

Talk, Ethics and Politics in Plotinus

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Why is language intelligible? Like every other kind of understanding, Plotinus explains linguistic understanding in light of the immaterial structure of reality. The intelligible structure of human speech is a special kind of activity which depends on the Intellect. When the intelligibles are actualized in the air, truth is present for everyone by hearing. This lofty metaphysical picture, however, has implications for Plotinus' ethical and political theory, topics of increasing interest in recent studies.¹

In this paper, I propose a general structural unity of explanation for virtuous activity and linguistic activity. I think both kinds of social activity are structured by similar principles of Plotinian metaphysics. This approach would shed light on the following question. What role could familiar linguistic practices occupy in the good life of quietude, withdrawal from sense perception, and psychic unification into the One? The goodness of the Plotinian sage derives from contemplation—every activity derives its value from this primary activity. Thus I will try to offer a Plotinian defense of the goodness of all language use according to various degrees of perfection.

1. J.M. Dillon, "Plotinus, Philo and Origen on the Grades of Virtue," in *Platonismus und Christentum: Festschrift für Heinrich Dörrie*, eds. H.-D. Blume und F. Mann (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1983), 92–105; J.M. Dillon, "An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. L.P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1996), 315–35; G. Leroux, "Human Freedom in the Thought of Plotinus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, 292–314; A. Smith, "The Significance of Practical Ethics for Plotinus," in *Traditions of Platonism. Essays in Honour of John Dillon*, ed. J.J. Cleary (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 227–36; C. Wildberg, "ΤΙΠΟΣ ΤΟ ΤΕΛΟΣ: Neuplatonische Ethik zwischen Religion und Metaphysik," in *Metaphysik und Religion. Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens. Akten des Internationalen Kongresses vom 13.–17. März 2001 in Würzburg*, eds. T. Kobusch and M. Erler (Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2002), 261–78; A. Ousager, *Plotinus on Selfhood, Freedom and Politics* (Aarhus: Aarhus U Press, 2004); A. Schniewind, "The Social Concern of the Plotinian Sage," in *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honour of Peter Brown*, ed. A. Smith (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2005), 51–64; A. Smith, "Action and Contemplation in Plotinus," in *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity*, 65–72; P. Remes, "Plotinus's Ethics of Disinterested Interest," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (2006): 1–23.

I. THE METAPHYSICS OF LANGUAGE

Apart from the One, nothing is intelligible. Even the intelligibles themselves, the Forms contained in Intellect, are sequents of the One. The intelligibles provide illumination from beyond the hearer and the utterance (4.3[27].18, 20–2; 6.4[22].14, 26–8)—light provides an important analogy by its presence to vision alongside the illumined object (5.5[32].7, 1–35).² Increased awareness of superior reality is the awakening to understanding in the soul (*sunesis*).³ This transcendent experience can be followed by the articulation within the soul from the One and the Intellect which issues from it. This deposit is described in some passages as a kind of linguistic trace of attaining union, like the heights experienced by Minos, whose divinely inspired laws order the city (6.9[9].7, 1–26; 6.9[9].4, 1–14; 3.8[30].6, 26–40).

However, contemplation is the proper function of the soul. Language is an inferior activity. For the most part, Plotinus places language (like discursive reasoning) as a function of soul, not of intellect (6.7[38].23, 18–20; 5.5[32].5, 16–27; 5.8[31].5, 20–5).⁴ Only by contemplation can the soul draw nearer to Being; by contemplation the soul constitutes itself.⁵ Representation in Plotinus has generated recent scholarly discussion. In the soul's ascent to contemplative actuality, reality and representation become increasingly unified, until all forms of representation (impression, symbol, sign, proposition, image, picture) are eliminated in the unity experienced by the soul. For all representation entertained by the soul is provisional, at

2. I have consistently used the earlier edition (*editio maior*) of the Henry-Schwyzter text of Plotinus, which includes a text of Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*. P. Henry and H-R. Schwyzter (eds.), *Plotini opera*, 3 vols. (Paris and Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer, 1951–73).

