

The Flight of the All-One to the All-One: The φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον as the Basis of Plotinian Altruism*

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■ Abstract

It has become commonplace to contrast Plotinus's spirituality with Christian spirituality by portraying the former as solipsistic and the latter as communal. In particular, this critique has centred around Plotinus's description of mystical ascent as a "flight of the alone to the alone" and his presentation of Plato's *Phaedrus* as an exhortation to "work on your own statue." Yet, should one understand the One as a supreme unity, it would appear that the Plotinian *unio mystica* renders the mystic supremely unified with the rest of being. Accordingly, this article emphasizes Plotinus's "inclusive monotheism" in order to argue that the "flight of the alone to the alone" should be understood as a movement towards the supreme unity that underlies reality. The unificatory effects of this ascent are emphasized by the way in which Plotinus, in both his life and works, depicts teaching as a common response to *henosis*. This didactic turn, it is argued, is a response to glimpsing the deep unity of reality, which expands the mystic's sphere of concern to include the "other" as another self.

■ Keywords

Plotinus, Platonism, monotheism, monism, mysticism, *Unio Mystica*, *Henosis*, apophaticism

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■ Introduction

Scholars frequently critique Plotinus on the grounds of a solipsistic spirituality or an autoerotic understanding of love by appealing to two specific passages: the first passage is Plotinus's enigmatic description of mystical ascent as a *φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον* (flight of the alone to the alone), and the second is his presentation of the *Phaedrus*' ἄγαλμα (statue) passage, which is an exhortation to work on the statue of the beloved, as an injunction for one to work on one's own statue. The common interpretation of the former passage is that this "flight" detaches the mystic from community life, and an often-stated critique of the latter passage is that Plotinus has redirected the *ἔρωσ* (*eros*) that Plato intended for a beloved towards the self, resulting in autoeroticism. Yet, Plotinus, who experienced *henosis* no less than four times in the company of Porphyry, lived a life that was deeply communal. It is clear, therefore, that Plotinus's mystical experiences did not hinder him from taking care of orphans, continuing his teaching, and being "fully present" to his friends in conversation. In order to account for this discrepancy, the present article suggests that a greater weight ought to be placed on Plotinus's "inclusive monotheism," wherein the One is understood as a primordial unity that undergirds the world. Thus, by understanding the One as a primordial unity, the "flight of the alone to the alone" should be understood as an ascent to greater unity with the rest of being, rather than a fragmentation therefrom. Moreover, by understanding the One in the light of "inclusive monotheism" and emphasizing the positive attributes of the One, especially *ἔρωσ*, a non-autoerotic understanding of Plotinus's presentation of the *Phaedrus* will be proposed.

The present article proceeds by reviewing contemporary portrayals of Plotinus's presentation of the *Phaedrus* and his "flight of the alone to the alone" as "narcissistic." In order to set up a metaphysical foundation for a response to these critiques, an account of the One as a hyper-abundance and a supreme unity is given. In the same section, the One's positive attributes are considered. The attribution of love to the One is of particular interest, for it has been observed by some that the One's perfect, self-directed love overflows into creation. The "flight of the alone to the alone" is, thus, understood as a flight towards greater unity with the rest of being because it is a flight towards the supreme unity. Next, Plotinus's interpretation of the *Phaedrus* is presented with the overflow of the One's self-directed love in mind. It is suggested that Plotinus is making explicit an implicit first step of working on one's own statue before working on the statue of the beloved; this suggestion is bolstered by the way Hermias interprets this passage in his fifth-century commentary on the *Phaedrus*. Moreover, a crucial shift from the third to second person in Plotinus's discussion of this passage seems to suggest that Plotinus is at work on his student's statue. Finally, Plotinus's didactic response to mystical experience is considered as a pragmatic reason to believe that mystical experience expands one's sphere of concern, indicating that *unio mystica* (mystical union) renders the mystic more unified with the rest of being than before.

