, did a positive appreciation appear of Iamblichus and of those who followed him into a revealed pagan religion which counterbalanced and contested Christianity with a philosophically justified cult and theurgy.

That Festugière's treatment of Platonism marked a transition was evident to Bréhier himself. After presiding over the defence of Festugière's doctorate, Bréhier published a criticism of his interpretation of Plato "which made Plato appear to be a mystic, and which sought to find, like Plotinus, the foundation of the hierarchy of being in an intuition of pure being (the Good or the One), which the author does not hesitate to consider as an authentic mystical experience" and, thus, for treating the Plotinian reading of Plato as correct both in method and content.[21] Festugière reduced to a unity what Bréhier wanted to preserve: "the duality between the mystical Plato and the intellectual."[22]

There is a large group of scholar priests to whom we owe the indispensable editions and translations, with philological, historical, and philosophical commentary, of the Neoplatonic texts. Many of them had important connections with English scholars like Dodds and A.H. Armstrong (1909–1997). Under the influence of Pierre Hadot and Trouillard, Armstrong participated in the French re-evaluation of the post-Iamblichan theurgic tradition. There is also a current English enthusiasm for this tradition of Neoplatonism in the so-called Radical Orthodox theological party which is totally dependent upon post-Modern French philosophers like Jean-Luc Marion, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Michel Henry.

Priestly Neoplatonism

After Bergson and Bréhier, for the greater part of the century, Neoplatonic study in France is not primarily with laymen or with those who taught at the universities, but with Catholic scholars, theologians and philosophers most of whom were priests, or who, like Pierre Hadot, Henry Duméry, Jean Pépin,

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20. P. Hadot's *Memorial for Festugière* 34. It was only through reading Trouillard that A.H. Armstrong got beyond Dodds' prejudices in respect to later Neoplatonism.

21. É. Bréhier, "Platonisme et néoplatonisme: A propos d'un livre du P. Festugière" 56. Festugière's *thèse de doctorat ès lettres* was published as *Contemplation et vie contemplative chez Platon*.

22. Ibid. 64; see Hadot's memorial, 32.

and Michel Tardieu, started their scholarly careers as priests. With priests like Festugière, Trouillard, Duméry, Combès, Henri-Dominique Saffrey o.p., Édouard Jeauneau, and Stanislas Breton, a Passionist, their Neoplatonic studies were implicated in their religious lives. Neoplatonism also became a substitute for Catholicism among laicized priests and the ecclesiastically disenchanted.[23]

For example, Pierre Hadot has spent the greatest part of his scholarly career teaching, one might almost say preaching, that philosophy is a way of life, a spirituality.[24] In 1977, he presented his work on ancient philosophy under the title "Exercices spirituels."[25] He said that his aim was to offer "to those who were not able or who did not wish to live according to a religious way of life, the possibility of choosing a mode of life purely philosophic."[26] Hadot tells us that there is an important connection between his personal spiritual quest, his formation as a Catholic priest, his studies of Neoplatonism, and his presentation of philosophy.

Hadot had had mystical experiences as a youth which were not associated with his practice of Catholicism.[27] When he read Plotinus, he discovered "the existence of a purely philosophical mysticism."[28] Despite doubts concerning Plotinian mysticism, his interest continued, and, from the beginning of his teaching, he developed research on the mystical treatises of Plotinus. He discovered there "a type of experimental knowledge which one is able to categorise as 'mystical'." The character of this special *connaissance* occurring with Plotinus seems to be "without precedent in the Greek tradition." This knowing meets the requirements of philosophy *comme manière de vivre* because in it the knower is transformed to become more truly himself. However, recently Hadot reports: first that personally, mystical experience, whether Christian or Plotinian, no longer has a vital interest for him; second, that Neoplatonism no longer seems a tenable position; and, third, that "Stoicism and also Epicureanism are more accessible than Plotinus to us contemporaries."[29]

He confesses that he has become "considerably detached from Plotinus":

23. Outside France, the most evident example of the latter is A.H. Armstrong and is put forthrightly in his "Some Advantages of Polytheism."

24. See P. Hadot, "Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy," idem, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre*, and W.J. Hankey, "Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians?"

25. P. Hadot, "Spiritual Exercises."

26. Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre* 68.

27. Ibid. 25–32; see 128–29.

28. Ibid. 126.

29. Ibid. 137.

in 1946, I naively believed that I, too, could relive the Plotinian mystical experience. But I later realized that this was an illusion. The conclusion of my book *Plotinus* already hinted that the idea of the "purely spiritual" is untenable. It is true that there is something ineffable in human experience, but this ineffable is *within* our very perception of the world, in the mystery of our existence and that of the cosmos.[30]

For our purposes it is important to see that Hadot's preference for Stoicism and Epicureanism, as against Neoplatonism, as well as his initial attraction to Neoplatonism, worked out in the course of a career devoted to historical and philosophical scholarship and teaching, combine the needs and experiences in his own spiritual quest, judgments about what is most accessible to his contemporaries, and an evolving philosophical judgment about the nature of reality.

