Plotinus and the Intuitive Tradition of the West

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Plotinus (205-270 A. D.) is a pivotal thinker in the history of Western mysticism. He is the principle representative of Neoplatonism, the last major school of "pagan" Greek philosophy, yet his ideas were to have a considerable impact on the development of Christian thought and particularly Christian mysticism. The contemporary interest in mysticism has often compelled Westerners to delve into the great mystical traditions of East, particularly Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, while ignoring the West's own mystical traditions. However, the popular view that Eastern thought is intuitive, monistic, and experiential, whereas Western thought is exclusively rationalistic, dualistic, and dogmatic is an overgeneralization. A careful study of Eastern philosophy reveals examples of highly rationalistic, dualistic, and even dogmatic thought, while a similar study of the West shows instances of intuitive, experiential, and monistic ideas. Indeed, the range of philosophical ideas explored by both Eastern and Western philosophy are remarkably similar, even though the language in which they are stated is, as might be expected, quite different. In his book, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy,* Junjiro Takakusu has shown, for example, that Buddhism developed its own forms of idealism, realism, materialism, etc. in ways which were quite similar to the West.[1]

Certainly it is true that the intuitive and mystical tendency in the West, while influential, was never dominant, having been eclipsed consecutively by the rationalistic humanism of the Greeks, the dogmatic orthodoxy of medieval Christianity, and the scientific outlook which has been the main thrust of Western thought from the Renaissance to the present. The psychologist Carl Jung, however, held that the attempt to appropriate Eastern forms of spirituality to Western consciousness is but another example of the characteristic Western tendency to regard spiritual truth as external to the self. Rather than look for an introverted tendency outside of its own traditions, Jung recommended that the West seek the same values within ourselves, in the unconscious.

> Instead of learning the spiritual techniques of the East by heart and imitating them in a thoroughly Christian way—*imitatio Christi!*—with a correspondingly forced attitude, it would be far more to the point to find out whether there exists in the unconscious an introverted tendency similar to that which has become the guiding spiritual principle of the East. We should then be in a position to build on our own ground with our own methods. If we snatch these things directly from the East, we have merely indulged our Western acquisitiveness, confirming yet again that "everything good is outside," whence it has to be fetched and pumped into our barren souls.[2]

Jung goes on to suggest that if the West's search for inner values is to be genuine it must be

"grounded in our own history" with "full consciousness of the Christian values and of the conflict between them and the introverted attitude of the East."[3]   Jung's view can become narrowly ethnocentric if taken to an extreme, of course, and it can be legitimately countered that the study of non-Western philosophies has an invigorating effect on Western thought and spirituality by offering fresh perspectives at a time when many in the West have come to regard traditional Christianity as ossified and unable to satisfy what has become an urgent quest in the West for internal, intuitive insights.

Nonetheless a closer examination of the West's own history will reveal a rich and stimulating intuitive tradition which is all-too-often overlooked in the West's gaze eastward.   Even so-called "New Age" thinking (a catch-phrase for the West's current, somewhat fashionable, and variegated interest in the spiritual and the occult, science and quasi-science) is premised on some very ancient and perennial ideas, which are not confined to any particular historical or geographical context. The pursuit of a fully developed, wholistic personality and worldview requires the assimilation of psychological opposites, whether these are discovered in the conflicts within one's own culture or in the confrontation with other cultures.   This accounts not only for the West's interest in "inner-directed" Eastern spirituality and intuition but also for the East's fascination with "outer-directed" Western rationality and science.[4]   The central question for the West is whether the intuitive insights it discovers can be reconciled with the West's existing religious and social institutions or whether new wineskins will be needed to contain the new wine.

Plotinus is arguably one of the most profoundly intuitive philosophers the West has ever produced.   Not only has his influence on the mystical tradition of the West been seminal, but his ideas have invited comparison with the mystical ideas of Indian philosophy, Buddhism, and Taoism. In this article I shall make only parenthetical suggestions about some of the comparisions which are possible, and I shall be less concerned with showing the actual historical influence of Neoplatonism on Christian thought, which can be found in most histories of medieval philosophy, than with the more specifically philosophical and interpretative tasks of: (1) demonstrating how Plotinus's metaphysics can be related equally to theistic and nontheistic mysticisms; (2) showing how Plotinus's views on the relationship between knowledge and discourse are relevant to contemporary problems of mysticism and language; (3) contrasting a "vertical" interpretation of Plotinus, which attempts to assimilate the monistic perspective of Plotinus to a dualistic interpretation of orthodox Christianity, with a "horizontal" interpretation, which, I believe, remains closer to Plotinus's original intent and results in a more mystical and contemplative approach to religion; and (4) speculating on how Christianity could have developed in more intuitive directions had the medieval Church not, as it typically did, rejected the horizontal perspective as heretical.   The first and second problems are discussed in Part I of this essay, presented here; the third and fourth problems are discussed in Part II, published separately.

