

Philosophical Grounds for Mystical Intuition in Plotinus

Ritsuko Okano

GAKUSHUIN UNIVERSITY, TOKYO

According to Plotinus, the One is the first principle that transcends Intellect (νοῦς). It is beyond knowledge (cf. 5.3[49]12.48) and is not an object of knowledge (cf. 5.3[49]13.9–11). “**We have neither knowledge nor intellection of it**” (5.3[49]14.2–3),¹ says Plotinus. It is impossible to conceive it by cognitive activity, and even when Intellect directs its attention to the One, it cannot apprehend the One itself. Emilsson² indicates that just as seeing is of an image of the external object, what is apprehended by the cognitive activity is not the One itself (i.e., the substantial activity of the One³) but a mere image and appearance of it (i.e., the derivative activity of the One, which proceeds from its substance). In order to know the object itself, **the knower must become identical with its substantive activity. Whereas he will know Intellect itself by becoming it, because the nature of Intellect is intelligible, even if he becomes the One itself, he does not know the nature of the One, as the substantive activity of the One transcends knowledge.**⁴ This indication is essential for understanding Plotinus’ epistemology.

However, if the One is inconceivable, how is any philosophical statement made about such an inconceivable thing? David Hume asks: “**How do you MYSTICS, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from Sceptics or Atheists, who assert, that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible?**”⁵ **We should not be able to cognize truth about an unknowable thing, or know the value of what has no attribute. Nonetheless, according to Plotinus, the One is “the productive power of all things”**

1. For the English translation of *Enneads*, I employ that of A.H. Armstrong and add corrections where necessary.

2. E.K. Emilsson, “Remarks on the Relation between the One and Intellect in Plotinus,” 288–89.

3. About the so-called the double-activity theory, see 9. As for the One, what corresponds to the substantial activity should be taken as quasi-activity, just as what is substantial for the One is quasi-substance (6.8[39]13.7, see also Emilsson, *op. cit.*, 271, note 2).

4. Emilsson warns, “**So if you have something you know that you think may be the One, be sure that it isn’t!**” (Emilsson, *op. cit.*, 288).

5. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 405.

(3.8[30]10.1, 5.1[10]7.9–10, 5.4[7]1.36, 2.38) and “the principle of all things” (5.2[11]1.1, 5.3[49]12.8, 15.27, 5.4[7]1.23, 6.8[39]9.7). Just as in Plato the idea of the Good is the cause of knowledge, truth and existence, in Plotinus too, the One is the cause of the thought and the existence of Intellect (5.1[10]11.7, 5.3[49]16.37–38, 6.8[39]18.39–40). According to his assertion, we “have the ability to judge rightly and to know that this (i.e., the One) is what we desired, and to establish that there is nothing better than it. For there is no deceit there” (6.7[38]34.25–27). If the One is beyond knowledge, are there any grounds for such statements?⁶ Is there any authentic thought of an inconceivable object? And how can the One, being unknowable, be the cause of knowledge and self-thinking of Intellect? Without considering these questions, we will be unable to comprehend Plotinus’ mysticism.

MYSTICAL UNION

As Emilsson indicates, the union with the One does not give us any knowledge. However in this union, we can have an experience of the One. If we have no knowledge in this experience, then whatever happens at all?

Unification

When we discuss the mystical union, we should notice that it is the total absorption during which there occurs no reflective consciousness on the self. Even while we participate in the activity of Intellect, we dare not recall who we were, but are carried beyond ourselves and are absorbed in Intellect. The soul, when it is in the intelligible world:

will not even have the remembrance of itself, or that it is a man himself, Socrates for instance, who is contemplating, or that it is Intellect or soul. Besides, it should be borne in mind that even here [in the sensible world] when a man contemplates, especially when the contemplation is clear, he does not turn towards himself (οὐκ ἐπιστρέφει πρὸς ἑαυτόν) by thinking, but while one possesses oneself, the activity is directed towards that (i.e., the object of contemplation), and he becomes that, offering himself [to it] as a kind of matter, being formed according to what he sees, and being himself then [only] potentially. (4.4[28]2.1–8)

6. The One is “the Good” not for itself but for others (6.9[9]6.40–42, 5.6[24]6.34, 6.7[38]41.28–29, cf. 38.4–5), and the appellation of “the One” means only the negation of multiplicity (5.5[32]6.26ff, 6.9[9]5.31–33, cf. 6.9[9]3.49–54, 2.9[33]1.5–11, 5.3[49]13.1–6, 14.6–8). Plotinus expresses in a negative way the One that transcends definition, but whatever the statement about the One may be, it shows a kind of judgment about it, and this attitude is different from that of those who suspend judgment about an unknowable object. Concerning the problem about the One and language, see D. O’Meara, “Le problème du discours sur l’indicible chez Plotin,” 145–56, and F. M. Schroeder, “Plotinus and Language,” 336–55.

Since “it is not possible, when a man has an intuition of something through intellection, to do anything else but think and contemplate that object” (4.4[28]1.6–7), during the union with Intellect he is not able to think that he is Socrates or soul or even that he is Intellect. For there is neither memory nor sense-perception (5.8[31]11.33–35) nor discursive thinking in the intelligible realm. The soul united to Intellect, taken out of itself, has no activity other than that of Intellect, namely intelligible thinking. However the union with Intellect is said to be “one and also two” (cf. 4.4[28]2.25–29), for Intellect itself, being one thing is also two things (5.1[10]4.31, 5.6[24]1.6–7) and there are the thinking subject and its object in it. So here is still duality of subject and object of thinking, though they are identical.

The union with the One, by contrast, is absolutely one, for the One transcends knowledge. As the One has neither definition nor Form, we have to stop thinking and abandon even intelligible Forms to be assimilated and united with the One (6.7[38]34.2–4, 6.9[9]7.14–16, cf. 5.5[32]6.20–22).