Besides Hadot's initial endeavour to use Neoplatonism to found a non religious spirituality, we can list at least three other forms: there is the Neoplatonised Augustinianism developed by Maurice Blondel in reaction against Neothomism, a Neoplatonised Thomism, and a retrieval of pagan Neoplatonism in Trouillard, Duméry, and Combès. Stanislas Breton, has described these three as "the Neoplatonic triad of France." They develop a "Neoplatonic radicalism," which reproduced in the twentieth century the logical connection and development between Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius.[31]

From Blondel to Trouillard and Duméry: From Augustinian Ontology to Proclean Henology

Blondel's Platonism is intellectualist, ontological, and Augustinian. In contrast, with Trouillard, we arrive at Neoplatonism developed within an essentially postmodern position. Trouillard was the first to undertake a philosophical and theological revolution by means of henology, i.e., a system in which the first principle is designated by "one" rather than "being." The Neoplatonisms of the Religions of the Book (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have in general been ontologies, in the sense of metaphysics of pure being, rather than henologies. The radical redevelopment of pagan henology is central to French Platonism in our time. Trouillard's Procline henology evolved as an alternative to what he regarded as the Hegelian conclusion of the Augustinian following of Plotinus. It is equally an alternative to Thomism and is shaped importantly by Martin Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics.[32] His first work was on Plotinus, there the language of the "*contact*

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30. P. Hadot, "Postscript," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* 280–81.
31. S. Breton, *De Rome à Paris* 31 and 152–53.
32. See S. Breton, "Sur la difficulté d'être thomiste aujourd'hui," and, for an early consideration of the connection of Neoplatonism of Heidegger, P. Hadot, "Heidegger et Plotin."

indicible," the grounding in what is unthinkable because prior to both *noesis* and *esse*, attracted Trouillard.

A ground prior to thought and being seemed to provide the right solution to the problem occupying all the followers of Blondel. On the one hand, they perceived a destructive modern secularization of Christianity. On the other hand, that secularization appeared as a necessary development of Western Christianity. Neoscholastic metaphysics would loosen no knots. Thomism, with its separation of philosophy and theology, and its account of the relations of natural and supernatural coordinate with this separation, did not belong to the solution of the problem but to its intensification.[33] Henri de Lubac demonstrated that the Western tradition had come to regard the supernatural as another nature superadded to the first. It was dialectically necessary that, in such a binary opposition, nature would retrieve what had been alienated and so make itself total. The Plotinian location of the transcendent ground of nature in what was beyond representation, grasp, manipulation, and retrieval seemed to provide a way out.[34] However, to find this exit something more deeply and decisively determinative of the character of Western Christendom and its dilemmas than Thomism would have to be questioned. The Augustinian tradition, the very heart of Latin Christianity, must be critically examined.

Trouillard discovered a danger in the trinitarian speculations of Augustine. The Augustinian center in Western thought did not adequately protect difference, otherness, transcendence. For Trouillard, in seeking to found self-reflexive subjectivity in God, the Augustinian tradition projects the finite on to the infinite. As he wrote, Augustine's trinitarian speculations:

> reduplicate the distinctions inherent in created spirit under the pretext of founding them in the Absolute. One of the weaknesses of the Augustinian tradition is to have remained within one aspect of the Plotinian exegesis of the *Parmenides* and not to have understood that in this the requirements of criticism and the necessities of religious life converge in order to liberate Transcendence from all that would draw it back within the Intelligible. Outside of this we would perpetually risk the *quiproquo*, as it results in the Hegelian dialectic where no one is able to say if this is of God or this is of man and which plays upon this ambiguity.[35]

Against Augustinian reduplication of human subjectivity in the divine, Trouillard would have us reflect on the power of negation, the indeterminate and absence. In a move which reminds us of a postmodern deconstruction, Trouillard writes that the Platonic tradition brings before us "the infinity of

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33. O. Boulnois, "Les deux fins de l'homme" 209–22.
34. J. Combès, "Néoplatonisme aujourd'hui" 356.
35. J. Trouillard, "Pluralité spirituelle" 24.

absence which all presence implies, more exactly the positivity and efficacy of this absence. A mental intention defines itself as much by that which it excludes as by that which it posits."[36] He goes on:

> If then the normative dominates presence and absence both, if it commands both possession and privation, the name *Être* seems badly chosen to designate it. The normative is 'une hyperontologie.' The term *One* would be equally inappropriate if we understood it as an attribute. An infinite norm has only characteristics attributed to it as a result of the ways in which it functions. It is *être* inasmuch as it produces what derives from it, but it also imposes on them "*la distance*." It is *unity* in the sense that it rules the many, but it is equally the source of the multiplicity and variety of what is.[37]

This equalizing of the positive and negative is a deconstruction of the onto-logical and positive account of reality and the self. Both Trouillard and those we are more accustomed to call postmoderns take this as the centre of the Western tradition. Their deconstructions repeat his.

Along the same lines, Jean-Luc Marion detaches himself from Augustine's theological ontology to which Blondel had been drawn, finding that Augustine's interpretation of Exodus 3.14 is at the root of the conception of God as *idipsum esse* and that "Augustinian thought … finds itself … explicitly taken up according to the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics."[38] Nonetheless, Marion refuses to follow Trouillard into a Neoplatonic henology: "I have never been convinced by the argument that one can pass beyond Being to the One: this still remains within metaphysics by the simple conversion of the transcendentals. [Henology] is a insufficient evasion!"[39] Nonetheless, he locates a corrective to Western onto-theology in the same place where Trouillard finds it. Marion attempts a theology without ontology in a retrieval of the Pseudo-Denys.[40] In his first book *L'idole et la distance*, he adopts from Denys what the Areopagite owes to Proclus and Damascius. However, having refused metaphysics, Marion denies that Denys' position—or his own—is a Neoplatonism. Inspired by Lévinas to look to the autonomy of the ethical, one may say that the Neoplatonic principle named as the Good rather than as the One governs his thought. Marion also adopts something crucial to his thought from Blondel.