Theistic and Nontheistic Approaches to Plotinus.   Since the tendency to distinguish Neoplatonism historically from Platonism did not arise until the 19th Century, Plotinus and his followers, who were active roughly up until the Arab conquest of Alexandria in 642 A. D., professed themselves to be—and were contemporaneously regarded as—Platonists.   While the philosophy of Neoplatonism

departed in several significant ways from the thought of Plato, it was nonetheless constructed on certain key Platonic concepts. Plato had made a stark distinction between the empirical world of sense and the ideal world of "forms" or ideas. Ideas alone are ontologically real; only they have being (*ousia*). Whatever is perceived through the senses is only a shadow or an image of reality. Since the actual circles we perceive with the senses, for example, are imperfect and mutable, they do not have the same degree of reality as the idea of a circle, which is perfect and immutable. That which we perceive with our senses is constantly in a state of change, but the world of ideas remains eternal and changeless. If, for example, all the circles that we see in the empirical world were to mysteriously disappear, the *idea* of a circle would nonetheless continue to exist, and we would still be able to draw a circle precisely because the idea continued to exist. Its existence, moreover, is known to the mind through reason, and not to the senses through observation.

In Book VI of *The Republic* Plato had elevated the Idea of the Good above all other ideas, comparing it to the sun:

> You will agree that the Sun not only makes the things we see visible, but also brings them into existence and gives them growth and nourishment; yet he is not the same thing as existence....And so with the objects of knowledge: these derive from the Good not only their power of being known, but their very being and reality; and Goodness is not the same thing as being, but even beyond being, surpassing [or *transcending*] it in dignity and power.[5]

The Idea of the Good can be further identified with the One, which Plato had argued hypothetically in the *Parmenides* is ineffable and unknowable.

Plotinus seized on Plato's imagery of the sun, the Idea of the Good, and the concept of the One, taking them as a single, unified principle which could explain the whole of existence. *Enneads* IV. 3. 17 contains a succinct schematic summary of Plotinus's thought:

> For there is a kind of centre, and around this a circle shining out from it, and beyond these another, light from light: but outside these there is no longer another circle of light but this next circle through lack of its own light needs illumination from another source.[6]

The center and the first two concentric circles surrounding it form a triad consisting of three stages or *hypóstases*: the center represents the One, the first inner circle *noûs* (mind), and the second circle *psychê* (soul). The third circle, which represents *hŷle*, or matter, can not be classified as a *hypóstasis* because Plotinus held that matter does not exist by itself, properly speaking, but only by virtue of the illumination it receives from *psychê*.

The fact that there are three *hypóstases* does not undermine Plotinus's essential monism because he held that *noûs* and *psychê* were both emanations of the One. The One, overflowing with creative energy, "produces" *noûs*, which in turn "produces" *psychê*, which in turn "produces" matter. (The "producing" is a logical, not a temporal, sequence.) Without this process of creation the One would

have remained mere potentiality, but through the emanation process the One actualizes itself. Nonetheless, this actualization process produces emanations which proceed further and further from the center, the One, thus necessitating a spiritual movement back to the One, that is, a mystical rejoining of that which *emanates* and that which is *emanated*.

The One is both transcendent and immanent—transcendent in that it cannot be limited to any one particular thing and immanent in that it is the ground of everything that exists. On the one hand, while the One is the source of all existence, it cannot itself be a constituent part of existence, for if it were only a part it would not then be the whole. The One cannot be reduced to any particular being and is in this sense, as Plato had also speculated of the Idea of the Good, "beyond being," or transcendent. On the other hand, the very notion of the One demands that it be immanent, or omnipresent, since if it is All, there is no place where it cannot be. *Enneads* V. 5. 10 states,

> That Source, having no prior, cannot be contained: uncontained by any of those other forms of being, each held within the series of priors, it is orbed round all, but so as not to be pointed off to hold them part for part; it possesses but is not possessed. Holding all—though itself nowhere held—it is omnipresent, for where its presence failed something would elude its hold. At the same time, in the sense that it is nowhere held, it is not present: thus it is both present and not present; not present as not being circumscribed by anything; yet as being utterly unattached, not inhibited from presence at any point.[7]

In this passage, the word "omnipresent" relates to God's immanence, while the opposite phrase, "not present," relates to his transcendence. Since the One is a perfect unity and cannot be divided, it embraces all that is, including particular beings and therefore human individuals. *Noûs* and *psychê*, encompassed by the One, are thus both cosmic and individual. The individual *noûs* is an instance of universal *noûs*; the individual *psychê* an instance of universal *psychê*. (The identification of individual mind with universal mind is reminiscent of the Indian identification of atman with Brahman in the *Upanishads*. Plotinus also used the identification of individual soul with universal soul as proof for the soul's immortality, and both Indian philosophy and Plotinus set forth doctrines or reincarnation: as the individual purifies himself he progressively becomes absorbed in the One.) There is an element of pantheism in this conception, but Plotinus fails to qualify as a pantheist in the technical sense because while he regards *noûs* and *psychê* as monistic emanations of the One, he does not go so far as to equate the One with matter. He cannot, in fact, because he holds that matter, in the technical sense, does not exist—a stance which enables him to avoid dualism and preserve the monistic qualities of his system.