3. F.M. Schroeder, "Synousia, Synaisthaesis and Synesis: Presence and Dependence in the Plotinian Philosophy of Consciousness," *ANRW* II.36.1 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1987), 677–99 at 682–9 provides a detailed explanation of uses of this term in Plotinus. Also see A. Smith, "Unconsciousness and Quasiconsciousness in Plotinus," *Phronesis* 23 (1978): 292–301 at 296–99. The term (*sunesis*) is an important yet lightly used term in Plotinus, 'coming to oneself' in attaining contact with the intelligible world (e.g., 5.8[31].13, 23, cf. Plato, *Rep.* 517B5).

4. J.M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1967), 100–1 claims correctly that language is fully operative only at the level of soul, cf. J.H. Heiser, *Logos and Language in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 6–9, 17–24, 49. F.M. Schroeder, *Form and Transformation. A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's U Press, 1992), 69–79; Heiser, *Logos and Language*, 49–57 claim that language is possible at the level of Intellect, with reference to 5.3[49].10, 32–42; 5.3[49].14, 8–19; 5.8[31].5, 20–5. However, any form of expression or cognition at this level would be unified beyond linguistic structures. The Intellect only 'speaks' insofar as there is an expression at a lower level of its effluence (5.3[49].6, 18–28), although Plotinus describes a 'primal response' of Intellect to the One, not intelligible as a propositional, predicating, or articulated response (5.5[32].5, 16–27).

5. P. Kalligas, "Living Body, Soul, and Virtue in the Philosophy of Plotinus," *Dionysius* 18 (2000): 25–38 at 32–3.

a remove from the realities themselves.⁶ In his difficult arguments on the self-knowledge of Intellect, Plotinus' general distinction between reality and representation lies behind his claim that truth completely excludes alterity (5.3[49].5; 5.8[31].4–6).⁷ That is, the truth of Intellect excludes the alterity introduced by images of reality (5.3[49].5, 25–6). “For it must not be the case that truth belongs to something else, but that which it says, this it actually is.”⁸ This point about Intellect sheds light on the soul's understanding of truth, as Plotinus himself makes clear (5.3[49].6, 22–8). In its higher, self-constituting attainment, what the soul speaks (*legein*) is the intelligibles. For in this way, the soul, being itself a *logos*, is conformed to the ordering and unifying principle (*logos*) that belongs to Intellect. In short, for souls to attain self-knowledge is to think the intelligibles free from images and representations (6.5[23].7, 1–8).

There are further dimensions of this metaphysical scheme that explain the lower forms of comprehension. Below perfect self-knowledge, all partial truth in representation still depends on contemplation. There are different levels of expression, according to the greater and lesser degrees of the soul's recourse to Intellect. Images (*agalmata*) and icons (*eikônes*) express wisdom more purely than propositions (*axiomata*) and statements (*lekta*) (5.8[31].5–6, cf. 6.7[38].38, 1–25). These pure, ideogrammatic representations are truer images of the intelligibles (5.8[31].6, 1–13). On the other hand, it is true that everything is an image in some sense, obtaining its metaphysical status in view of the sovereignty of the One. Even Intellect, the seat of the Forms, is an image. It is an icon (*eikôn*) of the One (5.1[10].7, 1–2). In turn, the Intellect is the ground of all other images, for it contains the pure images (the Forms) which furnish identity for all the lower beings subject to plurality and variety.⁹ The wisdom (*sophia*) of the Egyptian sages makes possible a higher

6. K. Corrigan, “La discursivité et le temps futur du langage chez Plotin,” in *Logos et langage chez Plotin et avant Plotin*, ed. M. Fattal (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 223–45 makes this point particularly well. “Les représentations, les explications plausibles et les théories scientifiques pertinentes peuvent nous rendre aveugles face à la réalité si nous les prenons pour la vérité absolue sans les critiquer, mais elles peuvent aussi nous ouvrir à la réalité, si nous sommes prêts à les faire voler en éclats afin d'entrevoir à travers elles la réalité ... Comme Plotin le précise: nous ne devrions pas confondre nos explications au sujet du pourquoi des choses qui sont telles avec le fait qu'elles soient telles (V, 8 [31], 7, 36-44).”

7. I owe much here to E.K. Emilsson, “Cognition and its Object,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, 217–49 at 234–8.

8. In this passage, I assume that Plotinus loosely and improperly envisions speaking (*legein*) at the level of Intellect, cf. 5.3[49].6, 14–24.