The soul sees [the One] in itself suddenly (ἐξαίφνης: cf. 5.5[32]3.13, 7.34, 6.7[38]36,18–19, Plato, *Symposium* 210e4) appearing, for there is nothing between, nor are there still two but both are one (ἐν ἑνί). For you could no longer distinguish them while the One is present.... It does not still perceive its body, that it is in it, and does not speak of itself as anything else, not man, or living thing, or being, or all, for the contemplation of these is somehow uneven (i.e., to the One); it has no time for them nor wants them, but it has been seeking it (i.e., the One), and meets That, which is present to it, and looks at That and not upon itself; but it has not even time to see who the soul is that looks. (6.7[38]34.12–21)

As well as in the case of the union with Intellect, he who experiences the union with the One does not have self-consciousness as does the soul, but “ignoring even himself, comes to be in contemplation of That, and comes together with That” (6.9[9]7.20–21). At this time he does not contemplate the One as an object (6.9[9]10.20–21), since “there were not two, but the seer himself was one with the seen” (6.9[9]11.4–5). So its contemplation is rather “a contact and a sort of touch without speech or thought” (5.3[49]10.42) and “a standing out of himself, simplifying, giving himself over, desiring for contact, rest (στᾶσις)⁷ and careful thought leading to adaptation” (6.9[9]11.23–25). Since thinking is a kind of movement, but the One does not move, the soul when united to the One does not think.

7. The One “stands entirely still” (5.3[49]10.17–18), so we are exhorted to “stand absolutely still” (5.5[32]4.9, cf. 6.9[9]11.15–16) for attaining to the One. However the One’s “rest” is not “Rest” as an intelligible Form (cf. 6.9[9]3.42–49).

The soul is so disposed then as even to despise thinking (νοεῖν), which at other times it welcomed, because intellection is a kind of movement, and the soul does not want to move. For it says that That which it sees does not move either. (6.7[38]35.1–4)

The soul does not move then either, because That (i.e., the One) does not move. Nor, then, is it soul, because That does not live, but is above life; Nor is it Intellect, because [That] does not think either; for it must be made like. Nor does it even think that That does not think. (6.7[38]35.42–45)

In the union with the One, we are altogether motionless without thinking anything either about the One or about ourselves.

[He who became one with the One] was one himself, with no distinction in himself either in relation to himself or to other things—for there was no movement in him and he had no emotion, no desire for anything else when he had made the ascent—but there was neither reason nor thought, nor a self at all, if we must even say this. But he was as if carried away or quietly possessed by a god in a solitude and a state of calm, not turning away anywhere in his being nor turning about himself (οὐδὲ περὶ αὐτὸν στρεφόμενος), entirely at rest, and having become, as it were, rest. (6.9[9]11.8–16)

Thus, we are absorbed in the One and have only a “**delightful experience**” (6.7[38]34.38: εὐπάθεια, cf. 34.30, 35.26, Plato, *Phaedrus* 247d4).

Descent from union

Nevertheless, our bodies persist through this experience, and for example, the possibility of Socrates’ **returning to his own corporeal life is maintained**. Plotinus tells his experience of having returned to physical life from the mystical union:

Often, when I have woken up from the body to myself, having become external to all other things and self-centred, I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt sure that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine, and set firm in it I have come to that supreme activity, setting myself above all the other intelligible objects.⁸ Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body, though, even in the body it is what it has shown itself to be by itself. (4.8[6]1.1–11)

Human soul, though having attained to rest in the One, cannot stay perpetually there, but comes down again and recovers the sense in body.⁹

8. Cf. 6.9[9]4.2–3: τὰ ἄλλα νοητά.

9. Hadot, in referring to the report that Plotinus experienced the One four times while Porphyry was with him (*Vita Plotini* 23.1–27), describes the mystical experiences as “*expériences ponctuelles, relativement rares, qui ont un commencement et une fin*” (P. Hadot, “*L’union de l’âme avec l’intellect divin dans l’expérience mystique plotinienne,*” 6).

Nonetheless, it is in alternation of descending from and ascending again to the union with the One that a man passes “the life of gods and of godlike and blessed men” (6.9[9]11.49). Plotinus describes such a life as follows:

Though he falls from the contemplation, if he wakens again the virtue in himself and apprehends himself set in order by these [virtues], he will again be lightened [of the corporeal burden] and come through virtue to Intellect and wisdom and through wisdom to That (i.e., the One). (6.9[9]11.45–48)

Then, when we returned to ourselves from the union, does our recollection of the One or Intellect not make us cognize anything? Although the union with the One is not itself knowing the One, does this experience bring nothing to our knowledge? Plotinus mentions the duty to relate the experience of the One after having returned from the union with it: “Having been in the company with That and had, so to put it, sufficient converse with it, you must come¹⁰ and announce,¹¹ if possible, to another the communion there” (6.9[9]7.22–23). At this time, we tell what we did not cognize during the union with the One. What happens to us at all when we descend from the mystical union?

OBJECTIFICATION OF THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

During the mystical union, we have no reflective self-consciousness, but self-consciousness is preserved potentially and reappears when we return from the contemplation to ourselves. It follows that we have left the mystical union when we reflect on ourselves. According to Plotinus, even in the sensible realm, concentration on an act or a state is slackened when it is objectified and brought to consciousness. He indicates that concentration on act is hindered and weakened when a man objectifies his own act and becomes conscious of it, for then his consciousness is turned from the act itself to the fact that he acts.

We can find a lot of excellent activities, theoretical and practical, when we consider and act being awake, but we do not do so being conscious (παρὰ κολουθεῖν) of those activities. For the reader is not necessarily conscious that he is reading, least of all when he is concentrating; nor the man who is being brave that he is being brave and that all his actions conform to [the virtue of] courage; and there are thousands of similar cases; So the consciousness is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness, but when the activities are alone, they are pure and more active and alive, and when sage men are in this state, their life is more alive, not having been spilt out into sensation. (1.4[46]10.21–33)

10. Cf. Plato, *Rep.* VII 519d1–7.

11. About the report of the union with Intellect, see 5.8[31]12.3.

Here we find two forms of consciousness, namely that which is concentrated on an act and that which reflects upon one's own act. **When the reader is intent upon reading, although he forgets himself, he is "awake" nonetheless and is never unconscious.** Even though he is not conscious that he is reading, he is not ignorant of his reading. Rather, when he is concentrated, the consciousness is clearer and more alive. By contrast, when he directs his attention to the fact that he is reading, his consciousness leaves the content of the book. Similarly in the experience of Intellect or the One, we forget ourselves when our consciousness is centred on them, but we then have a **"delightful experience."** **This experience is never an unconscious one, and what is absent from it is only a reflective self-consciousness.** When we objectify our own state of union in a reflective way, we stray from that state.