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36. Ibid. 27.

37. Ibid. 28.

38. J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being* 215, associating himself with a treatment of Augustine's doctrine of God by J.S. O'Leary.

39. D. Janicaud, *Heidegger en France* ii, *Entretiens* 210–27 at 216.

40. On his move to Denys see Hankey, "Denys and Aquinas" 150ff. and idem, "Self-knowledge and God" 93–98, for his understanding of Augustine.

Blondel takes up the infinity of the will as converted to charity in the Christian tradition leading from Augustine. Marion's attempt "to shoot for God according to his most theological name—charity,"[41] and to move "*hors-texte*," transcending the historical conditions of philosophy, is also Augustinian. Augustine's voluntarism attracts him and, like Trouillard, he finds in Blondel "the conversion of the will," or *charité*, by which he turns to God without metaphysics.[42] Marion recognises that Blondel is also concerned to find how will transcends "all its objects as so many idols."[43] Trouillard and Marion meet, in fact, because in charity a Neoplatonic move to the One - Good beyond being and to the will as free beyond the determinations of the *noetic* are united. The French Canadian scholar of Neoplatonism (and great admirer of Jean Trouillard), George Leroux reminds us of the Plotinian origins of the notion of a undetermined free good will in his work on *Ennead 6.8*: the *Treatise on the Liberty and the Will of the One*.[44]

When considering "The Current Relevance of Neoplatonism," Stanislas Breton speaks: "of the three states or three phases of Neoplatonism: the intuitive stage, the logico-formal stage, and the aporetic stage. To each of these epithets corresponds a figure who illustrates it: Plotinus the intuitive, Proclus the logician, Damascius the aporetic."[45] He proposes these stages "as a law of development in which the essence of Neoplatonism unfolds … a quasi-group of operations … an operation of identity, a transitive operation or processive, an inverse or conversive operation."[46] In consequence of its henological reference to the One-Nonbeing of the *Parmenides*, Neoplatonism is constantly inspired by a self-criticism. Damascius is the culmination of the critical spirit which is the heart of Neoplatonism: "Damascius the intrepid, when he turned on Neoplatonism in order to test its aporia, incarnates the inverse operation, reflexive and critical."[47] To this ancient triad of persons and stages a modern one corresponds:

> Plotinus illustrates the operation of the remaining—intuition which makes nothing; Proclus was the man of the discursive procession, in its systematic rigour; Damascius, as for him, by a return, as much critical as it was conversive, in respect to the two first thinkers, incarnates the concluding operation of the cycle. By a distant analogy, I found, in some way, in the work of Trouillard the Plotinian nuance, in that of Duméry, the philosopher of religion, the drive, simultaneously expansive and rigorous, of the

41. Marion, *God Without Being* xxi; see idem, "The Idea of God" i, 270–72.
42. J.-L. Marion, "La conversion" 33–46.
43. Ibid. 38.
44. Plotin, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l'Un*, on which see below.
45. S. Breton, "Actualité du néoplatonisme" 110–11.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.

Proclean discourse; in the translation with commentary of Combès, the critical force
of the original text of Damascius.[48]

Duméry makes the same connection between contemporary immanentist
atheism and Augustine's following of Plotinus as is made by Trouillard. He
judged that spiritual freedom for humans could not be secured in Augustinian
ontology or psychology but only in an Absolute which was beyond being.
Duméry also makes this point vis-à-vis Hegel, supposing that Hegelianism
ultimately submits God to the exigences of the human.[49] For him only a
God who is beyond determinations can ground human freedom. Together
with Trouillard, Duméry points to the Christian successors of Plotinus in the
Iamblichan tradition as a correction to dangers in an Augustinian unification
of psychology and trinitarian theology. In considering the construction of
the doctrine of the Trinity, he asserts that although the historian has points
to make, the critical philosopher "has also his own word to say":

> He will note, for example, that psychologism risks destroying this metaphysical con-
> struction (psychological trinities are not of the same order). He will also point out, we
> believe, that to give equal weight to the Trinitarian schema and the transordinal character
> of God is to confuse transcendence itself with its modes of apprehension. Neither St.
> Augustine nor Blondel entirely avoided this confusion. With Scotus Eriugena, and
> under the inspiration of the Pseudo-Dionysius, it will be necessary to repeat that God
> is more than Unity and more than Trinity. In no case can he be circumscribed by the
> intentionality which seeks to grasp him.[50]

The French Problematic

Despite the re-evaluation of theurgic Neoplatonism, Plotinian and Por-
phyrian study continued. The Jesuit Paul Henry (1906–1984) co-edited the
definitive edition of Plotinus. In addition, by pointing to what in Marius
Victorinus mediated the connection between Plotinus and Augustine,[51] he
established the context in which his student, Pierre Hadot, identified Por-
phyry as the missing link.[52] Hadot showed that an aspect of Plotinus' teaching
about the activity of the One and its relation to *Nous* had been exploited by
Porphyry and transmitted to Augustine either directly or through Marius
Victorinus. In consequence, Augustine's Trinity could be seen as an extension

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48. Breton, *De Rome à Paris* 153.
49. H. Duméry, *Regards* 58.
50. H. Duméry, *Faith and Reflection* 175, note 15, translating *Philosophie de la religion*
69, note 1.
51. See P. Henry, "The *Adversus Arium* of Marius Victorinus."
52. See P. Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus*. For a collection of the articles by which Hadot
traced the history from Porphyry and Augustine to Western mediaeval ontologies see his *Plotin,
Porphyre. Études Néoplatonicienne*.