■ Spiritual Solipsism: Contemporary Criticism of Plotinus

There has been a tendency amongst scholars who make reference to Plotinus, and less so amongst Plotinian scholars, to claim that Plotinus propounds a solipsistic spirituality. As noted, this critique often focuses on two passages. The first is Plotinus's presentation of the *Phaedrus*' exhortation to "work on the statue of the beloved" (*Phaedr.* 254b7) as an injunction to work on one's own statue. The second is Plotinus's enigmatic claim that the ascent to the One is a "flight of the alone to the alone."¹

Kristeva caustically charges Plotinus with producing a new form of inward-looking narcissism. In response to Plotinus's presentation of the *Phaedrus*, she writes,

Platonic dialogism is transformed, with Plotinus, into a monologue that must indeed be called speculative: it leads the ideal inside a Self that, only thus, in the concatenation of reflections, establishes itself as an *internality*. To the narcissistic shadow, a snare and a downfall, it substitutes autoerotic reflection, which leads ideal Unity inside a Self that is illuminated by it.²

Kristeva seems to draw on an interpretation of Plotinus that stems from Harder, who writes, in his commentary on this same passage, "The Platonic image of the sculptor (*Bildhauerbild*) (one of the roots of our concept of 'education' [*Bildung*]) applies to an act of education (*Erziehung*); in Plotinus this becomes self-education (*Selbsterziehung*) – just as Platonic eroticism becomes a spiritual autoeroticism (*Autoerotik*)."³ Yet, Kristeva's charges against Plotinus are also made on the basis of the "flight of the alone to the alone." Thus, she writes,

¹ Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9 [9] 11.51. Plotinus's Greek in this article is drawn from the *editio minor*, *Plotini Opera* (ed. Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer; 3 vols.; OCT; Oxford: Clarendon, 1964–1982); translations are from Plotinus, *Enneads* (trans. A. Hilary Armstrong; 7 vols.; LCL 440–45, 468; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966–1988), with occasional modifications noted below. Citations of Plotinus are cited by Ennead number, treatise number, the chronological number of the treatise in square brackets, chapter, and verse.

² Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* (trans. Leon S. Roudiez; New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 109 [italics in original]. A recent commentary on this text from Plotinus agrees with this transformation of dialogue form: "The other effect of this indirect reference is to make us comprehend that the love of the beautiful, such as Plotinus conceives it (it is love of the Good and it aims to identify with its object), is, therefore, also, as this reflexive movement shows, at the same time, self-love and self-knowledge. To see yourself is to know yourself. Therefore, we see that Plotinus, here, departs considerably not only from the dialectical movement of the 'Symposium,' whose point of departure is the experience and the love of beauty in others, and the ultimate end is the revelation of the beautiful in itself, but also from the dialectical approach proposed in the Republic (VII, 532 b–535 a), which has the knowledge of the Good for an end" (Plotinus, *Traité I. Introduction, traduction, commentaire, notes et indices* [ed. and trans. Anne-Lise Darras-Worms; vol. 1 of *Les écrits de Plotin*; Paris: Cerf, 2007] 229–30) [unless otherwise noted, translations from French and German are my own].

³ Plotinus, *Plotins Schriften* (ed. Richard Harder; 6 vols.; Philosophische Bibliothek 211–15, 276; Hamburg: Meiner, 1956–1971) 1b: 381.

A melancholy, pathetic individual, Plotinus did not seek an object to halt his anguish. He lashed himself down to the archetype or rather to the source of objecthood—image, reflection, representation, speculation. By totalizing them, by unifying them within the inner space of the Self, “alone with him who is alone,” causing Platonism to topple over into subjectivity.⁴

Those who make the case for Plotinus’s solipsism on the basis of the “flight of the alone to the alone” frequently wish also to contrast this passage with Christian spirituality. Louth repeatedly uses this phrase as a way to distinguish between Platonism and Christianity. Louth bemoans the effects of Plotinian spirituality on community when he writes,

‘The flight of the alone to the Alone’: the very familiarity of that phrase is a measure of the influence of Plotinus. It also enshrines the essence of the mystical quest as he sees it: a solitary way that leads to the One, sovereign in solitary transcendence. The One has no concern for the soul that seeks him; nor has the soul more than a passing concern for others engaged on the same quest: it has no companions. Solitariness, isolation; the implications of this undermine any possibility of a doctrine of grace—the One is unaware of those who seek it, and so cannot turn towards them—or any positive understanding of the co-inherence of man with man. These limitations, as we shall now begin to see, disclose a radical opposition between the Platonic vision and Christian mystical theology.⁵

The assumption is clear: if the One, being the highest perfection, focuses itself on the best possible reality, which is itself, it will not think about others. Louth, in turn, attributes the One’s lack of “concern” for that which is posterior to Itself to the mystic, suggesting that those who embark on this mystical quest will not care for those around them. This line of argumentation may lead one to wonder: Is this actually the nature of the One?