The soul's knowledge obtained by objectification of Intellect

According to Plotinus, even if human soul has attained to the contact with Intellect and has come to possess it in itself, it wishes to look at it from outside as **object of vision. When a man is filled with intelligible beauty:**

The object is no longer outside, nor subject sees from outside, but the keen-sighted has what is seen within; although having it he for the most part does not perceive that he has it, and looks at it as if it were **outside because he looks at it as if it was object of sight, and because he wants to look at it.** But a man looks at everything externally, which he looks at as object of vision. (5.8[31]10.35–39)

To see something objectified is to see it from outside. Even though we have come to unity with Intellect, if we want to see it as object, we go out of the unity and look at it externally. Then, however, we see a mere appearance of Intellect.

One of us, being unable to see himself [as god], when he is possessed by that god (i.e., Intellect) and brings the object of vision (i.e., the god) before [himself] so as to see it, brings himself before [the god] and looks at a beautified image of the god [from outside]; but when he dismisses the image, beautiful though it is, and comes to unity with the god, making no more separation, he is one and all together with the god silently present, and is with him as much as he wants to be and can be. But if he turns about and comes into duality (ἐπιστραφείη εἰς δύο),¹² while he remains pure he is close to the god, so as to be present to him again in that other way if he turns again towards him (ἐπ' αὐτὸν

12. It should be noticed that there are two directions of the "turning." The souls "turning to itself" in striving for Intellect (5.3[49]8.29–30, cf. 1.4[46]11.8) is the "turning" from outside to inside and that from the self that is in the sensible realm to the self that is said to remain in the intelligible realm. By this "turning to itself," the soul leaves the sensible self. However, Plotinus employs the phrase "turning to oneself" also for the reflective activity by which the soul returns to itself from the mystical union or the absorption in a vision (cf. 6.9[9]11.14–15, 4.4[28]2.5).

στρέφοι). In this **turning** (ἐν δὲ τῇ ἐπιστροφῇ) he has the advantage that to begin with he perceives the god (αἰσθάνεται αὐτοῦ), while he is different from him; then he hastens inward and has everything, and leaves perception (αἰσθῆσαι) behind in his fear of being different and is one in the intelligible world; and if he wants to see by being different, he puts himself outside. (5.8[31]11.1–13)

We can not only participate in the thinking of Intellect by becoming identified with it, but also have a perception of it by looking at it from outside. Thus, after having come to unity with Intellect, if we want to see it as object, we depart from the unity with it and come down, and “**by wanting perceive it more, we stand away from ourselves** (i.e., the self that has been concentrated on Intellect)” (5.8[31]11.24) **so that we come into duality** (i.e., of the soul and Intellect)” (5.8[31]11.7).

The soul, when it has come into accordance with the rational principle (λόγος) too, starts to think it discursively, wishing to have a better understanding of it, and so objectifies it and distances itself from the unity with it.

The soul, then, when it has become akin to and disposed [according to the rational principle], still, all the same, utters and propounds it—for it did not possess it primarily—and learns it thoroughly and by its proposition becomes other than it, and looks at it, considering (διανοουμένη) it, like one thing looking at another **What it utters, it utters because of its deficiency, with a view to examining it, trying to learn thoroughly what it possesses.** (3.8[30]6.21–29)

The soul is said to “**desire to learn more thoroughly what it has contemplated and gain a fuller contemplation, which comes from examining it** (θεωρῶσαν τὴν ἐξ ἐπισκέψεως)” (3.8[30]6.32–34). **There is a similar description also** in 4.4[28]4.10–13 about the soul that has come to possess the object of contemplation in the intelligible world.

It could happen that, even when a man is not conscious (καὶ μὴ παρακολουθεῖντα) that he has [something], he holds [it] to himself more strongly than if he knew. For perhaps if he knew he would have it as something else, being different himself, but if he does not know that he has it he is liable to *be* what he has.

To be conscious of one’s **own possession is to objectify it and to be apart** from it. When we are not conscious of what we have, we are united with it, but when we are conscious of it, we look at it as an object other than ourselves.

As well as in the case of experiences in the sensible world such as reading, two types of consciousness should be noticed in the experience of Intellect, namely, one in which the soul becomes one with it—being absorbed in it—and another in which it reflects and objectifies it (cf. 5.8[31]11.22–24).

The soul united with Intellect thinks itself (4.4[28]2.31) by participating in the self-thinking of Intellect, and its consciousness is clearer than usual (cf. 5.8[31]11.31–33). However when we objectify the state of union with Intellect and have a reflective consciousness of it, we slacken our concentration on it, come out of the union and at the same time as we look at Intellect from outside, we return to our own consciousness.¹³ Then recovering the faculty of memory (4.4[28]4.14–15, cf. 3.1–3) we start to think depending on the memory of Intellect (4.4[28]3.3–4, 4.6–7),¹⁴ re-consider it and translate it by soul's **discursive thinking** (cf. 5.9[5]9.1–3).

While we were above in the nature of Intellect, we were satisfied and we were [really] thinking and seeing, bringing all things together into one; for it was Intellect that was thinking and speaking about itself, and the soul kept quiet and went along with the act of Intellect. But since we have come to be here below again and in soul, we seek for some kind of persuasion, as if we wanted to contemplate the archetype in the image.
(5.3[49]6.12–18)

The relation between Intellect and our discursive thinking **exercised then** is similar to that we find between the idea in mind and the statement. When we conceive a notion, we try to express it in unfolding and articulating by language (4.3[27]30.7–10).

As the thought (λόγος) in utterance is an imitation of that in the soul, so the thought in the soul is an imitation of that in something else (i.e., Intellect)¹⁵: as the uttered thought, then, is broken up into parts as compared with that in the soul, so is that in the soul as compared with that before it, which it interprets. (1.2[19]3.27–30)

Not only the thinking of the soul but also its substance is said to be an expression of Intellect.