of an alternative within the Neoplatonic interpretation of the *Parmenides* of Plato. Porphyry's collapsing of the differences between the hypostases, against which Iamblichus and his successors reacted, might then be understood as the founding of the onto-theological tradition in which the First is understood in terms of being so that ontology will be absolute. Alternatively, the same doctrine might be taken as the foundation of an apophatic ontology, "a metaphysics of pure being." Hadot's research leaves us with the possibility of three opposed or at least different metaphysics emerging from Platonism in Late Antiquity: 1) kataphatic ontology—traditionally associated with Augustine and Aquinas—, 2) apophatic ontology, "a metaphysics of pure being," or 3) henology.

In 1959 Hadot published a criticism of Heidegger's treatment of Platonism in the course of judging both that Heidegger is "the prophet of this end of Platonism, which is, at the same time, the end of the world" and that "one is able to be tempted to interpret the thought of Heidegger as a sort of *néo-platonisme.*"[53] Pierre Aubenque's "Plotin et le dépassement de l'ontologie grecque classique," was published in 1971. It sets up the question about the alternative metaphysics which might derive from Neoplatonism in the Heideggerian terms which have dominated French philosophy in the last two-fifths of the twentieth century. He judges that: "The thought of Plotinus and, in consequence, Neoplatonism are characterised … by two complementary theses, which are counterweights to traditional ontology. The first is that 'being is not the first; above being there is the one'."[54] Aubenque goes on to outline what follows from the first thesis: "a negative henology, the always repeated indication of the necessity of a *dépassement* of ontology."[55] He tells us that: "Plotinus has generally chosen the first way." Nonetheless, there is a second way:

> In his criticism of Stoicism, he [Plotinus] seems nonetheless to suggest the possibility of another way …. This second way is that which another Neoplatonic tradition will follow, which P. Hadot recently believed himself able to trace back to Porphyry. It will consist of deepening the notion of being, rather than "overcoming" it in favour of some kind of non-being, and, in particular, rising from the "on" [Greek] participle to the infinitive-being [*l'être-infinitif*], that is to say to the act of being [*être*], absolutely simple and undetermined, because it is the foundation of all determination.[56]

53. Hadot, "Heidegger et Plotin" 539–541.
54. P. Aubenque, "Plotin et le dépassement" 101. See also Aubenque's "Néoplatonisme et analogie de l' être."
55. Ibid. 102.
56. Ibid. 107.

By either, or both, of these ways Plotinian thought might escape Heidegger's critique of onto-theology. Aubenque also suggests how Neoplatonism relates to a Derridean deconstruction of ontology:

> "Fundamental Ontology" or "overcoming metaphysics": this alternative, which the contemporary project of a "destruction" or better of a "deconstruction" of the pseudo-evidences of classical ontology confronts anew, finds its exact prefiguration in Neoplatonism.[57]

Recently Jean-Marc Narbonne has shown the inadequacies of the Heideggerian critique of Neoplatonism because "the Neoplatonic problematic itself is almost totally ignored by Heidegger."[58] If the teaching of Aquinas and, indeed, the diversity of the metaphysics produced in the Middle Ages are considered within the Neoplatonic problematic in the wide sense now open to our view, exciting and paradoxical results emerge.

For example, when we have come to understand the origins, history, and character of "the metaphysics of pure being," it becomes clear that the characteristics by which Étienne Gilson set Aquinas' existential metaphysics of esse in opposition to Neoplatonism serve, in fact, to place his doctrine within a Neoplatonic tradition.[59] In the still wider understanding which the addition of all the Neoplatonic alternatives gives us, we can see with Jean-François Courtine "that Heidegger possessed a completely frozen and reductive notion of medieval metaphysics" and judge, in consequence, with Rudi Imbach "that Western metaphysics is a barbarous and bastard, but vigorous, child of a formidable interbreeding."[60] Alain de Libera, with many others, has contributed to showing what Neoplatonism gave to this "formidable interbreeding" and judges:

> By a certain type of subtle archaeology, liberated from the horizon of onto-theology, I believe, in any case, that it is possible to approach in a true historical way the plurality of medieval metaphysics, and at the same time it is possible also perhaps to throw a bridge between the metaphysics of yesterday and the metaphysics of today.[61]

From medieval metaphysics, we return to henological Neoplatonism and to Trouillard as its greatest exponent. He perceived that the universe was united in very different ways for Plotinus and Proclus. For Proclus, the One was present and powerful throughout the whole, even in the material. After

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57. Ibid. 108.
58. J.-M. Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis* 19.
59. W.J. Hankey, "Aquinas' First Principle" 133–72; idem, *God In Himself* 6.
60. R. Imbach, "Heidegger et la philosophie médiévale" 431 and 435.
61. A. de Libera, "Genèse et structure" 181.

noting the "well known divergence …" between "the rationalists … Plotinus and Porphyry on the one hand" and "Iamblicus, Syrianus, Nestorius, Proclus, who grant the first place to the *Chaldean Oracles* and theurgy, on the other," he writes that, whereas Plotinus proceeds by negation,

> Proclus shows rather a will for transfiguration. His universe … is traversed by a series of vertical lines, which like rays diverge from the same universal center and refer back to it the furtherest and the most diverse appearances.… The sensible is thus susceptible to a transposition and a purification which announces and perhaps prepares for the intelligible expanse of the Cartesians.[62]

The subsequent philosophical heirs of the Neoplatonic revival in France will all choose this Proclean way as opposed to the Plotinian way as the two are represented by Trouillard.