9. L.P. Gerson, “Metaphor as an Ontological Concept: Plotinus on the Philosophical Use of Language,” in *Logos et langage*, 255–69 at 260 provides an admirable discussion of the ‘iconic’ status of all cognition and language, in dependence on Intellect. “Everything that is produced by the One with the instrumentality of *Nous* is doubly an image. That is, it is an intelligible image of *Nous* and an existential image of the One. The latter point is just the direct consequence of the

level of signification (*deiknunai*), which depends on contemplation of the living realities in the soul of the sage (5.8[31].5, 19–5.8[31].6, 9).

As we will see, the wisdom that encompasses the soul is also the transcendent basis of perfecting human political community (6.4[22].15, 18–40; 6.5[23].10, 11–40). It stands opposed to uncontrolled passions and public tumult (4.4[28].17, 19–37).

2. TWO LEVELS OF SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Now let us pursue the ethical and political aspects of speaking and hearing, which I will locate on two levels. The austere ideals of the contemplative life inherited from Plato provide authentic goodness, yet Plotinus is aware of the requirements of human life in civic society, in particular the actions and choices that we must make in order to be virtuous (2.9[33].9).¹⁰ This corresponds to his rejection of Gnosticism's dark vision of life in the material world (2.9[33].4–5, 9, 16–18). There is some tension between this world-affirming view and pursuing in actuality the divine life of the gods while maintaining the civic virtues on a merely potential basis (1.2[19].7, 10–30; 1.4[46].5, 16–24). For if there are duties to perform in the political community, more authoritative is the inner activity of actualizing virtue in the soul (6.8[39].6, 3–22). Unfortunately, there may be pressing needs that demand public discussion in this world of trouble, in contrast to the higher understanding that connects souls in the intelligible realm (4.3[27].18, 15–19).

Of course, there is a hierarchy of the soul's activities corresponding to the degrees of intelligible presence. At every level, inner activities are more perfect than external activities. For the activities (productive, linguistic, practical) that issue from the soul have their being in recourse to the self-directed activity of the soul's substance (5.4[7].2, 27–33; 5.2[11].1, 16–28; 6.9[9].7, 16–23).¹¹ These external activities of the soul proceed from it and attain existence on the model of the generosity of the One. One of these external activities, linguistic in nature, is described as an incorporeal 'signifying activity' (*poiêsis sêmantikê*, 6.1[42].5, 7–8). Like other external activities, it is secondary to the soul's inner activity of contemplation, directed towards Intellect.¹² Linguistic

fact that the One is the cause of the existence of all. This duality of imagery, as we may term it, guarantees the ontological groundedness of metaphor representations of everything inferior to intelligible reality. Whereas in a non-Plotinian world we can readily distinguish an image *qua* image from the same image *qua* what it really is, for Plotinus everything is permanently an image of the first principle over and above the fact that it is or contains an image of *Nous*.

10. Remes, "Plotinus's Ethics of Disinterested Interest," 10–11. Dillon, "An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage," 323–8 is less generous in according Plotinus an other-regarding ethics.

11. Activity and actualization in Plotinus is a topic that invites further treatment in Plotinian studies. J. Bussanich, *The One and its Relation to Intellect in Plotinus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 28–31 provides helpful discussion.

12. Kalligas, "Living Body, Soul, and Virtue," 32 points out that the term *poiêsis* is usually

activity is intelligible on account of the imposition of immaterial, clarifying Form upon air, the matter of spoken language (6.1[42].5, 1–14; 6.4[22].12, 1–28; 2.8[35].1, 17–29). The presence of Form is what constitutes the essence of language (*logos hēi logos*, 6.1[42].5, 1–4 Henry Schwyzer).

This takes us to some remarkable features of linguistic activities. The intelligibles are actualized for souls engaged in discourse in a certain way. For we understand what is said by virtue of Form, which is uniformly and pervasively present to the air—degrees of understanding seem to be ruled out. In fact, Plotinus seems to view vocal sound as a particularly telling case of the ubiquity of the intelligible, which Plotinus often considers in light of the soul's presence to the body. For the soul is present to the body everywhere yet nowhere, not confined to a physical location, being attendant as a whole to every bodily part. The omnipresence of Form in discourse is most completely explained in one passage (6.4[22].12, 1–23, cf. 2.8[35].1, 17–29).