Matter, which lies below *psychê* at the very bottom of the hierarchy, only exists so far as it takes on form, which is provided by the archetypes as mediated through *psychê*. Otherwise matter is simply raw, unshaped "stuff." And since we cannot imagine matter without form (or formless matter), matter is real only to the extent that it has form—and even then what is real is not the matter itself but the form or idea. We can, however, imagine form without matter, eg. the idea of a circle, as Plato held, and thus maintain the ultimate reality of ideas. Matter itself, then, does not

participate in being, or in ultimate reality. Just as light eventually dims into darkness, so being eventually fades into non-being. As the schema in *Enneads* IV. 3. 17 indicates, the "third circle" does not generate light on its own, but rather "needs illumination from another source." Without that light, it is darkness; it is nothing; it does not exist.

The inclusion of the concept (if not the reality) of matter in Plotinus's system has the effect of making the schema a tetrad rather than a triad. The figure of a tetrad, interesting from the point of view of Jungian psychology but at variance with the conventional interpretation that the *hypō-stases* constitute a triad or trinity (in the full sense of three-in-one), provides a parallel to the equally unconventional schema of a Christian tetrad consisting of the Trinity plus Satan. But whereas Satan is unconditionally evil, matter for Plotinus is more ambiguous. Since it is nothing, it is evil; but precisely because it is nothing it is also pure potentiality. Matter is evil only to the extent that it is not illumined by the higher *hypōstases*, that is, to the extent that it remains dark and thus nonexistent. As with Augustine, influenced by Neoplatonism on this point, evil is therefore not so much an active principle which stands in opposition to good, as it is the negation or the absence of good—a failure of that which is lower to realize a higher potential. The recurring theme of potentiality actualizing itself, or making itself real, prefigures the notion of self-actualization in humanistic psychology. It was also, of course, a primary source of Christian thinking on spiritual growth—i. e., the individual's moving towards the ideal and archetypal image of Christ.

The problematic nature of matter in Plotinus's thought seems to be matched by the problematic nature of the One. In other words, the problem concerning the sense in which matter exists or does not exist seems parallel in some ways to the problem of describing how the One is both the source of being, yet beyond being. While Plotinus often spoke metaphorically of the One as a source of light, it is interesting to note that in the imagery of the concentric circles given in *Enneads* IV. 3. 17 the One exists as a *point*, which in mathematical terms has no extension and therefore occupies no space. As we have seen, since the One is no-one-thing, there is a sense in which it, like matter, can be described as "nothing," as not existing in the usual sense of the word. If nothing can be predicated of the One, neither can its existence, as such, be predicated.

The Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius also spoke of God as nothing (*oudēn*). But the "nothingness" of the One, or of God, is still quite different from the "nothingness" of matter. Just as Buddhism, with its similar doctrine of the Void, periodically has to defend itself from charges of nihilism, so the *mu*-like character of the One invites the charge that the One "doesn't really exist." Plotinus would counter that it is precisely because the One is beyond being that it cannot be limited to a *particular* being, and therefore cannot "exist" in the same way that an idea, an object, or an image exists. The identification of the One with matter results in pantheism, which should be distinguished from monism. If ultimate reality is the One + something else, i. e., matter, as pantheism holds, the One is no longer one. Monism treats the One simply as one, albeit a One which emanates into multiple forms.

The rejection of pantheism, however, should be not be construed as a rejection of the immanent qualities of the One. Matter, to the extent that it is illumined by the higher *hypōstases*, embodies archetypes of the higher ideas, and the contemplation of nature can itself be conducive to the experience of oneness. This accounts for why Plotinus could conceive of matter itself as evil, yet

describe the world of nature in almost Franciscan language. The natural world, the world we live in, is permeated with the One, as emanated through *noûs* and *psychê*. Everything, including inanimate objects, are "alive" because the entire cosmos has been animated by *psychê*—a notion with deep roots in primitive animist culture. The traditional view of spirit and matter as being at "war" with each other is thus mitigated by the fact that they are also *united* in humanity and in nature. Despite Porphyry's claim that Plotinus was "ashamed of being in the body" and desiring at the time of his death to "bring back the god in us to the divine in the All,"[8] the notion of humanity and the world as being totally infused with a divine presence softens some of the other-worldliness traditionally ascribed to Neoplatonism. The monistic outlook of Plotinus does not seem to permit a sharply differentiated concept of "other," i. e., a dualistic split between what is *this*-worldly and *other*-worldly.