Just as a thought in utterance is an expression of the thought in the soul, so the soul itself is an expression (λόγος) of Intellect, and the whole activity and life which it (i.e.,

13. Hadot argues for a **reflective function exercised on the mystical experience that is a non-reflective presence of the consciousness of the rational and discursive part of the soul that involves language, representation and memory**. He states that it objectifies and externalizes what it wishes to apprehend, translating it into language and representation, and indicates that for apprehending Intellect, the consciousness of the soul must come out of the union with Intellect (P. Hadot, “Les niveaux de conscience dans les états mystiques selon Plotin,” 243–66). “Pour parvenir à saisir la Pensée comme un objet posé en face du sujet, il faut soi-même sortir de l’unité avec la Pensée. A ce moment, on ne peut plus l’éprouver d’une manière totale et globale comme dans l’expérience mystique, mais on doit détailler discursivement les formes particulières qui sont incluses dans la Pensée et qui la manifestent” (259).

14. According to Plotinus, it was in remembering the communion with Zeus that Minos established laws that were its images (6.9[9]7.23–26).

15. Cf. *SVF* II. 135. See also M. Atkinson, *Plotinus: Ennead V*, 1, 50–1.

Intellect) sends out to constitute another substance. (5.1[10]3.7–9, cf. 4.3[27]30,7–10, 3.8[30]6.22)

“The activity which Intellect sends out” is the so-called external activity of Intellect. Plotinus asserts that everything has an activity that belongs to its substance and another activity that derives from it, just as in fire there is a heat that makes its substance as fire and another heat sent out from fire.

Everything has an activity which belongs to substance and one which goes out from substance; and that which belongs to substance is each thing itself whereas the other activity which derives from that first one must necessarily follow everything being different from the thing itself: as in fire there is a heat which is the content of its substance, and another which comes into being from that primary heat when fire exercises the activity which is native to its substance in abiding unchanged as fire. (5.4[7]2.27–33)

The external activity of a hypostasis is said to be an image of its internal activity that is its substance itself (5.1[10]6.33–34; 5.2[11]1.13–21; 4.5[29]7.15–18; 5.3[49]7.22–23) and it comes out of the substance and constitutes the next substance. So Plotinus says about the external activity of Intellect: **“This activity proceeding from the substance of Intellect is the activity of the soul”** (5.2[11]1.16), **“When an activity proceeds from Intellect, the soul is produced”** (6.2[43]22.27–28, cf. 5.3[49]7.21–27).¹⁶

When human soul that has come into union with Intellect starts to look at it from outside, going out from it, and has a reflective thinking of it, it unfolds the intuition of Intellect by **discursive thinking of the soul, just as** when we conceive an idea, we unfold and articulate it by utterance. Thus the soul which **“comes down from Intellect to discursive reasoning”** is an expression of Intellect and its **“interpreter (ἑρμηνεύς)”** (1.2[19]3.30), and the thinking of the soul is a reflection of Intellect in the soul and Intellect as unfolded into reasoning.¹⁷ Furthermore, since this reflective activity derives from unity of the soul and Intellect, it is both the soul's own activity and the derivative activity of Intellect. Whereas the external activity of Intellect is the discursive thinking of the soul, the union with Intellect is identification with its internal activity that is $\nu\omicron\epsilon\hat{\iota}\nu$.

16. The derivative activity of Intellect is the substantial activity of the soul and the derivative activity of the One is the substantial activity of Intellect (cf. R. Okano, “How does the One generate Intellect? Plotinus, *Ennead* 5.1[10]7.5–6?” 161–64).

17. Also the virtue as purification is a reflection of the activity of Intellect on the soul (cf. 1.2[19]3.21–22) and is said to be **“a sight and the impression of what is seen, implanted and acting in [the soul]”** (1.2[19]4.19, cf. 7.6–7). Concerning this distinction of level of virtue in Plotinus, see J.M. Dillon, “Plotinus, Philo and Origen on the Grades of Virtue,” 92–105 and “An ethic for the late antique sage,” 315–35.

Intellect as the primary knowledge of the One

Unification with the One is also identification with its quasi-internal activity that transcends νοεῖν. In the union with it, **“there was neither reason nor thought”** (6.9[9]11.11). It is said that **“our awareness of That** (i.e., the One) is not by way of knowledge or of thinking, as with the other intelligible objects, but by way of a presence superior to knowledge” (6.9[9]4.1–3). However when the soul that has attained to the union does not remain in **“rest” but begins to realize its experience, it comes out of the state of union.**

The soul experiences its falling away from being one and is not altogether one when it gets knowledge of anything; for knowledge is language and language is many. The soul therefore goes past the One, falling into number and multiplicity. (6.9[9]4.3–7)

So Plotinus exhorts us to remain in absolute **“rest” in the One.**

You must not any longer add anything to it (i.e., the One), but stand absolutely still in fear of departing the least little way from it and of progressing towards two. (5.5[32]4.8–10)

To stand away from the One and become defective is to have many things added to it (3.9[13]9.22–23). In the state of union with the One, we have become **“rest” itself without any movement, but as soon as some cognition is added to this state, we “depart from the One” and “progress towards two”** (εἰς δύο προελθεῖν). Though Plotinus says that a man who has made contact with the One **“is absolutely unable to speak nor has time for that while the contact lasts, but it is afterwards that he is able to reason about it (i.e., the One)”** (5.3[49]17.26–28), **it can also be said that the thinking activity itself is** in a sense a trigger of the separation from the One. For, if he thinks something even slightly, he comes out of union and becomes **“two,” the thinking subject and its object** (cf. 5.3[49]10.14, 22–23). During the union with the One, we do not see it as object (ὡς ἕτερον), but when we have objectified it, we have come to be apart from it (cf. 6.9[9]10.17–21).

It is therefore by reflecting on our own experience afterwards that we speak about the One. According to Plotinus’ **description, “going around [the One] as it were we want to expound (ἐρμηνεύειν) our own experiences”** (6.9[9]3.52–53), **“what [the soul] speaks, then, is That (i.e., the One) and it speaks it afterwards, and speaks it in silence** (cf. 3.8[30]6.11), and since it had a delightful experience (εὐπαθοῦσα), **it does not speak falsely that it has a delightful experience”** (6.7[38]34.28–30).