And just as the ear, being attentive, receives and perceives when on many occasions voice is (dispersed) throughout the air and language (being) in the voice, and even if you should interpose another (ear) in the vacuum, the language and voice comes to it, or rather the ear comes to language, and many eyes look towards it and all are filled with the vision, yet the object of vision is separated, because the eye is one case, the ear is another case. In just this way, surely, that which has the potential to obtain soul will obtain it and one thing, and still another, will obtain from the same (source). Now the voice is everywhere in the air, not being one (voice) being partitioned, but rather one whole (voice) everywhere. And with respect to sight, if the air by being affected takes the shape, it does not take it partitioned; for wherever sight is positioned, there it possesses the shape. But not every teaching countenances this view (of sight), nevertheless let it be said, on account of that (observation), that the participation is from the same unity. But the clearer case is that of voice, the Form is present as a whole over the air space; for otherwise, it would not be true that every listener hears the same thing, insofar as the language having been voiced would not be present in every sector as a whole, and each hearing would not take in the entirety in a uniform way. If it is not true even here that the whole voice is extended over the entire air, so that one part of it is yoked with this bit, another mingled in with another, why need one hesitate (to draw our conclusions), that the one soul is not extended by being distributed, but is omnipresent wherever it is present and is not partitioned at every point of the all?¹³

used by Plotinus for the secondary activity of the soul, while the primary activity of the soul is contemplation (*theōria*), the prototype of the higher activity of the soul (*praxis*). “Like *praxis* in Aristotle, Plotinus’ primary activity is a realization and actualization of a being’s nature in a way which implies the presence of the aim of the act within itself, so that it can be considered as being perfect and complete at any particular moment . . . In the case of the soul, this means that its primary activity is directed towards the Intellect as a whole since, as we saw, the foundation and the core of its being lies there and, moreover, comprises—in a way which is peculiar to all intelligible beings—all the rest of the intelligible realm. This amounts to saying that the proper, primary activity of the soul is its contemplation.”

13. The translations of Plotinus are my own, although on occasion I have consulted A.H. Armstrong’s Loeb translation; parentheses present supplementary words that do not expressly appear in Plotinus’ Greek.

Plotinus claims that vocal sound is distributed uniformly around an area, being equally present at each point in space.¹⁴ The argument for the non-partitioned presence of soul relies on the entire presence of ‘whole Form’ (*holon to eidos*) in the air.¹⁵ The actualization of Form in hearing happens uniformly (*homoiois*), otherwise different hearers would understand different things. In other passages, we find a similar employment of voice in space to illustrate how the indivisible, uniform presence of higher, immaterial realities can be actualized for the soul (3.8[30].9, 24–8; 6.4[22].14, 26–8, cf. 5.5[32].9, 11–16).¹⁶ It is remarkable that Plotinus relies on the case of voice for these purposes, in view of the limited power of human language to express intelligible truths.

But a wider angle reveals that degrees of understanding are possible for souls, depending on the various degrees of divine life attained, not on variations in the presence of higher realities. For it is clear that souls are not uniformly harmonious with Intellect—at times Plotinus distinguishes between ‘Soul of the All’ firmly attached to things above, and ‘partial souls’ (4.8[6].7, 23–32). Among lesser souls, Plotinus clarifies two basic levels of shared understanding, corresponding to different contexts of order. The highest level for partial souls is envisioned in the intelligible world, where they share an immediate understanding, a connection similar to contemplation (4.3[27].18, 7–22; cf. 6.4[22].14, 17–31).

Now if there above (things are) without reasoning, how would (souls) still be rational? Perhaps because, someone might reply, they have the potential, when circumstance (arises), to be flush in deliberation. And we must understand the reasoning that is of this sort—if we understand reasoning which always flows from the Intellect, being in them a disposition, a standing activity, being like a reflection (of Intellect); (in this sense) there would be (souls) engaged in reasoning there above. Certainly, in my opinion, we

14. I resist reading the ‘vehicle’ model of communication into this passage. Stephen MacKenna’s venerable translation slips into this model, *Plotinus. The Enneads*, ed. J. Dillon (London: Penguin, 1991), 450. “Think of a sound passing through the air and carrying a word; an ear within range catches and comprehends.” The basic concept is atmospheric uniformity ‘through the air’ (*kata ton aera*), not transfer of meaning.