Trouillard outlines what drew him to Proclus, despite prejudices against him, after his studies of Plotinus:

> my reading of the *Commentary on Euclid* and the *exposé* … of 'the self-motivating character of imaginative space (*le caractère automoteur de l'espace imaginatif*)' or the circuit by which the soul forms itself and projects the mathematical reasons.[63]

After he has traced other steps which changed his view of Proclus, Trouillard concludes:

> Finally when translating the *Éléments de Théologie* … I genuinely encountered the self-constituting character of all authentic being and this made evident to me that in a monadological perspective the entire procession is intrinsic to each psycho-noetic subject.[64]

Once Proclus is properly understood, the Neoplatonic doctrines of transcendence and of the soul must be reconceived. Trouillard sets these in contrast to "the Judaic-Christian transcendence, which received in the Middle Ages a re-enforcement by the abrupt Aristotelian transcendence":

> Neoplatonic transcendence is not an absence, but an excess of presence, since it is for each spirit its interior home of liberation. It is less an end than a point of departure, less a superior term than a prior state, never participated, always communicated. It is only exterior to us inasmuch as we are exterior to ourselves .… Since the soul is not only the term of the internal procession, but also the spontaneous recapitulation of the entire procession from the One to matter, we are able to resume everything... in a single formula …:"The soul is the perfect mediation because it is the plenitude of negations …. It is in this that it is self-moving."[65]

62. J. Trouillard, Introduction to Proclus, *Éléments de Théologie* 23–25.
63. J. Trouillard, *L'Un et l'Âme* 3.
64. Ibid. 3–4.
65. Ibid. 4–8.

It is impossible to read these words without thinking of the repetition of similar doctrines in the philosophies of Jean-Luc Marion and of Michel Henry—whatever their sources for these philosophers maybe. Trouillard found them repeated in Eriugena.

Stanislas Breton locates the third and last phase of the Neoplatonic *autocritique* in "Damascius l'aporétique," studied and reproduced by Joseph Combès. When writing of the character of this aporetic, Combès, following Aubenque, writes of a "déconstruction." The debates between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion over speech, negative theology, and mysticism reproduce the concerns of Damascius.

The significance of the new "radicalisme néoplatonicien" which completes itself in the work of Combès is summed up by Stanislas Breton:

> What they inaugurated under the appearance of a return to the past was well and truly a new manner of seeing the world and of intervening in it, of practicing philosophy, of comprehending the givenness of religion, both in its Christian form and in its mystical excess; since, and I hasten to add, they reconnected the old West to its Far Eastern beyond.[66]

Breton's move—and that of French Catholicism—from Rome to Paris (his informal intellectual and religious autobiography is entitled *De Rome à Paris. Itinéraire philosophique*) is not only represented as a move from a Roman Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy to a Neoplatonic thinking and spirituality, but also as a relocation to a Parisian Athens where he could be open to the thought of his lay compatriots. In France, Breton continued the work of "the Neoplatonic triade" by a remarkably wide actual engagement with the French world, for example, with Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995), Louis Althusser (1918–1990), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), and by his close friendship with Althusser. The extent of his interests pursued over an extraordinarily long life prevent summary, but a few persistent themes continued in his latest works will indicate where he pushed the Neoplatonic revival. His autobiography gives a central place to his engagement with Aquinas and his work in developing both a Neoplatonic alternative to the Aristotelian-Thomist philosophy and also a Neoplatonic interpretation of Thomas.[67] Equally, there is early work on rational psychology from which he went on to an on-going occupation with Phenomenology.[68] The consideration of consciousness is connected in Breton with themes from Trouillard: the relation between the nothingness of the Principle, human freedom, self-creation, and mysticism. In this line he has recently produced

66. Breton, *De Rome à Paris* 154, see also, particularly, 164.

67. See S. Breton, "Sur la difficulté d'être thomiste aujourd'hui"; idem, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin* and "Textes de Saint-Thomas."

68. Breton, *De Rome à Paris* 66–72.

a book centered on "the human project as the causing of the self by the self."[69] There is a study of *Philosophie et mathématique chez Proclos* and of the doctrine of matter in Plotinus.[70] Breton reverts again and again to the Oriental religions, an interest connected with his conviction about the end of the West.[71] It seems to me that Breton's modification, following Damascius, of the Neoplatonic doctrine of the One into Nothingness by excess (*Néant par excès*) is at the heart of his thought.

Breton summarises his contribution to the Trouillard *festschrift* in terms of henology as *méontologie*: "This radical difficulty [of Being] is expressed by a double-sided *meontology* which is the real meaning of its henology. The progression is from being [*l'étant*] to Being [*l'être*], and from Being to beyond Being."[72] In considering matter and dispersion, he writes of Neoplatonism: "in a philosophy of this kind, the thought of the nothing has an importance without parallel. Nothingness by excess and nothingness by default are inseparable."[73] He writes also of "the horror of emptiness (*l'horreur du vide*)" and the possibility of calming it by the Buddhist "*sunyata*" and a Neoplatonic "Nothingness by excess" and goes on to consider "how to distinguish nothingness by excess and nothingness by default." In this consideration he raises the question as to whether "there will be a beyond in respect to being and in respect to the God of the religions."[74]

Inherent in the logic of Breton's move from Rome to Paris and of the "*au-delà … du Dieu des religions*," and one of the consequences of the Second Vatican Council, was an end to the domination of the clergy in philosophy and theology. The last figures at which we shall look at in this history are laïcs, most of them teaching philosophy in the university.