Elsewhere, Louth makes the contrast between Plotinian and Christian spirituality even more acute when he pits Plotinus’s solipsistic mysticism against Augustine’s communal, Christian vision. He writes, “For Plotinus the soul’s ascent to God was the ‘flight of the alone to the Alone,’ but for Augustine there is always the conviction that it is with others, in some kind of *societas*, that we are to seek God.”⁶ Yet, Kirby interprets Augustine’s relationship to Plotinus with regard to *unio mystica* in a different context, arguing that Augustine represents a Plotinian form of Christianity

⁴ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 117. Although no citation is noted, it would seem that Kristeva is dependent upon Bréhier for the caricature of Plotinus as a melancholic in his introduction to Plotinus, *Ennéades* (ed. Émile Bréhier; 6 vols.; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1924–1938) 1: vii–ix. If so, Pierre Hadot has poked enough holes in this assertion that it is no longer tenable; see: Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus, or, The Simplicity of Vision* (trans. Michael Chase; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 76–77.

⁵ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 50.

⁶ Andrew Louth, “Augustine,” in *The Study of Spirituality* (ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 134–45, at 136–37.

by ranging Plotinus and Augustine's contemplative, unmediated spirituality against the liturgical spirituality of Iamblichus and Dionysius.⁷

This same "flight of the alone to the alone" has also been used as a point on which to distinguish Plotinus from his elder, Christian contemporary, Origen. Hengstermann, although greatly sympathetic to reading Platonism and Christianity as complementary, delineates the two as follows,

Thus, it is διὰ τὰ πολλὰ, i.e. for the sake of his creation, that the God-head, in downright defiance to common Neoplatonic theology, becomes actively involved in the fate of the distracted multitude. Secondly, whereas Neoplatonic salvation, famously, is conceived of primarily as a φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον with the political aspect being marginal at best, Origen, the Christian Neoplatonist, envisages salvation as a historical process of universal, even cosmic scope.⁸

Here, in a similar fashion to Louth, the claim is that the "flight of the alone to the alone" causes the Platonist to retreat from worldly affairs. Henry also propounds this reading, noting, "Man is for Plotinus fundamentally isolated. . . . In the pursuit of happiness, in the search for God, society has no place. The sage is a monad, basically unrelated to any other monad. No solidarity exists of man with man, whether in good or in evil. How different from Judaism and Christianity."⁹

Bréhier, with his "l'orientalisme de Plotin" (the orientalism of Plotinus) thesis, made the case that Plotinus's spiritual egoism, as observed in the "flight," was the result of Indic influence on Plotinus's thought. He avers,

These are traits characteristic of the religious doctrine of the Hindus as expressed in the Upanishads. This is why it has seemed to me that the system of Plotinus must be linked to Indian thought. What relates Plotinus to Indian thought is his decided preference for contemplation, from which he derives

⁷ W. J. Torrance Kirby, *Richard Hooker, Reformer and Platonist* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) 34: "Augustine is highly critical of Porphyry's account of the human nature as so far 'descended' into the flux of becoming and without immediate access to intellection of the divine that it must invoke the 'theurgic arts' in order to effect mediation by degrees. Augustine expresses admiration for the contrary opinion of Plotinus that the intellectual soul 'has no nature superior to it except God, Who made the world, and by Whom the soul itself was made.' The Plotinian intellectual soul is illuminated directly by the divine sun, and thus is understood to be independent of the agency of angelic mediators. In many respects the logic of Porphyry's pagan account of the mediating hierarchy of daemonic powers bears a close resemblance to the Pseudo-Dionysian theology"; see also *ibid.*, 39: "In the Pseudo-Dionysian cosmology, which follows the model established by Iamblichus and Proclus"; John Peter Kenney, *Contemplation and Classical Christianity: A Study in Augustine* (OECES; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 33–34, 155–57.