The statement about the One is the reflective expression of our own experience of it. So Schroeder is right when he asserts, **“the language of**

theological discussion ... reflects divine contact.”¹⁸ He maintains elsewhere that “the restlessness of the soul, its wanting always to express what it has and thus distance itself from its having and its intuition, belongs to the very structure of the Plotinian universe Thus the Soul, even at the moment of its union (*sunousia*) with the One, proclaims (*angellonta*) that union (6.9.7.22–3). In so doing, it becomes the reflective and declarative instrument of the One which, as we know from 5.3.14.18–19, bestows speech.”¹⁹ The One bestows not only speech but also thinking of Intellect according to 5.3[49]14.18–19 (ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς κρείττων λόγου καὶ νοῦ καὶ αἰσθήσεως, παρασχὼν ταῦτα, οὐκ αὐτὸς ὦν ταῦτα) to which Schroeder refers. So if theological language is a reflective expression of the One, intellection is also its reflective expression in a higher mode. While Schroeder’s concern is the relation between the One and language, when we argue about the relation between the One and knowledge, we have to take into consideration the intelligible realm that precedes speech, because before we speak, we must think something as we saw in the relation between the statement and the idea in mind.

When we come out of the union with the One by objectifying it, the first region we enter is the intelligible world. “All the other things [than the One] are on our way down” (6.7[38]34.24–25). When we descend from the One to the activity of Intellect, we relive the universal generation of Intellect from the One. That is to say, the same thing happens to us then as happens when the hypostatic Intellect proceeds from the One. Or we would have to say that Plotinus found through such an experience how thinking occurred from the state of oneness.²⁰ According to his doctrine of Intellect’s genesis, the sight of so-called inchoate intellect just engendered from the One is indefinite and it is by turning towards the One and being defined by it that it becomes Intellect’s thinking (cf. 5.4[7]2.1–26, 5.2[11]1.7–13, 6.7[38]16.1–22, 17.11–34). Just as the soul united to the One begins to think by reflecting it, the inchoate intellect starts to think by reversion to the One. We should notice that what the inchoate intellect apprehends then is not the One itself, but its “impression.”

18. Schroeder, “Saying and Having in Plotinus,” 80.

19. F.M. Schroeder, “Plotinus and Language,” 350.

20. If Plotinus apprehended the One and Intellect by experience, he must have known the way Intellect has proceeded from the One when his soul has come down from the One to the intelligible realm. According to 6.7[38]35.33–41, the soul ascends to the One by becoming identical with Intellect that is said to be “Intellect in love,” and if so, it would be by becoming identical with the inchoate intellect that the soul descends from the One and begins to think. As long as the soul that has come down from the unity with the One can think about it by reflecting it, there functions the same mechanism as when the inchoate intellect that has just proceeded from the One looks back at the One. Either case concerns the thinking formed by turning towards the One.

So this Intellect is multiple (πολυς), when it wishes to think that which is beyond (i.e., the One). If it wishes to think That itself, still, in wishing to attain to it in its simplicity it comes out always apprehending something else made many (πληθυνόμενου) in itself; so that it moved to it not as Intellect but as sight not yet seeing (ὄψις οὐπω ἰδοῦσα), but came out possessing the multiplicity which that sight itself made (cf. 3.8[30]8.31); so that it desired one thing, having vaguely in itself a kind of appearance [of the One], but came out having grasped something else which it made many in itself. For again, it has an impression (τύπου) of what is seen (i.e., the One);²¹ otherwise it would not have allowed it (i.e., what is seen) to come into existence in itself. But this [impression] became many out of one, and so [Intellect as a sight] knew it and saw it, and then it became a seeing sight. It is already Intellect when it possesses [the impression of the One], and it possesses it as Intellect; but before this it is only desire and sight without impression (ἀτύπωτος ὄψις). (5.3[49]11.1–12, cf. 6.7[38]15.12–24)

Intellect grasps an image of the One by looking at it as object of sight, just as the ordinary sight receives an image of the object. Plotinus states that “what is known by sense-perception is an image (εἶδωλον) of the thing, and sense-perception does not apprehend the thing itself; for that remains outside” (5.5[32]1.17–19). Since the external object itself does not enter into the sight, what is apprehended is a mere image of the object. The knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) of a sense-object—though it is more suitable to call it “opinion” (δόξα)—is said to be an “image” (εἰκῶν) of the object, since it is a knowledge of the thing which previously exists (5.9[5]7.1–4). Similarly, in the above-mentioned passage, the inchoate intellect sees the One as its object but what it grasps then is “an impression of what is seen.” Intellect knows the One only in its own manner. When it contemplates the nature of the One, it receives many objects of contemplation, not as they are in the One, but “as Intellect possessed them” (6.7[38]15.14). And these impressions are Forms that define the sight of Intellect. Intellect defined in this way is completed as “One-Many (ἐν πολλά)” (5.1[10]8.26, cf. Plato, *Parmenides* 144e5), which is “image” (εἶδωλον: 5.4[7]2.26, εἰκόνα: 5.1[10]7.1) and “imitation” (μίμημα: 5.4[7]2.25) of the One. Plotinus states also about a man who has the experience of union with the One, “If he recalls who he became when he was brought into contact with the One, he will have an image (εἰκόνα) of That in himself” (6.9[9]11.6–7). When he looks back at the One, he takes on its “image.”

The “impression” or “image” of the One apprehended by Intellect is multiple because the object of cognition is necessarily multiple. “Knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) is language and language is many” (6.9[9]4.5–6), for knowledge is composed of propositions, which is composed of words and sentences.

21. Also the virtue in the soul is said to be “a sight and the impression (τύπος) of what is seen,... like the relationship between sight (ὄψις) and its object” (1.2[19]4.19–20).