15. As we find in other passages about voice (cf. 6.7[38].18, 41–5), this passage does not distinguish the essence of language and language as composite in accordance with the metaphysical complications of 6.1[42].5, 1–14.

16. Bussanich, *The One and its Relation to Intellect in Plotinus*, 97–8 notes in his commentary on 3.8[30].9, 26–8 the uses of this illustration in Plotinian metaphysics. “This remarkable auditory metaphor for describing how the soul can actualize the presence of the One has received little attention. Plotinus often uses the sound of a voice to symbolize metaphysical doctrines. In the cosmic metaphor at III.2[47].17.65–75 the sounds of all voices harmonize in a universal melody. At V.1[10].12.14–20, to dramatize the omnipresence of Intellect to the soul, he counsels the soul to rouse its ‘power of hearing to catch what, when it comes, is the best of all sounds which can be heard’ (16–17), i.e. that of the intelligible world.”

should not consider that (souls) use vocal sounds in the intelligible world, although in the heavens (souls) altogether possess bodies. As many things as they discuss on account of needs or difficulties here below, there above it would not be so; but rather acting in perfect arrangement and according to nature, they order no particulars nor is counsel taken, rather they know from one another in understanding. For even here below, silent eyes have knowledge of many things, while there above all body is pure and each (being) is, as it were, an eye, nothing hid or counterfeit, but by sight alone it knows prior to speaking to another.

Our present devices of communication are dim reflections of higher forms of understanding. Plotinus argues from silent knowledge shared from visual contact in our present state to show the more perfect vision (*sunesis*) souls enjoy in the heavens. The shared activity of heavenly souls is more perfectly connected to the whole, the whole Soul, Intellect, and the One (1.7[54].3, 7–22; 6.4[22].14, 17–31).¹⁷ It is a life closest to the life of the gods, engaged in endless contemplation, possessing perfect wisdom (5.8[31].3, 18–5.8[31].5, 25; cf. 3.8[30].5–6).

The second level of understanding, unlike the first, is steeped in political virtue. This level relates to language in political communities, because maintaining civic order is a fundamental theme in Plotinus' political philosophy. There is opportunity for discord to arise in any arena below the heavenly bodies—the harmony of the whole is liable to disturbance by desires, pleasures, and pains (1.4[46].5–8; 6.4[22].15, 1–23). In fact, the point of expressing the lower, political virtues (courage, justice, temperance, and practical wisdom) is to bring order to passions and desires (1.2[19].2, 13–18). So it may be required for the wisest men in the city to establish law and order by their speeches, quieting the chaotic discourse of disorderly men in civic assemblies (6.4[22].15, 18–40; 4.4[28].17, 17–37). The exercise of the higher or 'cathartic' virtues may not remove the excellent person from civic activity entirely. It is true that nothing is good for the sage besides contemplation (1.2[19].7, 23–8), but it is also true that the sage is good to the people around him while he remains oriented to the intelligibles.¹⁸ This requires arising from the quiet and rest of contemplation to speak from his wisdom to others (3.8[30].6, 12–40).

I would argue that this second level of linguistic understanding also emerges in Plotinus' most detailed treatment of public assemblies (6.5[23].10, 11–40), although there is no direct reference to speechmaking. Plotinus claims

17. In its higher life, the soul does not dispense with body altogether (4.3[27].18, 7–22). The concept of the soul's otherworldly garment is inherited from Plato (Plato, *Phaedr.* 247B, *Phd.* 113D, *Tim.* 41D–E; Plotinus 4.3[27].18; 4.4[28].5). R. Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators 200–600 AD. A Sourcebook*, 3 vols. (London: Duckworth, 2004), vol. 1, 221–41 highlights vehicles of soul in Later Greek philosophy.

18. Remes, "Plotinus's Ethics of Disinterested Interest," 7–14.

that unities formed in civic debates imitate (*mimountai*) the contemplative ascent of the soul, a sort of second-order public unity that harmonizes the attending souls discovering wisdom. The text reads as follows (6.5[23].10, 11–34).

