

Werner Beierwaltes

The True Self

PREFATORY REMARK

It was primarily as an *interpres secretorum sive mysteriorum Platoniorum*¹ that Plotinus, after the classical age of Greek philosophy, took up its metaphysical potentials and expounded them with such a resolve to express their essential core and with such conceptual intensity that a new and consistent way of thinking could emerge from it and persevere. In a variety of ways, this way of thinking – either consciously or unconsciously – catered to the needs of an age of massive social change and spiritual insecurity.² For one thing, it put faith in the convincing and guiding power of thought. For another, it did not restrict itself to abstract concepts, but instead opened up thought to a dimension incommensurable with it. Either it expounded this dimension of and by itself, i.e. as it is *in* itself and the One, in deliberate daring of ever-growing precision, or it set it apart in radical difference from everything comprehensible in conceptual categories, instead pointing to it in metaphor and paradox. Far from being an absolutist claim of reason overestimating itself, therefore, this constant “rushing forth” of thought and speech over and above that which can be thought and said in precise language is a recognition of its own relativity in thought and speech.³

This opening up of thought and self-reflection to something incommensurable and, hence, to something unthinkable and un-sayable (ἄρρητον) proves to be a fundamental *religious* aspect of this mode of philosophizing. The objective of the motion of thought *and* going beyond is the One as the *Divine* in its most intensive degree.⁴ This self-transcendence of thought into union with the One itself, prepared by and rooted in reflection, is the highest philosophical *and* religious act. As such, it is, by its very nature, different from the attempts

¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Plotini divini illius e Platonica Familia Philosophi de Rebus Philosophicis Libri LIV in Enneades sex distributi ... per Thomam Guarinum*, Basel 1562, fol. ʹIII (Ficino’s prooemium to his translation of Plotinus first published in 1492).

² On that, see E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety. Some aspects of religious experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, Cambridge 1954. P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Mass. 1978.

³ Cf. my remark on the problem of language in: “Ferne und Gegenwart des Platonismus” (*Hegel et il Neoplatonismo*, ed. by Giancarlo Movia, Cagliari 1999, 251–264, here 263–264) and pp. 14. 37–38. 86. 109. 112–113. 139 below.

⁴ On the divinity of the Intellect and the One, see pp. 39–40.

undertaken, above all, since Iamblichus to gain *immediate* access to the Divine, as it were, in *theurgical* practice, which reduces or even replaces the validity of thought. Instead, it is characteristic of Plotinus's thought that both intentions, i.e. reflexivity and unity, are conceived of and carried out in a harmony of productive inseparability. As against the
 25 seductive allure of nonconceptual immediacy towards the intelligible and the absolute, Plotinus's remark holds true: μόνη δὲ λείπεται ἡ θεωρία ἀγοήτευτος εἶναι – “*theoria* or contemplation alone – as a mode of conceptual thought – remains incapable of enchantment”.⁵ Only a *theoria* conceived of and practiced along these lines justifies an explication of its own *inner* centre which, while pre- or super-reflexive itself, nevertheless
 30 guides thought. It is the aim and consummation of all philosophizing to become conscious of this being *beyond* thought and live in accordance with the norms deducible from it (περὶ τὸ ἐν φιλοσοφεῖν⁶).

In order to gain a true understanding of the rich substance of this very philosophizing, it is imperative that its aforementioned fundamental intentions be understood as one unity
 35 which as such continues to shape our interpretations.

We cannot hope to understand either the structure or the intention of Plotinus's thought by adhering to a habit still occasionally found today in declaring it a *system* in which Platonic concepts and terms have been further defined and, simultaneously, fixed in the process. For a long time, especially common handbooks of the history of philosophy were
 40 wont to construct (and thereby also “deconstruct”) Plotinus's “system of thought” primarily from above and in abstraction as a “pyramid of being” (with a tip *in* it), proceeding from the One (Hen) to Intellect (Nus) and the Soul (Psyché) and viewing them as a succession of “hypostases”. In turn, this inevitably gave rise to the impression that Plotinus was concerned, above all, with an exposition of an objectified order of “things”. Moreover, this fixation upon
 45 the so-called ladder of hypostases⁷ led these expositions to lose sight of the fact that a thinking of the One and a thinking of Nus – through and in Psyché – is intended to be undertaken for the sake of a *conscious life* led in accordance with the One. In other words, thinking of the one can never be a single isolated cerebral act, but must be the shaping aspect of a philosophical

⁵ IV 4,44,1.

⁶ VI 9,3,14.