Nonetheless, within the one metaphysical reality there is a two-fold process: the creative emanation of the One which makes itself immanent in all that exists, and the longing of that which has been emanated to transcend itself and return to the source. It is precisely this tension between the immanent and the transcendent which provides for the possibility of both a *theistic* interpretation of Plotinus, which emphasizes the transcendence of the One and the gap between "emanator" and "emanated" (Creator and creature), and a *nontheistic* interpretation which stresses the immanence of the One and thus the essential oneness of emanator and emanated. The theistic interpretation, which of course became the standard Christian interpretation, sees the need for "fallen" humanity to return to God via the mediation of the archetypal Christ; Christian mysticism is thus the union, or better the reunion, of God and humanity. Nontheistic mysticism, on the other hand, basing itself on the idea of immanence and oneness, holds that it is simply unnecessary to reunite that which has never been separated in the first place. Thus, the concept of "God" is rendered unnecessary since it no longer serves to distinguish, in dualistic fashion, between the divine and the worldly. (The concept of "the worldly" can equally be rejected.) All concepts of the divine are rendered meaningless by the experience of the divine. One is no longer concerned with the *thought* of God, which necessitates thinking about something distinct from oneself, but with the *experience* of God in oneself here and now, which requires absolutely no conceptualizations.

The notion of nontheistic mysticism, while characteristic of Buddhist mysticism, has only achieved the serious attention of Western thinkers in the twentieth century. The German philosopher Fritz Mauthner spoke of *gottlose Mystik*, or godless mysticism, as early as 1925. More recently Eric Fromm defined his religious position as "nontheistic mysticism," devoting several pages of his book *You Shall Be as Gods* to the problem of nontheistic mystical experience. Unlike Mauthner, who was undoubtedly influenced by atheistic and Buddhist sources, Fromm looked at his conception of nontheistic mysticism as a logical extension of the progressively developing idea of God contained in the Old Testament. God is sequentially seen as tribal diety, arbitrary ruler, constitutional monarch, the nameless God, and finally, the God "...of whom no essential attributes can be predicated."[9] In the same way, I would suggest that the ambivalent characterization of the One and of God as "beyond being," "nothing," or "non-being" by Plotinus and Neoplatonic Christian thinkers makes possible a nontheistic interpretation of Christian mysticism. That is, despite the presumably monotheistic character of Western religion, nontheistic mysticism can in fact be derived

from Judaic and Christian sources as well as from Hindu and Buddhist sources (just as theistic mysticisms have been derived from Hinduism and Buddhism).

Fromm notes that the dualistic split between God and man was initially a positive experience because it involved despiritualizing nature into order to make room for unimpeded human activity. In a similar vein, Peter L. Berger writes that "...the transcendentalization of God and the concomitant 'disenchantment of the world' open up a 'space' for history as the area of both divine and human actions."[10] Ironically, then, theism itself is responsible for the alienation of spirituality from humanity and from nature. By removing God conceptually, if not literally, from earth (immanence) to sky (transcendence), two distinct spheres were created: a "lower" secular sphere for human activity and a "higher" divine sphere for spirituality. God is conveniently "gotten rid of" in this schema. No longer is the spiritual an integral part of the world or of human consciousness. The end result is sterility—a truncated monism, i. e., materialism, which accepts the sole reality of matter, and sees the world around us as totally devoid of spiritual meaning. Nietzsche's proclamation that God is dead is thus nothing more than a logical extension of the doctrine of the transcendence of God, unmitigated by a similar emphasis on God's immanence.

In ethical terms, the alienation of the spiritual from the material results in the notion of a transcendent, all-powerful, and good God "up there" who is ultimately in control, and who thus alleviates humanity from final responsibility for taking care of the evil going on "down here." The emphasis on God's transcendence in traditional theology leads humanity to accept itself as weak, unempowered, evil, in a state of original sin, and thus to look for salvation outside from God (i. e., through Christ). No provision is made for humanity to actualize the divine principle within itself, and to thus enable it to take real responsibility for its world. Moving from the notion that a transcendent God has ultimate responsbility for the world to the notion that human beings, as potentially empowered by an immanent divine principle, themselves have ultimate responsibility for the world involves breaking what Fromm calls our "incestuous ties" to a God who in effect serves as a father-figure for us. The existentialist "despair" of living in a world devoid of meaning is at least in part the result of an adolescent rebellion against a view of God as father-figure.

Greater spiritual maturity will result only by locating the divine principle and ultimate meaning not in a transcendent God we are expected to "be obedient to," but in ourselves (i. e., the God within). Put simply, if theism encourages spiritual dependence, then the rejection of theism is a precondition for spiritual maturity. While the "divine" must be integrated into a fully developed personality, the transcendental principle itself remains intact as a corrective to a misguided egoism (spiritual pride) which sees the self already as "fully God" and thus with no prospect for a further realization of one's divine potential. God's infinity, or infinite transcendence, means that the individual realization process is limitless. There is always something more.