Back to the Laity and University Philosophy

The context of Jean-Luc Marion's postmodern turn to Neoplatonism is defined more by Lévinas[75] than by Heidegger, and as indicated above, his *dépassement* of ontology is not by henology but by a leap *hors-texte* to the Good or charity. His use of the Pseudo-Denys in this leap requires the mention of another of the priest scholars recuperating Neoplatonism in this century, René Roques. He produced the most important studies of the Pseudo-Denys and his tradition written in the twentieth century.

69. S. Breton, *Causalité et projet* 1.
70. S. Breton, *Matière et dispersion*.
71. Breton, *De Rome à Paris* 204–13; idem, *Causalité et projet* 187–95; idem, *Philosophie et mystique* 111–41.
72. S. Breton, "Difficile néoplatonisme."
73. Breton, *Matière et dispersion* 189.
74. S. Breton, "Sens et Portée de la Théologie Négative" 642–43.
75. On the relation of Lévinas to Neoplatonism see J.-M. Narbonne, *Lévinas et L'héritage Grec*.

In 1972–73 Marion offered a paper to Roques' class: "Distance and Praise; from the concept of the necessary (*aitia*) to the trinitarian status of theological language according to Denys the Mystic." We are not far from *L'idole et la distance* (1977) where the section on Denys is entitled "*La Distance du réquisit et la discours de louange: Denys.*" The interpretation of Denys by Roques strongly influenced Marion. Duméry writes: "M. Roques shows precisely that Denys only received Neoplatonism to the degree that it was able to be adapted to the untouchable structures of the Old and New Testaments."[76]

In *L'idole et la distance* the religious and apophatic side of Neoplatonism provides a way around Heidegger's naming of the idols of Western ontology. Marion radicalizes Deny's negative theology, while, nonetheless, opposing it to Neoplatonic theory, in a way we never find in Denys himself, maintaining that the Plotinian One is no better a name for God than is the most gross idol.[77] The separation of theology from philosophy is crucial to Marion's project and is determined by his relation to Heidegger.[78] While his contribution to phenomenology is to add to it a theory of donation, there must be no move from within phenomenology to a transcendent Giver. Reaching a transcendent Giver would require phenomenology to become metaphysics, thus destroying itself. Marion does not see his work as part of the Neoplatonic revival but, on the contrary, he conceives Denys to be executing a radical Christian subversion of Platonic philosophy. Marion's own intentions do not, however, prevent his position from occurring within the contemporary appropriation of Neoplatonism. Thus, moving to an emphasis on will and charity in Augustine is not to move against Plotinus, for whom we are related to the One through "Intellect in love."[79] Moreover, Marion has been forced to recant his placing of Aquinas' *idipsum esse* within onto-theology. To rescue Aquinas, Marion has neoplatonised his doctrine so that it has become a kind of theo-ontology: God is before being which he gives even to himself, a notion suggested in Plotinus. Marion thus shifts Aquinas toward Denys and both toward their Neoplatonic sources.

In a recent objection to "the brutality" of Jacques Derrida's treatment of negative theology, Marion tries to get around Derrida by presenting Denys and his Christian predecessors and successors as engaged in mystical theology.[80] In his response to Derrida, he identifies the problem inherent in apophatic negation and associates it with Neoplatonism. He judges that

76. H. Duméry, *Regards* 38.

77. J.-L. Marion, *L'idole et la distance* 185.

78. See Hankey, "Denys and Aquinas" 150–63 and "*Theoria versus Poiesis*" 388–97.

79. See I. Perczel, "L''intellect amoureux' et l'un qui est'." Perczel opposes an Hegelian and Augustinian intellectualist interpretation of Plotinus and extends Trouillard and Hadot.

80. J.-L. Marion, "In the Name" 23.

the problem persists even when the names negated belong to prayer and praise, because by the negation of the names one arrives only at absence. In contrast to a negation of this kind Marion thinks that in the Christian mystical tradition God is being praised as nameless by excess and he turns to the notion of "the saturated phenomenon" to answer Derrida. Whether Marion succeeds in getting around Derrida, or indeed whether they come to an agreement, is not of interest to our present consideration.[81] We ought to recollect, however, both that for the Neoplatonists the One is nothing and never properly nameable because of its inconceivable fullness, and also that Damascius has anticipated the criticisms of negative theology by both Derrida and Marion as well as their criticisms of Neoplatonism. For Trouillard Damascius warns us that "silence must not be made into a counter-expression, night a secret, and nothingness a mysterious substance."[82] In fact, with the Neoplatonists, as with Denys and Marion, the solution is a mystical theology: "The Neoplatonists judge in the end that this antinomy, insurmountable in the intelligible order, was surmounted at the same time that we cognise the fact that the center of the soul, owing to her mystical communion with the Ineffable, is shut up neither within language nor in the intelligible."[83]