⁸ Christian Hengstermann, "The Neoplatonism of Origen in the First Two Books of His Commentary on John," in *Origeniana Decima: Origen as Writer; Papers of the 10th International Origen Congress, University School of Philosophy and Education "Ignatianum," Kraków, Poland, 31 August–4 September 2009* (ed. Sylwia Kaczmarek and Henryk Pietras; BETL 244; Leuven: Peeters, 2011) 75–87, at 85–86.

⁹ Paul Henry, "The Place of Plotinus in the History of Thought," in Plotinus, *The Enneads* (trans. Stephen MacKenna, rev. B. S. Page; 4th ed.; New York: Pantheon, 1969) xxxvi–xxxvii.

the only true reality, his scorn for the practical moral life, and finally, the egoistic (égoïste) and universal character of the spiritual life as he conceived it. Indeed, in its highest stage, the spiritual life consists in the relationship in which the soul is “alone” (seul à seul) with the universal principle; it excludes any union with other beings and persons.¹⁰

Elsewhere, Bréhier makes the case for Plotinus being a pantheist and goes so far as to claim that Plotinus is a proto-Spinozist.¹¹ In response to Bréhier, Armstrong notes that, based on the sources, there is simply not enough evidence to prove or disprove Indic influence; that being said, Armstrong does make the case that Plotinus’s innovations could well be a natural outgrowth of Hellenic thought.¹² Rist makes the case that Plotinus’s understanding of union (ἔνωσις) is discordant with an Atman-Brahman understanding of reality,¹³ and there has been an ever-increasing pushback to Bréhier’s “orientalisme” thesis.¹⁴

Thus, we have now observed two different starting points for the claim that Plotinus is guilty of egoism.¹⁵ his reworking of the *Phaedrus* ἀγαλμα passage and the φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον. In the former case, the exhortation to self-improvement is understood as autoeroticism. In the latter, the “flight of the alone to the alone” disables the mystic, or perhaps even the believer, from properly engaging in the present world. Yet, there remains one further reading of the “flight of the alone to the alone” that is most fantastic.

Cunningham makes the case that the flight is to be understood in relation to the One, rather than the individual’s mystical experience. Cunningham presents the One as desiring to be apart from its products, writing, “it may well be possible to consider the One as the first audacity. For the One endeavours to be apart from all else as the One. The One is this desire to be within itself and apart from all else.”¹⁶ This is then framed in the context of the “flight of the alone to the alone” when Cunningham writes, “If this is the case, then the flight from the One is also the flight of the ‘One.’ The audacious standing apart of the finite from the One is the constitution of the finite as ‘One.’”¹⁷ These efforts, which are part of a bewildering

¹⁰ Émile Bréhier, *La philosophie de Plotin* (Paris: Boivin, 1928) 135–36. English translation: Emile Bréhier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus* (trans. Joseph Thomas; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 132–33.

¹¹ Bréhier, *Philosophie de Plotin*, 32–34.

¹² A. Hilary Armstrong, “Plotinus and India,” *CIO* 30 (1936) 22–28.

¹³ John M. Rist, *Plotinus: Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 225–30; see also 213–17.

¹⁴ Consider Johan Frederik Staal, *Advaita and Neoplatonism: A Critical Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Madras University Philosophical Series 10; Madras: University of Madras, 1961) 235–49 and Richard T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London: Duckworth, 1972) 89.

¹⁵ One might also wish to note that Nygren wishes to pit an egocentric “Platonic” ἔρωσις against a self-sacrificing “Christian” ἀγάπη after specific reference to Plotinus (Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love* [trans. Philip Watson; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982] 209).