And it is true that wisdom is as a whole for all (souls). Hence wisdom is compresent (to all), not being in this way for one, in another way for another. For it would be absurd that wisdom is limited with respect to place. Wisdom is not like whiteness, for wisdom is not (an accident) of a body; rather if we truly participate in wisdom, it must be as one, the same, all united with itself. And from there (wisdom is present) in this way, (we are) not appropriating portions of it, nor I one whole having been torn away, you another whole. And even the assemblies and every meeting imitate (this process of unification), in that individuals come into unity with respect to wisdom. In fact each man separately is weak in wisdom, although growing together into unity every man in the meeting and understanding which is genuine begets wisdom and discovers it. What then will hinder mind from one quarter or another from being in the same (center)? Rather, when we are at one we do not seem to be at one; for example, if someone touches the same (string) with many fingers, one believes another (string) and still another to be touched, or strikes the same string even unawares. Or yet consider (our) souls insofar as we contact the Good; I do not grasp a piece of it and you another, but the same thing, not the same thing yet one effluent coming from above for me while another for you, to the end that (the Good) is in some sense above while its effluents are down here. In fact the giver <gives> to the partakers, so that they might truly receive, [and the giver gives] not to alien (partakers), but to domestic ones. Since not a work of transmission is the intelligible giving ...¹⁹

Admittedly, much of this passage is more metaphysical than political. The key point is the unity in wisdom that arises in a community of citizens (*sumballôn de eis hen pas ... to phronein egennêse kai heure*). This wisdom (*to phronein*) is Plotinus' version of Aristotelian practical wisdom, the guide of good practical action; at times Plotinus also envisions the exercise of *sophia* for the pursuit of happiness (1.4[46].9, 14–18).

So the assimilation to Intellect creates goodness in the city. The civic process of growing stronger in conformity to wisdom recalls the superior activity of dialectic, which seeks moral truths above linguistic structures: essences, the relations between essences, their connections, and the entire intelligible order (1.3[20].4, 1–16; 1.3[20].5). By dialectic, the soul is carried beyond discursive reasoning, and will be assimilated to Intellect and the Forms it contains (1.3[20].4–6; 1.2[19].6, 13–15). In an inferior sense, unity with Intellect can take place among an assembly of citizens, even when the sovereignty of the

19. With reference to the Greek text I closely follow the bracketing notation of Henry and Schwyzer, which appears in my translation as corner or square brackets. The word presented in corner brackets by Henry and Schwyzer, *didôsi*, fills in a seriously corrupt spot in the Greek. As in the other translations, round brackets supply words that are not literally in the text of Plotinus.

intelligibles is not a focus of awareness (harmony of strings example). Rather than forging a public consensus from different quarters, public unity is essentially governed by Intellect. And the intelligible is sufficient and complete to all citizens, much like the sufficiency, wholeness, and stability experienced by all lovers of Beauty (6.5[23].10, 1–11; cf. *Symp.* 203C6–D3).

Another important feature of this text is that Plotinus describes a non-perspectival stance available in a virtuous civic assembly. This is the communicative dimension of realizing the essential sameness of human souls—for example, there is sameness of the beauty observed in souls, whatever soul exhibits beauty (1.6[1].5, 9–20). Receiving truth from higher principles means that souls transcend their points of view in attaining goodness—shared knowledge of goodness becomes free from individual perspective. In other words, communal wisdom is good, yet it is good irrespective of what is good for one person, what is good for another person, or even for a body of citizens. Wisdom is the good for all, in that it is perfectly and uniformly good, and yet it is good for none, insofar as it is good independent of any point of view.²⁰ Plotinus' account of discovering wisdom in the political community might also be connected to the soul's prior connection to the Forms, awakened by recollection (cf. 5.3[49].2, 9–14; 6.2[43].22, 3–7).²¹

Now that we have reviewed the two levels of shared understanding developed in Plotinus, we can attempt to justify the goodness of ordinary talk. This leads us to the role of linguistic activities in view of the comprehensive harmony established among the parts of the political community.