So it is said about the thinking of Intellect too, **“In a word, thought** (τὸ νοεῖν) seems to be a joint-perception (συναίσθησις) of the whole when many things come together into one” (5.3[49]13.12–13).²² Although the intuitive thinking of Intellect differs from discursive thinking of the soul in that it cognizes all things at once and not one after another, it still cognizes many things. For it is impossible to think what is absolutely one. **“If [what thinks] directed its gaze to a single object without parts, it would be without thought or word; for what could it say or what could it understand of it?”** (5.3[49]10.31–32). What is divided by cognizing activity is no longer the One, for the One is not something divided. Thus, **“those which were not distinct** (μὴ διακεκριμένα: 5.3[49]15.31, cf. 6.8[39]18.39–40) in the One are distinguished in the second being (i.e., Intellect) by rational principle (τῷ λόγῳ)” (5.3[49]15.31–32), **and the manner in which the One is unfolded** in Intellect, being itself immutable, is compared to that in which the radii extend from the center of a circle. **“What the center is like is revealed through the lines** (i.e., the radii); it is as if it was unfolded without having been unfolded—it is like this that we must apprehend Intellect-Being, coming to be from That and as if poured out and unfolded and hanging upon it” (6.8[39]18.17–21).

The cognition of the One is the manifold expression and the **“unfolding”** of it. And just as what from Intellect is translated into discursive thinking is the cognition of the soul, what from the One is translated into intellection is the cognition of Intellect. Thus Plotinus considered both the thinking of Intellect and the reasoning of the soul to be expressions and developments of its preceding unity. **“This is in every nature, to produce what comes after it and to unfold itself as a seed does, from a partless beginning which proceeds to the final stage perceived by the senses”** (4.8[6]6.7–10), says Plotinus. **“The soul is an expression** (λόγος) and a kind of activity (ἐνέργεια) of Intellect, just as Intellect is of That” (5.1[10]6.44–45). **Just as the soul was “interpreter”** of Intellect, Intellect is interpreter of the One, and just as the soul was the external activity of Intellect, Intellect is the external activity of the One (5.4[7]2.33–37, 5.3[49]12.39–41).

We should also notice that Plotinus thus distinguishes the level of the One and that of cognition about it. Just as it is said that **“we can speak about it**

22. **“For self-consciousness** (συναίσθησις) (i.e., of the soul) is a consciousness of something which is many: even the name bears witness to this. And thinking, which is prior, turns inward to Intellect which is obviously multiple” (5.3[49]13.21–24). **“That which is conscious of itself** (τὸ δὲ παρακολουθεῖν ἑαυτῷ) and thinks itself comes second” (3.9[13]9.18–19). **By contrast, “it is one and the same thing which is better than self-consciousness and better than all thinking”** (5.6[24]5.4–5). However, though the One does not have self-consciousness that objectifies itself, it nevertheless has a sort of awareness of itself (5.4[7]2.15–19, 6.8[39]16.19–21).

(i.e., the One), but cannot speak it” (5.3[49]14.5–6), it is impossible to know the One itself, but is possible to know about the One. The knowledge about the One is in the realm of Intellect, which is different from the One itself. In Plotinus’ words, “If the thought of the Good is different from the Good, the Good is there already before the thought of it” (6.7[38]38.21–22), “In general thought (νόησις), if it is of the Good, is inferior to it” (6.7[38]40.32–33). The thinking that apprehends the One as multiple Form is Intellect, so the thinking about the One is Intellect.

In this way, even though the One is itself unknowable, we come to know about it through unification with it and the subsequent reflection on it.

When you see him (i.e., the One), look at him as a whole; but when you think him, think whatever you remember about him, that he is the Good—for he is the productive power of thoughtful, intelligent life, from whom come life and Intellect and whatever there is of substance and being—that he is One—for he is simple and first—that he is the Principle—for all things come from him. (5.5[32]10.10–14)

The soul descends further from the realm of Intellect to that of reasoning. Then it re-cognizes Intellect and the One by memories of them and describes them in a discursive manner²³ by analyzing and systematizing them. Thus the philosophical statement is made.

So, we should say that there are two stages of both the reflective consciousness and the non-reflective one. One of the two stages of non-reflective consciousness is the absorption in the One without reflecting it by intuitive thinking and the other is the absorption in Intellect without reflecting it by discursive thinking.²⁴

Self-thinking as reflective cognition of the One

He who has attained to union with the One, when he wants to cognize the One, reflects and objectifies his own state that was himself the One. Knowledge about the One is therefore the reflective thinking of his own state in which he was the One itself. Differing from the cognition of others that exist outside, it is a re-cognition that reflects and objectifies a thing with which the knower has become identical. Furthermore, since the unity with the One is absolutely one, when reflective thinking occurs from this state,

23. “We should not suppose that they (i.e., the souls) use speech in the intelligible world” (4.3[27]18.13–14).

24. See note 13. Hadot argues on the relation between Intellect and the soul’s consciousness in positioning the union with the One as an experience in which the soul accords with one of the two aspects of Intellect (P. Hadot, “Les niveaux de conscience dans les états mystiques selon Plotin,” 243–66), but it would be necessary to mention the relation between the One and intellection, for the relation of the soul to Intellect is parallel to that of Intellect to the One.

the primary division is made from the oneness into the cognitive subject and its object. So it becomes **self-thinking that objectifies one's own state**. This is self-thinking in the realm of Intellect and thus it is possible to say that Plotinus witnessed the phenomenon in which the primary thinking about the One arose as self-thinking.

Self-thinking of the hypostatic Intellect

We can find also in the hypostatic Intellect the same structure of self-thinking as the division from oneness into subject and object. The thinking ($\nu\omicron\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$) of Intellect arises from the One. It is said to “**derive from That**” (6.7[38]40.21) and “**not be able to be in that from which it came to be**” (6.7[38]40.11–12). Since the One “**possesses all together the intellectual causes which are going to be from it**” (6.8[29]18.39–40), the activity that will become the thinking by acquiring its object proceeds from the One. This, having come from the One, turns back to the One reflectively and becomes the hypostatic Intellect by having an “**impression**” of it. **Therefore, just as in the mystical union with the One the reflective consciousness occurs from the state of oneness and looks back at the One, in the generation of the hypostatic Intellect the sight of the inchoate intellect proceeds from the One and turns towards it. Our reflective consciousness that turns to the One corresponds to the sight of the inchoate intellect that reverts to the One, and in either case the object of cognition is the image of the One.**