¹⁶ Connor Cunningham, *A Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (Radical Orthodoxy; London: Routledge, 2002) 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

attempt to suggest that Plotinus is a nihilist, culminate in Cunningham's suggestion that non-being is the core of Plotinus's thought. He writes, "This means that what emanates from the One, being, *is not*, in so far as to *be* is an inferior mode of *existence* compared to Non-being which is the only entity that really *is* (the really real)."¹⁸ The result of this is that Cunningham, against the opinion of distinguished scholars,¹⁹ concludes that Plotinus is a monist.²⁰

Rather unfortunately, even scholars of late antiquity have not been impervious to this line of thought. Edwards notes, in a discussion of divine attributes, that, for Plotinus, the One does not exist: "Theologians might insist that quotidian properties can be ascribed to God only analogically, superessentially or eminently, but it required peculiar hardihood to deny him every property whatsoever, and still more to assert that, properly speaking, God does not exist."²¹ In addition, Edwards also maintains that the One should not be understood as creating anything other than itself.²² While the thrust of Edwards's chapter is to state that the Christian God is personal in a way that the One is not, and that the incarnation is a defining feature of Christianity, it would appear that, by driving the points that the One is "nothing" and that it does not "create," Edwards wishes to intimate that the One has no meaningful content.

■ Unity and Superabundance: The Positive Legacy of the One

Yet, the last two interpretations of Plotinus's theology are by no means the only ones. Nevertheless, these appear to provide the metaphysical underpinning that is fuelling the claim of solipsism at the level of the individual. Kristeva, for one, connects such a theology to Plotinus's reading of the *Phaedrus*, in order to mount the case for Plotinus's narcissism.²³ Accordingly, let us present a different

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 [italics in original].

¹⁹ Rist, *Plotinus*, 227; René Arnou, *Le désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin* (Paris: Alcan, 1921) 248; Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (London: Duckworth, 1983) 159; A. Hilary Armstrong, "Plotinus," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (ed. A. Hilary Armstrong; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 195–268, at 262.

²⁰ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 8.

²¹ Mark Edwards, "Plotinus: Monist, Theist or Atheist?" in *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology Between Transcendence and Immanence* (ed. Louise Nelstrop and S. D. Podmore; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2016) 16.

²² "The One is not the creator or redeemer of anything other than itself" (Edwards, "Plotinus," 16). Contrast this with the position of Beierwaltes, who writes, "Naturally, there can be no doubt about the differentiated in itself, dynamic coexistence and cooperation (Ineinanderwirken) of the One Himself—Identical with the Good—as the one origin of reality (Ursprung der Wirklichkeit) *in toto*, of the time-free Nous (Geistes) and of the World-Soul, which operates in time and space, or of the soul of each discrete individual (individuell-Einzeln), binding existing realities in Himself." (Werner Beierwaltes, *Das wahre Selbst: Studien zu Plotins Begriff des Geistes und des Einen* [Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2001] 11–12).

²³ E.g., Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 109, 117. Kevin Corrigan has pushed back against Kristeva specifically in " 'Solitary' Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius,"

understanding of the One by considering the One in relation to the categories of inclusive and exclusive monotheism, whereby we will argue that the One should be understood as a supreme unity that animates its creation. The implication of this is that the “flight of the alone to the alone” renders the mystic supremely integrated with reality. Thereupon, we will make the case for the One’s positive attributes. In a later section, we will use this understanding of the One to explain an alternative interpretation of Plotinus’s exhortation “work on your own statue.”

We noted, above, two separate tendencies in the presentation of Plotinus’s thought: 1) to present Plotinus as a monist; 2) to present Plotinus’s understanding of the One as completely disengaged, an understanding that was subsequently applied to the mystic, who seeks the “flight of the alone to the alone.” These two presentations of Plotinus’s thought should not be opposed to one another, nor should they be separated from one another, for they present a tension between the One’s immanence and transcendence. Plotinus presents this tension by describing the One as both *πανταχοῦ* (everywhere) and *οὐδαμοῦ* (nowhere).²⁴ Just as the One is intimately close to all created being, the One remains, in some way, separate from it. This tension reflects Plotinus’s belief in both inclusive and exclusive monotheism. Kenney defines these terms as follows,

On a numerical reading, this core thesis would be taken as endorsing the uniqueness of this divine principle. There is a single deity; the class of divine beings has only one member. This is the dominant thrust of what might be called “exclusive monotheism,” with its emphasis upon the uniqueness of the deity. But there is another way to construe this monotheistic thesis, one that turns on a qualitative understanding of oneness. . . . There is, then, in this qualitative monotheism a final divine unity beyond the multiplicity of the

JR 76 (1996) 28–42.