⁷ For a genuinely Plotinian understanding of “hypostasis”, cf. C. Horn, *Plotin über Sein, Zahl und Einheit*, Stuttgart 1995, 15ff.

way of life.⁸ It is true that the three, i.e. the One, the Intellect and the Soul, must be viewed
 50 as being tied together as one “large life”,⁹ as Plotinus calls it, which is ultimately rooted in the
 One. Moreover, the question must be discussed how the procession of all reality from the One
 can be conceived of. Still, both questions must be discussed with regard to and on the basis
 of man’s own *self-knowledge*, i.e. in a reflection upon his deliberative insight into his own
 potentials and upon the awareness of his own ground working upon, yet transcendent to, him:
 55 “We are rooted in Him by converging towards Him”.¹⁰ From the experience of this very ground
 arises the imperative which accompanies and moves all acts of human thought and human
 emotion: ἀνάβαινε πρὸς ἐκεῖνον, “Ascend to Him”.¹¹

Naturally, there cannot be any doubt that the dynamic co-existence and co-action of
 the One itself (or the Good which is identical with it) as the One origin of all reality, i.e. of the
 60 time-less Intellect and the soul of the world and the soul of every single individual acting in
 time and space, binds realities that subsist in themselves. However, they cannot be grasped
 immediately in an abstract fashion or “from without”, as it were. Instead, they only reveal
 themselves adequately to a way of thinking which acquires awareness of its own potentials,
 as it is determined by a ground working in and constituting it, thus finding its own place within
 65 the whole: it is the middle or the boundary between the perception of objects of sensual
 experience “from without” and the intellection of purely intelligible being achieved in a turn
 “inwards” and “above itself” – in an inner ascent or, as Hegel put it with regard to the
 “Platonist enthusiasm” driving Plotinus’s philosophy, in the elevation “into the sphere of the
 motion of pure thought”.¹² This reversion of thought into itself is the precondition for its own
 70 transformation into the time-less and absolute Intellect revealing itself in it. The latter is both
 its “true self” and the precondition for a growing awareness that the *ground* of that very self
 transcends it in its “being”, or in its super-being, which constitutes and comprises all things.
 Hence, the awareness of the soul’s own “true self” enables it to gain an awareness of absolute

⁸ Crucial to a proper understanding of this aspect are the discussions by Paul Oskar Kristeller and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer on the “two-fold perspective in the philosophy of Plotinus” (cf. the “Bibliographical References”) which must be viewed as one unity inseparable in itself: a primarily objectively-ontological one of “things” and a primarily subjectively-“actual” view of reality as a whole. – Pierre Hadot has provided an exemplary account of the principal characteristic of Plotinian thought as a way of life in his monograph *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard*. On that, cf. my review in: *Gnomon* 72 (2000), 202–207.

⁹ V 2,2,26: ζωὴ μακρά.

¹⁰ 1,11,14–15: ἐνιδρύμεθα δὲ οἱ ἅν συννεύωμεν ἐκεῖ.

¹¹ V 1,3,3. V 5,4,1: ... δεῖ τὴν ἀναγωγὴν ποιήσασθαι εἰς ἓν καὶ ἀληθῶς ἓν

¹² *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (1833), Jubiläumsausgabe, ed. By H. Glockner, Stuttgart 1959, XIX 44.

transcendence, i.e. the One or Good, from the traces of its being and action in it. It holds true
 75 for the time-less and absolute Intellect and for the intellect tied to time and space alike: εἰς
 αὐτὸν γὰρ ἐπιστρέφων εἰς ἀρχὴν ἐπιστρέφει – “for in turning into itself (or towards itself) it
 turns to its principle.”¹³ And thus self-reflection or the self-reference of thought gaining
 awareness of itself is the precondition for man to achieve the aim of his emotional and
 conceptual effort: “seeing” or “contemplating” without separation, “being together with” or
 80 “uniting” in the ecstatic self-transcendence of discursive thought “with” the One or the Good
 which is identical with it as the origin of the reality of the whole of being, thought and life.

In this context, “*The True self*”, therefore, serves as the centre and point of departure
 of an awareness of the time-less Intellect, the pure Nus in itself, *and* the One itself. Thus, our
 initial reflections on “*Plotinus’s Concept of Intellect*” reveal the absolute form of being which
 85 is directed towards the self-reflection of thought in its question about its own proper self. In
 my exposition of the frequently-discussed Plotinian Nus, I have chosen an approach that is
 intended to open perspectives worth reconsidering: I seek to understand the time-less and
 absolute Nus in its essential characteristics of “Truth”, “Wisdom”, “Beauty”, “Loving Union” in
 such a fashion that these four – alongside others – may be viewed as identity statements
 90 about Intellect. They are all expressions of the self-reference or self-presence of absolute
 thought or its dynamic unity in varying conceptual expressions. As a consequence, Nus is
 revealed as the same and as different from each of these perspectives – as unity *in* difference.