Marion was not the only phenomenologist to take a theological turn and to associate it with a Christian Neoplatonist.[84] We find in Michel Henry crucial elements of what has been with us throughout much of the history of the Neoplatonic retrieval we have traced:[85] 1) an endeavour to find the transcendent within immanence, 2) the quest is undertaken by way of the examination of consciousness which avoids abstraction from life and the sensuous, thus, he analyzes the "*corps subjectif*" and develops a "material phenomenology,"[86] (3) He engages Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger, and (4) unifies philosophy and religion with one another and with life. (5) God is the Unknown God. Finally, (6) what occurs more than once, Henry undertakes a positive engagement with Marx and locates atheism within rather than outside our philosophical and religious tradition.[87] Henry's approach complements that of Marion.[88] Henry turned not to Denys, but to Eckhart—although recognising Denys and Proclus as crucial sources for

81. See "Derrida's Response to Jean-Luc Marion," in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* 42–47.

82. J. Trouillard, *La mystagogie de Proclos* 94.

83. Ibid. 95.

84. On the turn see D. Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn."*

85. For his bibliography see *Continental Philosophy Review* 32.3 (1999): 367–77.

86. See Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body.*

87. M. Henry, *Marx*; idem, *The Essence of Manifestation* 429; idem, *I Am the Truth* 237–47.

88. For a recognition by Marion of the Henry's work on the auto-affectivity of the subject despite their differences, see J.-L. Marion, *Being Given* 231 and 366, n. 86.

what attracts him to Eckhart—a move which it was inevitable that someone among the French Christian Neoplatonists concerned with the structure of consciousness would take. Whereas Marion aims to prevent the reduction of the source of knowledge to the conditions of the subject, Henry wants to protect the affectivity of the subject against objectification and his analysis is of its internal structure.

Henry turns to Eckhart through the mediation of Heidegger, and finds in Eckhart a way around Heidegger.[89] Against Heidegger, in the archetypical Neoplatonic move, Henry subordinates Being to the unknown. Through Eckhart he constructs a metaphysical phenomenology and, in contrast to Marion, he finds a way to unite philosophy and religion. The foundation of experience is discovered in the auto-affectivity of the self where we also find true Christianity: phenomenology "no longer remains entangled in the question of knowing how and why phenomenology can give an account of the 'phenomena' of divine Revelation, but rather it affirms from the start, and in an 'apodictic' fashion, that an authentic phenomenology cannot have any other object than the divine Life experiencing itself in its Ipseity and in this self-affection, giving birth to Christ and to men as his 'Sons'."[90]

Janicaud puts the character of auto-affection in *The Essence of Manifestation* thus:

> its [thinking's] first condition is a receptivity every going-beyond toward a horizon supposes. "Immanence is the original mode according to which is accomplished the revelation of transcendence itself and hence the original essence of revelation." Henry integrates the Husserlian *epoché* and the Heideggerian ontological difference into what he claims to be a more fundamental return to the things themselves, that of manifestation as revelation. The rest of the work will explain this as autoaffection: the essence of manifestation reveals itself in affectivity, not that of an individual subject, derisively subjective, but of revelation itself, absolute in its inner experience.[91]

The elements of Henry's use of Eckhart come together in his interpretation of a passage from the German sermons to which he refers repeatedly:

> Thus life is begotten, carried out, undergone as a singular Self, as this Self that I myself am. Life autoaffects itself as myself. If with Eckhart, one calls life "God," then one will say with him: "God is begotten as myself." But this Self begotten in Life, holding the singularity of its Self only from ipseity and holding its ipseity only from the eternal

89. On the Heideggerian mediation, see Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"* 70 and 76.
90. R. Bernet, "Christianity and Philosophy" 325; see Henry, *I am the Truth* and *Incarnation,* and E. Falque, "Michel Henry Théologien," which examines *I am the Truth* as "a veritable Summa of Theology" in the light of Blondel's questions.
91. Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"* 72, quoting Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation* 227 (as translated by Etzkorn).

autoaffection of life, bears the latter in it, inasmuch as it is borne by it and arrives in each instant in life only through it. Thus life communicates itself to each of the Sons by penetrating him as a whole, such that there is nothing in him that would not be living, and moreover nothing—inasmuch as its Self arrives only in the autoaffection of life itself—that would not concern in itself this eternal essence of life. "God gives birth to me as himself."[92]

The life is communicated to each from the Son so there is nothing which does not contain in itself this eternal essence of the life.

We are again not only, as in Bergson, with a mystical union where the encompassing category is life so as to prevent the fraudulent objectifications of reason, but also with a Christian Neoplatonism which depends on the radical difference of the Absolute and *Nous*. This difference allows God to be both the external source of knowledge beyond reduction to objective conception and also the internal constitution of the subject so that it is not dependent in its self-objectification. The Principle is altogether beyond grasp and representation, and therefore metaphysics is impossible, but it is also the immediacy of my life, and therefore experience is the life of Divinity: "C'est moi la vérité." Theology is beyond philosophy become phenomenology, but also there is no separation of the visible and the invisible: "There is no opposition between the visible and the invisible, between two forms of reality. Within Christianity nothing is opposed to reality, and there is nothing other than life."[93] In virtue of the indetermination of the Absolute we are at both sides simultaneously. It is difficult to see where we could move beyond this point without giving some content to the Absolute. If we must move further, the difference of the One and *Nous* on which the history we have traced depends needs to be reconsidered and that consideration must not be pre-determined by what Heidegger will allow.