Mysticism and Knowledge. Obviously by discussing the One in pairs of seemingly contradictory opposites, such as "present" and "not-present," we are dealing in the kind of paradoxes which are characteristic of mysticism, and which are related both to the problem of knowledge and the problem of language. Plotinus uses the schema of the center and its concentric circles to serve the dual purpose of providing not only a metaphysical map of existence, but also a psychological map

of inner experience—a natural consequence of the identification of individual *noûs* with cosmic *noûs* and individual *psychê* with cosmic *psychê*. Each *hypôstasis* has its own appropriate function and type of knowledge. A slightly modified version of Thomas Michael Tomasic's outline of the various *hypôstases* and their functions is given in Figure 1.[11]

The One, which is beyond being, transcends knowledge and cannot be known, at least in a conceptual sense. It cannot even be known to itself. "Knowledge" at this level is "unknowledge" or *agnosîa*. To apprehend the One the individual must go beyond all particular concepts; one must think of nothing—literally no-thing. Even the word "think" is inappropriate here, because ultimately the One cannot be thought but only experienced. The experience is, of course, mystical experience which cannot be apprehended or discussed in rational terms. It is not an experience of thought, but of being, pure and simple, and the way to achieve it is to go beyond *thinking* about what is to a direct *experience* of what is. The parallel with the nonconceptual meditation engaged in by Zen Buddhists should be fairly obvious, even though Plotinus might be more willing to talk *about* the experience than a Zen practitioner would. The nonverbal and ultimately incommunicable nature of the experience itself does not mean that all language at all levels of discourse is useless.

Thought, or ideas proper, occur only at the level of *noûs*, which is the first emanation from the One, and here it is proper to speak of knowledge (*gnôsis*). *Noûs* apprehends the eternal Platonic ideas, which include, at the highest level, achronic ideas, which are atemporal and nonpropositional (eg., the simple concept of circularity which cannot itself be defined but which can be variously applied to specific concepts, such as circles or spheres), and at a lower level, synchronic ideas which are propositional, but atemporal, and true anaytically (or also by definition, eg., geometric definitions of a circle or a sphere). Since achronic ideas cannot be stated propositionally but only grasped intuitively, the type of knowledge which results is *theorîa*, or contemplative knowledge—knowledge which is nonverbal and beyond words. Synchronic ideas, which can be stated propositionally, result in *epistêmē*—cognitive, meditative, or speculative knowledge. Achronic and synchronic ideas are intuitive or intellective, that is, known to the self, and are the product of *nôesis*, or noetic activity. As such they constitute cognitive paradigms, or archetypes, which are universal (note that even intuitive and incommunicable achronic ideas are regarded as universal). The archetypes are public and objective, in that they can be known in exactly the same way to all minds, just as the idea of circularity or the definition of a circle can be neither private nor subjective, but is the same for everyone. This conception of universality blended very well with the Christian idea of catholicity and the notion that religious dogmas, like Platonic ideas, are both objectively true and universal.

Psychê embraces diachronic ideas which are temporal and synthetic (that is, applicable to particulars, eg., the description of a particular circle in terms of its circumference, diameter, or radius). They are the product of *dîanoia*, or discursive knowledge, which is known and shared with others. *Dîanoia* mediates between *noûs* and *psychê*. That is, the lowest activity of *noûs* is discursive reasoning as applied to synchronic ideas, whereas the highest activity of *psychê* is discursive reasoning as applied to diachronic ideas. The type of knowledge which results is *analogîa*, or analogical knowledge. Moving upward from *psychê* to *noûs* via *analogîa* provides analogies which compare images with ideas (eg., arriving at the idea of a perfect circle by seeing imperfectly drawn ones), whereas the downward movement provides analogies which compare ideas with

images (eg., using the idea of a perfect circle to recognize that the imperfectly drawn circle is an "imitation" of a perfect circle and thus can be classified as a circle). Plotinus would not have thought about it in this way, but the upward movement is quite similar to inductive reasoning, whereas the downward movement is similar to deductive reasoning. The *psychê* provides specific content for the universal archetypes, eg., *this* circle as opposed to the *idea* of a circle, and in this sense the particular is reflective of the general idea. Below diachronic ideas are *phantasía*, or images which are the product of the imagination, and *aísthesis* or sense perceptions. These, too, are reflections or imperfect realizations of the higher ideas. Imagination has primacy over sensation because imagination blends the contents of raw sense experience with discursive reason to produce a mental image; that is, imagination is midway between thinking and seeing, mixing thought and perception. Thus sensations come to be incorporated into images, which in turn lead one back, through discursive reason, into the higher realm of ideas.