“*The True Self*” deals with the connection between Soul and Intellect, the awareness
 of thought in the most intensive form of self-reference which leads to knowledge about the
 95 true self and, hence, to the proper form of human self-knowledge. At the same time, self-
 knowledge allows the soul to go beyond Nus and approach the One itself. The self-
 transcendence of thought into the experience of the One poses a formidable challenge to its
 capacity for language. – I consider my reflections upon the “True Self” as a correction of
 certain aspects of Plotinian thought which I myself developed in my *Self-Knowledge and the*
 100 *Experience of Unity* on Treatise V 3: *On the Knowing Hypostases*. At the same time, it is my
 stated aim to point out the systematic significance of this text for Plotinus’s own philosophy
 and for a historical development of the concept of self-reflection and self-consciousness.¹⁴ –
 In the context of the question of self-knowledge, *the One*, in the most intensive form of

¹³ VI 9,2,35–36.

¹⁴ For early modern philosophy, I have tried to show this – paradigmatically – for Schelling’s conception of the
 “I” in the chapter “Plotinus’s thoughts in Schelling” (pp. 187–195).

reflection, reveals itself both as the ground and the objective of the whole of this motion. In
 105 V 3, the One Origin of All Things is primarily shown to be a reality *prior* to anything, *prior* to
 every being and individual, the entirely simple that is without relation and, hence, without
 thought and that which cannot be expressed in language, but must be delimited in negations.
 In other words, it is the aim and consummation of one-not-thinking-anymore, but one
 touching in intuitive awareness, in ecstatic union with Him, prepared by universal abstraction
 110 towards pure Letting Go: ἄφελε πάντα – “Let go of all things”.

“*Causa sui*” provides a different perspective on the One. In his attempt to render
 comprehensible in affirmative expressions the One/Good in its absolute freedom, Plotinus
 defines it in VI 8: *On the Freedom and the Will of the One* as the cause, origin and ground of
 itself (ἄτιον ἑαυτοῦ), i.e. as its own active self-creation in the will for itself. It is another aspect
 115 of the One upon which the “true self” should reflect in yet another *approximation* to it
 without, however, claiming to annul in any way even for the sake of fiction that which is
 ineffable in itself. As is shown by the hermeneutic caveat of the οἷον (“as it were”) qualifying
 each affirmative expression, this attempt is deliberately self-reflective. As in V 3, the extent of
 the precision or the imprecision of language is drawn attention to, as language, in its very use,
 120 is defined by difference and solely references objects defined by difference. It, therefore,
 cannot furnish a precise expression of what is aimed at in absolute identity or in-different
 unity. When we negatively delimit or circle the One, expressing it in an affirmative fashion, we
 do not reach to It itself. Instead, we only point to It and, still engaging in this language of
 difference, constantly remain with ourselves. – I view Plotinus’s notion of the One as the
 125 ground of itself as the beginning of a development which we witness in imposing intensity in
 Marius Victorinus, John Scotus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart and Nicolas of Cusa: God as
 Trinitarian *self-constitution*. In this self-constitution, the *co-action* of the theories of Being,
 Thought and the One, derived mainly from the Platonist tradition, became key to the divine
 First Principle.

130 There were objections to the Plotinian definition of the One as the ground of itself as
 early as late antiquity: *Proclus*, citing his own concept of the One as that which is strictly un-
 relational, views it as a destruction of the concept and the reality of the pure One. Plotinus’s
 own attempt at affirmative expressions in VI 8 was taken up and modified in “*Proclus’s Theory*
of the Authypostaton – the Self-Caused” which is realized as unity *in* or *of* the many in the
 135 realm of plurality.

Plotinus's philosophizing, the basic form of Neoplatonist thought, is crucial to an adequate understanding of theory potentials that have shaped the history of philosophy and theology and of intellectual history in general, whether as the foundation or the form of reflection of certain fundamental notions of Christianity. Among them are the Trinitarian unity of being undergoing motion in reflection both in itself and in God's creative self-explication in his goodness and the method of negative, affirmative and symbolic theology. Likewise, we must consider the structure of the world in Boethius and Chartres Platonism, which draws upon a Neoplatonist interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus*, against the backdrop of the reception history of Neoplatonism. This also applies to the philosophical foundations of Christian spirituality and mysticism in particular, the new expression of the Plotinian concept of the beautiful in Renaissance art and, above all, the further refinement of the fundamental Platonic-Neoplatonist question of the relationship of the One to the many represented by the metamorphoses of the most diverse kinds of theories and life interests until German Idealism. In several publications of mine, I have followed my interest in these possibilities for further explication offered by the fundamental questions of Platonism in seeking to elucidate these and other aspects of the reception history of original Neoplatonism. Hence, I shall likewise conclude my present reflections upon the principal theoretical aspects of Plotinus with "*Plotinus's Thoughts in Schelling*". As can in part be verified historically, *Schelling's* philosophy of self-consciousness and subjectivity, his concept of the self-affirmation of the absolute or God, despite certain differences, are closely related in philosophical substance to Plotinus's concept of the true self, of the Intellect and of the One. For Schelling's concept of nature and of art and, on the other hand, that of matter, it is also highly illuminating to take a look at Plotinus.

(*Das wahre Selbst. Studien zu Plotins Begriff des Geistes und des Einen*, Frankfurt am Main:

Vittorio Klostermann, 2001, 9–15)