²⁴ Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.9 [13] 4.1–9: “How then does multiplicity (*πληθος*) come from one? Because it is everywhere (*πανταχοῦ*), for there is nowhere where it is not. Therefore it fills all things; so it is many, or rather it is already all. Now if it itself were only everywhere, it would itself be all things; but since it is also nowhere (*οὐδαμοῦ*), all things come into being through him, because he is everywhere, but are other than him, because he is nowhere. Why, then, is he not only everywhere, and is also, besides being everywhere, nowhere? Because there must be one before all things. Therefore he must fill all things and make all things, not be all the things he makes.” See also 6.8 [39] 16.1–8. In what we have just cited, Plotinus uses the neutered pronoun “it” (*αὐτό*) and the masculine pronoun “he” (*αὐτός*) interchangeably in reference to the One. This is also observable at V.2 [11] 1.1–9. Throughout this article, we have simply followed the pronoun found in the primary or secondary source being discussed. We do not have a definitive reason for why Plotinus uses both pronouns; however, two reasons seem plausible. The first comes from Porphyry’s *Vita Plotini*, 8.1–6 (ed. and trans. Armstrong in LCL 440): “When Plotinus had written anything he could never bear to go over it twice; even to read it through once was too much for him, as his eyesight did not serve him well for reading. In writing he did not form the letters with any regard to appearance or divide his syllables correctly, and he paid no attention to spelling. He was wholly concerned with thought.” On this account, the use of both pronouns would simply be an orthographic error. However, if this consistent use of both pronouns in reference to the One is not an orthographic error, perhaps this is a way to demonstrate that the One transcends all linguistic definition, even that of definitively gendered language.

world, a deeper unifying nature behind the cosmos. Divinity seems thus to be the final inclusive unity behind the manifest plurality of the world's plurality, the ultimate completeness that transcends but resolves its fractured multiplicity. I shall refer to this approach, which emphasizes divine primordially, completeness, and ultimacy, as "inclusive monotheism."²⁵

These two understandings of monotheism, moreover, have a complementarian relationship in the thought of Plotinus,²⁶ allowing for the One to be immanent while remaining utterly transcendent. Even Edwards, when emphasizing the differences between Plotinus and Christianity, affirms that this sort of transcendence is a key shared tenet between these two traditions;²⁷ Crouzel, too, has emphasized that Plotinus and Origen share a common form of theism, being neither dualists nor monists.²⁸ Thus, charges of monism or divine isolationism overemphasize one pole of this dichotomy at the expense of the other; monism overemphasizes the fact that the One is a supreme unity at the expense of transcendence,²⁹ and divine isolationism emphasizes the uniqueness of the One and its transcendence at the expense of its unifying ability.³⁰

Moreover, the fact that the One is a supreme unity points to the fact that the One is not "nothing" as understood in relation to nothingness.³¹ The One is indeed "nothing" insofar as it is "no-thing," which is to say that the One is not one thing amongst others.³² For Plotinus, "thinghood" is restricted to created, existent things;

²⁵ John Peter Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism: A Study in Ancient Platonic Theology* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1991; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010) xxiv (page numbers taken from the reprinted edition).

²⁶ "These two readings thus tend to dovetail and so knit together these conceptually distinct approaches to monotheism" (Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism*, xxv).

²⁷ Edwards, "Plotinus," 25–26.

²⁸ "A characteristic common to Origen and to Plotinus is that to become one does not put an end to being two; according to them, there is neither monism nor dualism" (Henri Crouzel, *Origène et Plotin: Comparaisons doctrinales* [Paris: Téqui, 1991] 115).

²⁹ Plotinus's development of the notion of transcendence had an immense impact on subsequent Christian thought. Consider Kenney on this point, "The struggle of Augustine to articulate and defend a Christian conception of transcendence was part of a much larger shift, as Nicene Catholics came to recognize the God of their creed and scriptures as an acosmic, spiritual God. In doing so they drew upon a trajectory of transcendentalist theology and allegorical exegesis stretching back to Philo and Hellenistic Judaism, and to the Alexandrian Christian tradition of Justin, Clement, and Origen. The reading of pagan Platonism by Nicene Christians served as a further infusion of this immaterialist conception of God and the soul" (*Contemplation and Classical Christianity*, 169); consider also A. Hilary Armstrong, *Plotinus* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953) 18–19.