The knowledge which *psychê* produces is not universal or philosophic, but *dôxa*, or perceptive— more the "practical" truth of poetry, parable, and moral theology. *Gnôsis*, or knowledge, is the exclusive perogative of *noûs*—*psychê* must content itself with mere *pístis*, or faith (in the sense of probable truth). The downward motion from the One to *noûs* to *psychê* constitutes the creative process of emanation, but as we have noted, as one moves further and further from the One, one moves further and further away from idea to image, from knowledge to faith, from light to darkness. The individual, now separated from the One, longs to return. Thus is initiated an upward motion back from the depths of *psychê* through *noûs* to the One. This process is accomplished through dialectic, which begins at the lowest levels with perception, and works its way up through discursive reasoning to the intuitive knowledge of *nôesis*, and beyond that to the mystical experience of the One. Dialectic, the exact reverse of the emanation process, moves from the particular and specific to wider and more encompassing generalizations of experience. I begin, for example, by seeing a group of circular shapes of different sizes on a piece of paper. Noting their similarities I conceive of them as a single shape, a circle, having no particular size. From this, I arrive at a definition of a circle, and from this the more general notion of circularity. Contemplating circularity gives rise to the notion of unity. And moving beyond the *thought* of unity to the actual *experience* of unity, I arrive at the One.

In its transcendental mode, as *agnosía*, the One is ultimately unknowable, at least in an intellectual sense—the same conclusion Plato had hypothetically reached in the *Parmenides*. Consider these two passages from *Enneads* V:

> It is, therefore, truly ineffable: for whatever you say about it, you will always be speaking of "something". But "beyond all things and beyond the supreme majesty of Intellect" is the only one of all the ways of speaking of it which is true; it is not its name, but says that it is not one of all things and "has no name", because we can say nothing of it: we only try, as far as possible, to make signs to ourselves about it.[12]

> ...[W]e have neither knowledge or thought of it. But if we do not have it in

knowledge, do we not have it at all ? But we have it in such a way that we speak about it, but do not speak it. For we say what it is not, but we do not say what it is....(13)

Compare these passages with those from the *Tao Te Ching* which describe the Tao as nameless and inexpressible.

In its transcendental mode, then, it is impossible to say what the One is, and we are limited to saying what it is not—or to remaining silent. We arrive then at a negative, or apophatic, use of language which is frequently found in Eastern philosophy—the Hindu *neti, neti* ["not-this, not-that"], the Taoist *wu ming* [無名 - "no name"], and the Zen *mu* ["nothing"]—and which in the West found expression in the negative theology of early Orthodoxy and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides. The passage from Exodus 3 which describes the encounter between Moses and God at the burning bush is frequently cited as a common scriptural source of both Christian and Jewish negative theology. When asked by Moses to give his name, God simply replied, "I AM WHO I AM." That is, God has no name; he simply is. Ultimately no other names can be given to him or statements made about his nature. The fact that God is, that he exists, is all that one is able to state in a positive and definitive sense about God in language—beyond this is only the *experience* of God.

All else, including the positive attributes and references given in scripture, are not to be taken as literal, but as metaphorical truths. Nonetheless, metaphorical truth, which relies on a positive, or cataphatic, use of language, is capable of expressing the One, since the One is also immanent. While language is not possible at the level of the One, language *is* possible at the levels of *noûs* and *psychê*. Just as *noûs* and *psychê* are emanations of the One, so the language appropriate to *noûs* and *psychê* reflects the One. One must not confuse the reality with its reflection, however—or as Zen would put it, the moon for the finger which points to it. To confuse the two is to commit idolatry, which is proscribed by the Old Testament belief in One God.

The tendency to draw a distinction between cataphatic and apophatic theology (historically more characteristic of Eastern Orthodox theology than of Roman Catholicism) was part of an attempt to come to terms with the problem of describing a God believed to be infinite and divine with words derived from finite, human experience. Cataphatic theology, or positive theology, attempted to describe God metaphorically or through the use of symbols (Plotinus's "signs"), recognizing that the symbols themselves only represent a spiritual reality which is ultimately trancendental to them— a formulation which holds forth the reality of an indwelling spiritual presence in icons and sacraments while avoiding the charge of idolatry. Apophatic, or negative theology, used language purely to state what God was not, emphasizing the fact that God could not be adequately described in finite language. The distinction between cataphatic and apophatic theology was developed by the Orthodox theologian Gregory Palamas to show that while it is impossible to know God's *essence*, it is nonetheless possible to know God through his *energies*. Imagine, metaphorically (and very Neoplatonically), God as a sun: if we look at the sun directly it is too bright to see anything; nonetheless everything we see in the world is lighted and warmed by the sun. We do not know the sun's essence, but its energies.