When we construe the doctrine of the inchoate intellect, we tend to separate into two stages the procession of the inchoate intellect and its reversion to the One. However the inchoate intellect neither only proceeds from the One nor only turns towards it, but it comes out of the One and returns to it. Since it is defined as Intellect by its reversion, it simultaneously follows that its reversion towards the One does not have a direction to union with the One, but rather direction to the separation of Intellect from the One. We should say therefore that this sequence of activities itself is the procession of Intellect from the One. The external activity of the One whose substance is said to be Intellect is not what merely proceeds from the One but what proceeds from it and returns towards it, for, if it were deprived of the reversion to the One, it would not be able to become Intellect.²⁵ So this activity is reflective. What seem to be two stages of proceeding and reverting are rather

25. There is a construction that takes the inchoate intellect as the external activity of the One and its reversion and the formation of Intellect as the internal activity of Intellect (cf. A.D. Lloyd, “Plotinus on the genesis of thought and existence,” 177, 182 and E. K. Emilsson, *op. cit.*, 274–75), but this construction is incompatible with Plotinus’ assertion (cf. Okano, *op. cit.*, 161–64). Emilsson, in his conclusion, dismisses the view that the inchoate intellect and Forms are two external activities of the One (287).

means for explaining discursively the formation of the thinking subject and that of the object respectively, in the procession of the single hypostasis of Intellect. Namely, the procession of the inchoate intellect describes the formation of the thinking subject and the “**impression**” of the One acquired by the reversion describes the formation of the object of thought. We should not rest satisfied with the literal reading of the sequence of procession and reversion of the inchoate intellect, but consider what this sequence means in the intelligible realm. Even if the process of the generation of Intellect is logical and not temporal, such a discursive explanation is no more than an objectification of Intellect by our reasoning.²⁶ Describing the logical order of the perfection of Intellect is how our reason reflects and analyzes Intellect. So if we want to have a more proper understanding of Intellect itself, we need to remove the discursive elements from such explanations.

However we may have to consider whether this interpretation is not inconsistent with Plotinus’ statement in 5.2[11]1.8–11 that the “**overflowing of the One**” makes something “**other,**” which turns towards the One (... καὶ τὸ ὑπερπλήρες αὐτοῦ πεποίηκεν ἄλλο· τὸ δὲ γινόμενον εἰς αὐτὸ ἐπιστρέφει καὶ ἐπληρώθη καὶ ἐγένετο πρὸς αὐτὸ βλέπον καὶ νοῦς οὗτος). Although this “**other**” is said to be “**what is generated,**” it is not a defined existence before it starts to see the One, but the indefinite sight of the inchoate intellect that is not yet in existence. It is no more than a “**mere desire** (ἔφεις μόνον)” (5.3[49]11.12, cf. 5.6[24]5.5–10) that wants to see and know the One. It is not when the inchoate intellect arises but when it sees the One that something “**other**” than the One comes into existence. If it turned back upon the One externally after having existed as “**other**” completely separated from the One, it would be a sort of sophistry to assert that a cognition of such an external object results in the self-thinking in which the subject is identical with the object. Despite the fact that the thinking of Intellect is formed by seeing the One and having “**an impression of what is seen**” (5.3[49]11.8), its thought is neither what “**comes from outside**” (5.5[32]1.25) nor is “**of what is external,** just like sense-perception” (5.5[32]1.26–27, cf. 5.3[49] 3.16–18, 8.20–21, 13.15–16, 2.9[33]1.47–48). According to Plotinus, sense-perception is “**opinion** (δόξα),” because it receives an impression of an external object (5.5[32]1.62–65). So if the thinking of Intellect, which apprehends the One’s impression, is not “**opinion,**” it must not be of an external object by an existing subject (cf. 5.3[49]8.20–21). That is, Intellect does not see the One after having become another existence than it, but rather sees the One as other in distancing itself from it. Intellect sees its multiple object, “**in a way cutting itself off** (οἶον σχιζομένη)” (5.1[10]7.11) from the One. So it objectifies and sees as other what is with itself. Whereas the perceiving subject

26. “Our rational discourse instructing us gives process” (6.7[38]35.28–29).

has external objects other than it (5.3[49]2.2–6, 5.5[32]1.19, 4.6[41]1.18, 21, 2.20), Intellect's **cognition of the One is a development of absolute oneness into subject and object**. The inchoate intellect is not necessarily another existence than the One until it sees the One, but we can rather consider it to be **“something like Intellect in one (ἐν ἐνὶ νοῦν), which is not Intellect” because it is in fact “one” (6.8[39]18.21–22, cf. 27).**²⁷ Also the following statements suggest the division and the development of Intellect from the One.

Two comes from one, making itself two because it thinks (νοεῖ) [itself]. (5.6[24]1.22–23)

Beginning as one [Intellect] did not stay as it began, but, without noticing it, became many, as if **“heavy [with drunken sleep]” (cf. Plato, *Symposium* 203 b 7), and unfolded itself because it wanted to possess everything—how much better it would have been for it not to want this, for it became the second! (3.8[30]8.32–36)**²⁸

The cognition of Intellect, despite the fact that it is formed by the apprehension of an **“impression” of the One, is not cognition of an external object, but is said to be self-thinking**, because it reflects and objectifies its own original state of oneness and comes to the duality of subject and object,²⁹ which is already the external activity of the One. So its knowledge is direct³⁰ and **“manifest” (ἐναργής)** (5.5[32]2.15, cf. 5.3[49]8,9–10, 16,28–29, 5.5[32]1,7–8, 10–11, 6.7[38]7,30–31, 30,39) and thus the self-thinking Intellect proceeds from the One. Then the multiplicity of object is brought about simultaneously

27. Hadot, identifying **“Intellect in love” with the inchoate intellect (cf. 6.7[38]35.32–33)**, lays stress on the point that the soul ascends to the One while being united with this Intellect (P. Hadot, *Traité* 38 (VI,7), 66–67, 340–45; **“L’union de l’âme avec l’intellect divin dans l’expérience mystique plotinienne,” 24–27; and “Les niveaux de conscience dans les états mystiques selon Plotin,” 245. See also G.J.P. O’Daly, “The presence of the One in Plotinus,” 164–69**). If so, it follows that the inchoate intellect is not necessarily anything outside of the One. Just as a radius ends at a point in the center (6.8[39]18.7–25), so it is at a tangent to the One. The two expressions of **“Intellect in love” and the inchoate intellect seem to be based on human experiences**. That is to say, as a step of our souls’ **ascending to the One, the phase of Intellect that sees the One appears to be what is “in love,” and as a step of our descending from the One, it appears to be what is “not yet Intellect.” The hypostatic Intellect itself is not what descends at one time and ascends at another.**

28. Referring to 3.8[30]8.32–38, Trouillard indicates that the activity of Intellect proceeds from unity with the One (**“Valeur critique de la mystique plotinienne,” 435**).