3. ORDINARY TALK AND POLITICAL ORDER

It is a Plotinian paradox that he defends the goodness of the products of Soul at every level, although the deeper involvement in the corporeal draws Soul away from the intelligibles. The World Soul constructs the physical universe, while it remains in unbroken contemplation of the intelligibles—this provides a model for the activity of individual souls.²² The universe is as good as it can be, and every part of the whole must contribute in some way to its perfection, however obliquely (2.3[52].16–18; 3.2[47].2–3). This is

20. Plotinus may be contrasted with Nietzsche, who is notorious for rejecting truths and embracing perspectives, as noted by N. Trakakis, "Nietzsche's Perspectivism and Problems of Self-Refutation," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 46 (2006): 91–110. For Nietzsche, there are no truths to be known, rather there are only interpretations, which issue from some individual perspective.

21. Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators*, vol. 1, 172. "Recollection is acknowledged by Plotinus. But it is needed only by the lower soul, not by the undescended soul which is uninterruptedly thinking the Forms." Schroeder, "Synousia, Synaisthaesis, and Synesis," 687 connects recollection (*anamnēsis*) with higher understanding (*sunesis*).

22. Smith, "Action and Contemplation in Plotinus," 66–69 develops this point.

why Plotinus can endorse the goodness of ordinary linguistic activities, in spite of the higher calling of the soul to discard language. As we have seen, Plotinus distinguishes the higher, purified virtues and the lower, political virtues. I will conjecture a structural parallel to the relationship of the more contemplative and the more ordinary levels of communication.

Let me introduce a possible objection, in order to show what is at stake. Plotinus' explanatory recourse to higher principles to explain linguistic understanding might seem extravagant, in view of the familiar purposes served by language use. The point of discourse is serving ulterior purposes, for example, warning someone of the hazards of military service (suggested in 3.2[47].8, 31–7). Language use takes shape in the process of understanding one another in view of these purposes.

I think Plotinus would handle the objection as follows. Similar to the subordinate role of the civic virtues in his ethics, the standard quotidian functions of language have their place in his philosophy of language. For all language use fits into a higher order which governs human interaction and political community. So perhaps even the interactive, negotiated aspects of ordinary talk exchanges are dependent on Intellect.²³ Nevertheless, highly discursive, messy exchanges provide a more oblique connection to Intellect than the more perfect levels. In a similar spirit, Plotinus demotes the 'worldliness' of Stoic virtue, insofar as it does not recognize the importance of higher sources of virtue. This point is ably shown by Pauliina Remes.

When Plotinus demands that the philosopher rise above actions and choices (*praxeis kai eklogas*), he is not renouncing all action in the world but criticizing the Stoics for remaining on this level of virtue. While the Stoics fare better than the Epicureans by acknowledging a higher good than the pleasant, Plotinus believes that they mistake virtuous choices and actions in the world as constitutive of the good, and thus fail to see the higher, transcendental, intelligible realm that governs the sensible universe. This is the proper source of virtue (V.9.1 esp. 11.11–15). Nevertheless, 'becoming like god' happens in a bodily existence and in the world. That is why it was earlier stated that the wise man is full of good action (*kathorthōsis*; 1.2.6.1–2). He does not need the lower virtues as guides for practical action because he acts according to the higher principles (*epi meizous de archas hēkōn kai alla metra kat' ekeina praxeis*; 1.2.7.20–24). He knows when to act and when not to act, and all the actions flowing from his internal state of virtue are virtuous.²⁴

23. In fact, it is reported that Plotinus, Porphyry, and other philosophers worked extremely hard to obtain mutual understanding about highly difficult matters, such as the relation between soul and body (Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 13). This must have involved questions of clarification of key terms, raising further questions, a messy process of seeking linguistic understanding in a community of philosophical souls. Of course, this is a record of highly abstruse metaphysical discussion, a struggle for shared understanding, but far removed from civic affairs. For another interesting example, compare the exchanges between Porphyry and Amelius concerning thought and intellect (Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 18).