The influence of Neoplatonism on apophatic theology was immense, but came primarily not

through the writings of Plotinus, but rather indirectly though the writings of the Christian Neoplatonic philosopher, Pseudo-Dionysius (erroneously identified with Dionysius the Areopagite of Acts 17 : 34).[14]   The texts, which did not come to prominence until the 6th century and were influenced both by earlier Christian assimilations of Platonism and by the pagan Neoplatonic philosopher, Proclus, were regarded as both authentic and orthodox in the Middle Ages.   A remarkable, poetical passage from *The Divine Names*—a work which reads in places like a Christian version of the *Tao Teh Ching*—sums up many of the themes which Pseudo-Dionysius adapted from Neoplatonism and applied to Christian theology :

> The indefiniteness beyond being
>   lies beyond beings.
> The unity beyond intellect
>   lies beyond intellect.
> The one beyond thought is
>   unintelligible to all thinking.
> The good beyond logos:
>   ineffable to all logos
>   unity unifying every unity
>   being beyond being
>   non-intelligible intellect
>   ineffable logos
>   non-rationality
>   non-intelligibility
>   non-nameability
>   be-ing according to no being
>   cause of *being* to all; but itself: non-be-ing,
>   as it is beyond every being, and
> So that it would properly and knowingly
>   manifest itself about itself.[15]

Many names, or attributes, can be given to God, but in an ultimate sense God is nameless and can be talked about only negatively.   In Chapter III of Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* it is stated:

> In affirmative theology the logos descends from what is above down to the last,
> and increases according to the measure of the descent towards an analogical
> multitude.   But here, as we ascend from the highest to what lies beyond, the logos
> is drawn inward according to the measure of the ascent.   After all ascent it will
> be wholly without sound and wholly united to the unspeakable.[16]

Note, on the one hand, the "unspeakable" nature of "what lies beyond," which parallels the *agnosia* Plotinus attributed to the One, and the "analogical mulitude," not to be confused with Plotinus's

concept of *analogia*, which applies to statements which mediate between *noûs* and *psychê*, but which parallels *nöesis*, that is, statements made by *noûs* about the One which are properly regarded not as analogies, but as metaphors.

Of negative theology enough has already been said, but Tomasic notes that even cataphatic statements made about God, or the One, cannot be understood using the two-valued system of Aristotelian (and contemporary scientific) logic; a three-valued system is necessary which admits the possibility of metaphorical statements which are neither true nor false.[17] To simultanously claim both that "God is being" and that "God is not-being" is a contradiction; traditional western logic insists that propositions must be either true or false; the notion that both A and its negation ~A could be simultaneously true is inadmissable. Yet in a three-valued logic system the first proposition, "God is being," would be regarded as a metaphor, not as literally true, while the second statement, "God is not-being," which is a negation, could be regarded as literally true. The conjunction of M and T would result in metaphorical, not literal, truth (see Figure 2). From the point or view of literal scientific truth, God does "not exist." Yet from the point of view of metaphorical, religious truth, he does. This opens the possibility for an esoteric use of language (similar to that of Kukai and esoteric Buddhism) which psychologizes religious language, using it to describe inner spiritual states as well as objective metaphysical "realities."

I would take Tomasic's analysis a step further, however, and argue that a four-valued, or even a five-valued logic would be more appropriate to the philosophy of Plotinus. Certainly in describing monistic or highly mystical philosophies, a two-valued logic has severe limitations: monisms simply do not permit opposites. If all is One, there can be no opposite. Any attempt to positively describe the One would result in a proposition which could be negated. The negated proposition would in turn be just as descriptive of the One as the proposition it had negated—or just as invalid. Thus, contrary to Tomasic, I would hold that a statement which was *neither* true nor false would be more properly classified as negative or apophatic, whereas a statement which was metaphorically true but literally false would be more properly classified as metaphoric or cataphatic. Thus, in terms of a four-valued system, a statement could be either (1) true; (2) false; (3) both true or false [metaphorical truth, the language of cataphatic theology]; or (4) neither true nor false ["negative" truth, the language of apophatic theology]. The usual conceptions of true and false in (1) and (2) are only valid when describing relationships between parts, and are thus only *partial* truths, which must be distinguished from the more "wholistic" truths of (3) and (4)—quite the opposite from our usual Aristotelian way of thinking! Incidently (or perhaps not so incidently), these four categories roughly parallel the Madhyamikan logic of the Buddhist metaphysician, Nagarjuna. A fifth value-possibility is the total ineffability of the One, which would parallel Nagarjuna's *sunya*, or void (and, for that matter the Zen *mu*), but here, while we might be dealing with "truth" in a noverbal or mystical sense (i. e., an experiential sense), we clearly would not be dealing with the truth-value of *statements*.

In any event, whether these logical possibilities be accepted or not, the richness of interpretation possible in the early Middle Ages far exceeds the impoverished literal-mindedness of both modern science and of some contemporary forms of Christianity. Origen, who is believed to have studied with the same teacher as Plotinus, Ammonius Saccas, and who had attempted to work out a

doctrine of the Christian Trinity which has striking similarities to Plotinus's triad of the One, *noûs*, and *psychê* (and was ultimately rejected as heretical), also held that there are three possible levels of meaning in Scripture: the literal, the moral, and the allegorical or mystical, conforming to man's flesh, soul, and spirit (the parallel with Plotinus's matter, *psychê*, and *noûs* seems obvious). John Cassian developed these three levels further and added another, resulting in four levels of interpretation which became standard in the Middle Ages. "Jerusalem," for example, could be interpreted *literally* as the historical city of Jerusalem, *allegorically* as a prophetic reference to the Church, *tropologically*, or morally, as the individual soul, and *anagogically* as the heavenly City of God. The range of interpretations encompasses past, present, and future, as well as individual and communal spheres of experience—a much wider and more inspiring range than is permitted either by contemporary literalist fundamentalism or the scholarly "objectivity" of higher criticism. Referring again to Peter L. Berger's discussion of the religious roots of secularization we read, "If compared with the 'fullness' of the Catholic universe, Protestantism appears as a radical truncation, a reduction to 'essentials' at the expense of a vast wealth of religious contents."[18] Neoplatonic logic suggests one way of restoring poetic and spiritual meaning to religious truth.