29. Intellect sees itself not by seeing **“itself with another part of itself” (5.3[49]5.1–2)**. Such a self-thinking is of something in which substance and activity are distinct by nature. In the thinking of Intellect, it is not the case that its activity apprehends its substance as object, but from the state of absolute oneness there occurs a reflective consciousness that objectifies it, and in consequence the distinction of activity and substance comes about.

30. **Neither the wisdom as virtue of the soul is a mere opinion, because it is what the soul reflects and translates on the basis of direct contact with Intellect. So the soul is said to see Intellect within itself.**

by the cognitive function, and by becoming “two,” Intellect becomes also “many.”

The self-consciousness of the One

Since there is nothing other than the One before the generation of Intellect, the activity of objectifying and externalizing the One arises from nothing but the One, and what is objectified and externalized then is Intellect. If so, it is possible also to say from the side of the One that it generates Intellect because “by turning to itself (τῆ ἐπιστροφῇ πρὸς αὐτό) it started to see; and this vision is Intellect” (5.1[10]7.5–6, cf. 6.17–19).³¹

As I have elaborated, there are two kinds of consciousness, the non-reflective absorption in a state and the reflective self-awareness. Also the One is said to have a kind of self-consciousness, and we can find these two aspects of consciousness in it. The non-reflective aspect corresponds to its quasi-internal activity that is the One itself and the reflective aspect corresponds to its external activity that is Intellect in substance. While the One’s “turning to itself” in the above-mentioned passage expresses its reflective self-consciousness, its non-reflective consciousness of the self is described in the following passages:

It will have a simple intuition (ἐπιβολῇ)³² of itself. (6.7[38]39.1–2)

[The One] is not, as it were, senseless; but all things belong to it and are in it and with it; it is completely able to discern itself; it has life in itself and all things in itself, and its thinking of itself (κατανόησις αὐτοῦ) is itself and exists by a kind of self-consciousness (οἶονεὶ συναίσθησει) in eternal rest and in an intellection different from the intellection of Intellect. (5.4[7]2.15–19)

It so to speak looks to itself and this looking to itself is its so-called being.
(6.8[39]16.19–21)

If the One were something unconscious, we would have no consciousness during the union with it, but in practice we have a “delightful experience” then. What we do not have then is self-consciousness in the reflective sense. So if Plotinus denies self-consciousness to the One (3.9[13]9.12–17, 5.6[24]5.3), it is because the One has no reflective self-consciousness in its quasi-internal activity. By contrast, the One’s “turning to itself” is its external activity. Since its quasi-internal activity is self-consciousness, its external activity that is its expression must also be a kind of self-consciousness, and

31. Cf. Okano, *op. cit.*

32. O’Daly indicates that ἐπιβολή in Plotinus signifies pre-cognitive intuition. The soul participates in this inner act of the One when united with it (G.J.P. O’Daly, *Plotinus’ Philosophy of the Self*, 92–94, see also “The presence of the One in Plotinus,” 167–69).

it is the reflective self-consciousness that objectifies and externalizes the non-reflective self-consciousness that corresponds to its quasi-internal activity. Thus the One has the non-reflective self-consciousness of **“a simple intuition of itself,” which is its inner activity, and the reflective self-consciousness of “turning to itself,” which is its outer activity.** So in the experience of the One, we participate in these two activities of it. That is to say, we conform to its non-reflective consciousness when united with it, and come from it to Intellect in conformity with its reflective consciousness. Furthermore, we unfold the content of Intellect and translate it into our discursive thinking by participating in the reflective consciousness that proceeds from Intellect, namely the external activity of Intellect.

Even in the external activity of the One, the procession from it is **never** caused by its outward activity but by its inward activity. For, the One does not turn to another existence but **“turns to itself.”** Its **“overflowing”** is what its self-consciousness has developed from the non-reflective state into the reflective state. Having proceeded to Intellect, it develops further into the reflective consciousness that objectifies Intellect, by which the soul comes to exist. So the procession from the One is the process of development of self-consciousness through its reflective function.³³ Thus we can understand through the structure of self-consciousness both the transcendence of the One in its non-reflective state and the **“overflowing” of it by its reflective consciousness.** Conversely, if our ordinary self-consciousness is a developed form of the One’s reflective self-consciousness, our return to the One is the ultimate state of non-reflective concentration of our consciousness.

CONCLUSION

When an object that exists outside of a subject is inconceivable, we are not able to know it, but in the process of cognition through unification and subsequent self-reflection, knowledge and the truth about the unknowable are possible in the form of self-thinking. We can have knowledge of the One as reflective thinking by way of our unification with it. So knowledge required then in the realm of Intellect is self-thinking and the concordance of knowing subject and object known is **“the truth”** (ἀλήθεια) (3.7[45]4.11–12, 5.3[49]5.21–25). According to Plotinus, the truth is not **“of something else”** (5.3[49]5.25) and **“the real truth does not agree with something else, but with itself”** (5.5[32]2.18–19). That is to say, the truth is not the precise apprehension of an external object by a cognizing subject, but knowledge through unification and reflection. Thus, the One is the cause of self-thinking Intellect, its being and the truth.

33. It is also by self-objectification that Nature produces what is next to it (3.8[30]4.17–22).

However according to Plotinus' philosophy, the truth is subjective in a way. For the One objectified by the reflective thinking is no longer the One itself, but its image, and Intellect apprehends the One "as Intellect itself possessed it" (6.7[38]15.14). It is because the knowledge is what is apprehended by the cognitive function and its content is necessarily multiple. Therefore, whatever is known is not something ultimate, even though it is the truth, and the truth cognized by human reason is still more multiple. What is absolutely one is the One that transcends knowledge. We should always endeavor to turn towards it and to think from it.

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