24. Remes, "Plotinus's Ethics of Disinterested Interest," 10–11.

The Stoics are right to dwell on the careful governance of assent, for the sake of managing actions and emotions for the welfare of the soul. Yet they fail to honor the ultimate grounds for virtue in the intelligibles. Similarly, the linguistic actions we pursue for everyday purposes, such as warning others about the hazards of military service in wartime, are ultimately grounded in the contemplative life. Plotinus insists that the contemplative life of the soul need not diminish in view of the concerns of earthly life. For our true nature is always occupied with Intellect, where our happiness and freedom lies (1.4[46].13; 6.8[39].6). This is what makes the actions of the sage in relation to other moral agents good.²⁵

So ordinary language use might have its place, but the sage also knows a higher order in politics, a *logos* which governs the political community. Plotinus conceives the state, when functioning well, as a harmony. The civic harmony is one of the harmonies that the soul encounters in fulfilling its destiny in association with body, and its aspiration beyond the grasp of body (4.3[27].9–18). Plotinus describes the higher, cosmic order in similar terms as the civic order. Members of the cosmic order (the stars, planets, and better souls) are subject to laws governed by the intelligibles (2.3[52].8, 1–9; 4.3[27].15, 7–22; 4.4[28].11, 1–13). In the terrestrial realm, it is good for the souls who live in the city to honor virtue and law (1.2[19].1, 46–53; 1.2[19].2, 13–26). In fact, it is possible for the laws of the city to be perfected by an ecstatic vision, as in the case of Minos (6.9[9].7, 23–6). Plotinus describes legislation and political harmony under the government of civic *logos* as follows (4.4[28].39, 11–22).

The *logos* of the All would be more in accordance with the *logos* that establishes the order and law of a city, which knows already what the citizens will do and for what reasons they will do it, legislating in view of all these things, weaving together by the laws all their experiences and actions and the rewards and punishments upon the actions, everything proceeding smoothly into harmony as if of its own accord. The signification is not (present) for the sake of this, to the end that there is signifying primarily; but when things happen in this way, different things are signified from different quarters. (This is the case) because all is unity and belonging to unity, and one thing is known by way of another, a cause in the light of the caused, the posterior as arising from the prior, the compound from the constituents, in that (the order) makes the constituents connected together.

This passage relates the city to the universal order under its cosmic legislation (cf. 2.3[52].8, 1–9; 4.3[27].16). To know the civic order is also to know the encompassing universal order governed by rational principles.

25. Kalligas, “Living Body, Soul, and Virtue,” 31–33; Remes, “Plotinus’s Ethics of Disinterested Interest,” 11–13.

As we find in several other texts of Plotinus, the universal order establishes the signification (*sêmasia*). However, this is a more sovereign kind of signification than linguistic signification, and it is known by a higher knowledge. It is the ethical and political expression of universal *logos*, regulating the predestined rewards and punishments for souls, maintaining the overall good amid the misfortunes of this world (3.2[47].13; 4.3[27].15–16). The intellect can know the causes and rational sequences of everything that happens as fated, for the outcomes of cosmic justice upon souls are ‘pre-signified’ (*prosêmainetai*) (4.3[27].16, 5–6). This higher signification is also active in the administration of the universe by cosmic intelligence (4.4[28].11, 1–13). In the All, different stars signify different things, under the governance of cosmic law (*dikê*). The signifying function (*sêmainein*, *sêmasia*) of the stars forecasts what will happen on earth, but the heavenly bodies do not enter into causal relationships (2.3[52].1–10). All this knowledge is open to the perfect man, who can know the course of future events, the necessary hardships to come in this life, and the general order which subsumes the parts of the whole (2.9[33].9; cf. 5.3[49].4). As suggested in 4.4[28].39, 11–22, ordinary citizens in the political community might also relate to this order by attending to some partial aspect of civic harmony, while the comprehensive order remains beyond awareness. Knowing the duties, customs, contributions, and concerns of civic life is to be situated within this more comprehensive scheme.

4. CONCLUSION

Plotinus’ theory of language should be related to his ethics and political philosophy, which shows a hierarchy of *logoi* in the cosmos. All forms of communication take shape under the intelligibles, the ultimate basis of linguistic understanding. Perhaps Plotinus offers a unique contribution to the history of philosophy in this area. Recent studies in philosophy and communication theory have reacted to the traditional view of ‘meaning transmission’, according to which utterance-transcendent meanings are transferred from one mind to another.²⁶ Plotinus shows how the transmission model can be avoided in an ancient theory of language, for language use fundamentally involves the recourse to higher principles, not the reception of intended meaning.²⁷

26. For example, take the increasingly popular contemporary view, in the spirit of the later Wittgenstein’s remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations* on ‘language games’, that makes the interaction between speakers in talk exchanges constitutive of meaning (the constitutive model).

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