NOTES

(1) Junjiro Takakusu, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1947).

(2) Karl Jung, "The Difference Between Eastern and Western Thinking" in *The Portable Jung* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), p. 490.

(3) *Ibid*.

(4) Hajime Nakamura regards the whole dichotomy as oversimplistic and suggests that Eastern thought has as much potential for universality as Western thought. See especially his introduction to *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964), pp. 12-32.

(5) Plato, *The Republic*, trans. F. M. Cornford, in W. T. Jones, *The Classical Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), p. 133.

(6) Plotinus, *Enneads* IV. 3. 17, trans. A. H. Armstrong, vol. 4 of the Loeb Classical Library edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 89.

(7) Plotinus, *Enneads* V. 5. 10, trans. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page (Chicago: William Benton, 1952), p. 232.

(8) Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books*, trans. A. H. Armstrong in vol. 1 of *Enneads*, p. 3 and p. 7 respectively.

(9) Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1966), p. 177.

(10) Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 118.

(11) *Cf*. Thomas Michael Tomasic, "Neoplatonism and the Mysticism of William of St.-Thierry" in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 55.

(12) *Enneads* V. 3. 13, trans. Armstrong, vol. 5, p. 117.

(13) *Enneads* V. 3. 14, trans. Armstrong, vol. 5, p. 121.

(14) A later, but equally important, attempt to restate Christian truths in the language of Neoplatonism was made by John Scotus Erigena in *De Divisione Naturae*, which drew heavily on the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius.

(15) Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology,* trans.　John D. Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), pp. 108-109.

(16) *Ibid*., pp. 217-218.
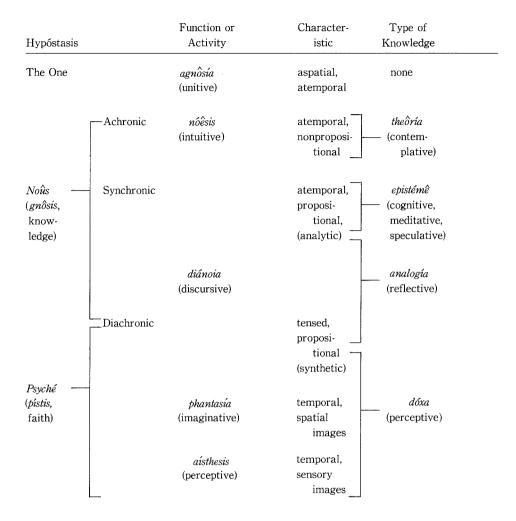
(17) *Cf*. Tomasic, pp. 58-64.

(18) Berger, p. 111.

Hypóstasis	Function or Activity	Character-istic	Type of Knowledge
The One	*agnôsía* (unitive)	aspatial, atemporal	none
	Achronic — *nôêsis* (intuitive)	atemporal, nonproposi-tional	*theôría* (contem-plative)
Noûs (*gnôsis*, know-ledge)	Synchronic	atemporal, proposi-tional, (analytic)	*epistémê* (cognitive, meditative, speculative)
	diánoia (discursive)		*analogía* (reflective)
	Diachronic	tensed, proposi-tional (synthetic)	
Psyché (*pístis*, faith)	*phantasía* (imaginative)	temporal, spatial images	*dóxa* (perceptive)
	aísthesis (perceptive)	temporal, sensory images	

Fig. 1: Outline of the *hypóstases* and their functions

	T	F	M
T	T	F	M
F	F	F	F
M	M	F	M

Fig. 2: Three-valued truth table with M as metaphor

Plotinus and The Intuitive Tradition of The West — I

Abstract

Richard Evanoff

This article is the first of a two-part inquiry into the relationship between Plotinus and the intuitive philosophical tradition of the West. The possibility of a nontheistic, as well as a theistic, interpretation of Plotinus's monism is presented. The relevance of Plotinus's views on knowledge and language to intuitive philosophy is also considered.

プロティノスと西洋の直感哲学の伝統 — I

摘　　要

リチャード　エバノフ

　本論はプロティノスと西洋の直感哲学の伝統との関係を考察する二部からなる研究の最初の部分である。本論では，プロティノスの一元論を有神論と同じように，自然主義的宗教観からも解釈できることを示す。また，プロティノスの知識観ならびに言語観と直感哲学との関連についても論じる。