Jean-Marc Narbonne (born in 1957) is Professor in, and former Dean of, the Faculty of Philosophy at Université Laval. He has greatly contributed to freeing French Neoplatonism from the horizon imposed by Heidegger's history of metaphysics as onto-theology and has begun the reinterpretation of crucial doctrines which this freedom allows and requires. In his *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)*, Narbonne challenges the dominant philosophical problematic within which the return to Neoplatonism has been situated for half a century and the characterisation of Neoplatonism intended as a solution. It is both a major individual accomplishment and the result of fifty years of engagement by philosophers, theologians, historians of philosophy and theology, and philologists with Heidegger's criticism of

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92. M. Henry, "Speech and Religion" 223; both quotations are from Eckhart, *Sermon* 6, 187.

93. Henry, *I am the Truth* 238. This is written in opposition to Hegel.

metaphysics as onto-theology. Narbonne depends not only on the work of Beierwaltes but also on that of French scholars who either presented Platonism and its history in order to show the defects of its Heideggerian representation, or turned to Neoplatonism, having accepted Heidegger's critique of metaphysics as onto-theology in order to find an alternative way for western philosophy, theology, and religion. Narbonne's book works from within a paradox: Heidegger's *Seinsfrage* has undermined its own results by inspiring the study and retrieval of Neoplatonism while misrepresenting it and the history of philosophy to which it belongs. Ultimately what is learned about the history of philosophy in this retrieval is turned against Heidegger.

Narbonne treats both henological Neoplatonism and the metaphysics of pure being. In addition, and crucially, he considers critically Heidegger's representation of the history of Western metaphysics as onto-theology together with his *Ereignis* as an alternative to the metaphysical tradition. Narbonne establishes that the purpose of the Neoplatonic refusal to predicate being of the One was to disconnect the First Principle from beings, so that it is not itself a universal being, defining intelligibility and rendering all which depends upon it graspable and manipulable. The One is not the thingliest of things, but precisely the opposite. To understand the transcendence of the One and Good through the transcendence of Plato's forms in respect to particulars, as Heidegger does, is simply to misrepresent both Plato and his followers. Heideggerian hermeneutic in respect to Neoplatonism distorts it; Narbonne writes: "The henological differentiation of levels [the One beyond Being and beings], is thus systematically disguised as ontological differentiation [Being beyond beings], and the ontological differentiation is in its turn brought back to the ontic horizontality."[94] This distortion casts doubt upon Heidegger's history of metaphysics as a whole and upon his criticism of it.

For Narbonne, the great problem for henological Neoplatonism is to prevent the construal of the non-being of the One as non-subsistence, thus making it nothing, rather than no particular thing, and depriving it of separateness. Henology is driven from one paradox to another in order to prevent the One becoming a being without becoming nothing. The result is that the Neoplatonic language about the One is like that used by Heidegger in trying to exhibit a universal ground as distinct from a founding being. Narbonne shows, however, that there is nothing arbitrary or irrational, and threatening to very existence of philosophy, in henology. The contrary is true for Heidegger.

The comparison of Neoplatonism and Heidegger is not to the advantage of Heidegger. While the First of henology is ineffable, because it is neither a being nor an object of intellection, the One is also subsistent, separate

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94. Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis* 197.

ground, universally present, active, and potent in all else. The One establishes difference within the other, as well as its difference from itself, and gives the cosmos being and order.

Narbonne regards Heidegger's Ereignis as brute fact, its play mere chance, a game without rules; it is the whirlwind or maelstrom. Heidegger substitutes another structure for the Neoplatonic metaphysical schema but ultimately the Heideggerian structure differs profoundly from it. Narbonne concludes his book with a comparison between the verticality of the Neoplatonic metaphysics and the *Seyn* of the *Ereignis* as immediate horizontal ground:

> Despite a certain communality in the will to pass beyond objectification … we have ascertained that Neoplatonism is set out along an axis opposed to that of which Heidegger has an inkling. The Neoplatonic way is erected vertically; it is ordered upward along a mediation notably by way of soul and intellect.…The Heideggerian horizontal approach is totally different .… In place of the steps of reality he substitutes a pure process which begins from an event (the *Seyn* as *Ereignis*), with which no mediated connection is permitted .… To the Neoplatonic theme of the "beyond" (*epékeina*), it seems to me that he opposes the theme of the "on the contrary side," that is to say of that which happens without mediation, if not in opposition, at least as something done behind its back, and as a kind of crossing-over from everything else.[95]

This is of the greatest importance for the history we have traced because the Neoplatonisms of the twentieth century have been characterised by a like horizontality. Beginning with Bergson, in attempting to overcome modern objectifying rationality, they too have endeavoured an immediate relation between an unknowable Absolute, on the one hand, and life, the sensuous, corporeal and material experience, and practical activity, on the other. Narbonne's criticisms of Heidegger apply in considerable part to the neo-Neoplatonisms we have outlined in this history. It is ironic but not surprising that a neo-Neoplatonism created in large part by a fundamental acceptance and partial rejection of the Heideggerian critique of Western metaphysics should so deeply reproduce what is most problematic about the structure of his alternative metaphysics. The limitations Narbonne has placed on the criticisms by Heidegger of Neoplatonism and of the metaphysical tradition enable his retrieval of a Neoplatonic metaphysics. It is not to be doubted that the Heideggerian invasion of French thought was a vitally important factor in making Neoplatonism so important and fecund in twentieth-century French intellectual and spiritual life. As its hold inevitably diminishes those attached to the Neoplatonic traditions have every reason to be hopeful. The reversals we have traced give us reason to look for other renewals of philosophy, yet to come, through yet other retrievals of Neoplatonism.

95. Ibid. 280–81.

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