³⁰ One can observe a similar tension in Plotinus's understanding of the self; Gary Gurtler notes that Plotinus "realizes that an emphasis on unity alone would deny any real sense of individual experience, and yet an emphasis on individuality would preclude not only the sharing of experiences, but even the possibility of any experience whatever" ("Sympathy in Plotinus," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 24 [1984] 395–406, at 406).

³¹ E.g., Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.2 [11] 1.3–4: "How then do all things come from the One, which is simple (ἐξ ἀπλοῦ ἐνός) and has in it no diverse variety (ποικιλίας), or any sort of doubleness?"

³² Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.2 [11] 1.1: "The One is all things and not a single one of them: it is the principle of all things, not all things."

the One, however, is so full of being that it is beyond being (ὑπερούσιον). Thus, while the claim we saw from Edwards about the One being “nothing” is true *stricto sensu*, it can also be profoundly misleading. Cunningham’s claim that Plotinus propounds a philosophy of nothingness, however, is simply not true. Moreover, Edwards’s claim that the One doesn’t create anything other than itself seems to presuppose, along with Cunningham, that the One lacks meaningful content. One can observe a potential foundation for the way in which Edwards and Cunningham interpret Plotinus, but also can see decisive evidence against their interpretation, in the following statement made by Plotinus about the One:

It is because there is nothing in it that all things come from it: in order that being may exist, the One is not being, but the generator of being (διὰ τοῦτο αὐτὸς οὐκ ὄν, γεννητῆς δὲ αὐτοῦ). This, we may say, is the first act of generation (οἶον γέννησις): the One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows (οἶον ὑπερέρρῳη), as it were, and its superabundance (ὑπερπλήρες) makes something other than itself. This, when it has come into being, turns back (ἐπεστράφη) upon the One and is filled, and becomes Intellect by looking towards it.³³

This passage reveals many important facets about the One. The One, we learn, does not “exist” because It creates existence.³⁴ This also means that the One does not “not exist” in the way any created being slips out of existence, because, as the creator of being, the One is beyond the category of being; hence it is ὑπερούσιον. Moreover, the One, in its existence beyond the category of being, is not some vacuous void; instead, we learn that the One is a superabundance (ὑπερπλήρες) that creates “being” by the overflow (ὑπερέρρῳη) of its perfection. One final point that is crucial to proving that the One is full of meaningful content is the fact that *Nous* (Intellect) is only filled with its intellection by turning back to look at the One.³⁵

The passage, cited above, should give one cause to reconsider Edwards’s claim that “The One is not the creator or redeemer of anything other than itself.” O’Meara addresses those who wish to oppose Plotinian overflow with a Christian notion of creation by writing,

According to these readings the One in Plotinus generates with the same automatic necessity that a fountain produces water. However, a more exact appreciation of Plotinus’ use of images of emanation ought to cast doubt on

³³ Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.2 [11] 1.5–11.

³⁴ In line with this, Beierwaltes has emphasized the fittingness of affirming that the One is ἀγαθόν (good), ἀρχή (principle), δύναμις (power/capacity), πηγὴ (font/source), and πατήρ (father) (Beierwaltes, *Wahre Selbst*, 144); Beierwaltes also wishes to apply such positive predicates to Proclus’s understanding of the One (*ibid.*, 179).

³⁵ Bréhier also observes the positive nature of the One: “Therefore, the One is considered less as the static principle of the union of beings than as the dynamic principle of *Nous* (l’Intelligence). It is less the object itself of *Nous* than the reason why *Nous* has objects” (*Philosophie de Plotin*, 143).

this. In any case Plotinus devoted one of his finest treatises, *Ennead VI.8* [39], to the subject of freedom and necessity in the One.³⁶

With this statement, O'Meara is critiquing those who deny that the One creates because it does not show a sufficient degree of "intentionality." Yet, as O'Meara points out, *Ennead 6.8* demonstrates that the will is a crucial feature of the One.

Ennead 6.8, to which we have just seen O'Meara appeal, is the locus classicus for the positive attributes of the One.³⁷ In this treatise, Plotinus continues his characteristically apophatic approach to the One,³⁸ but he also goes beyond this by discussing the One's positive traits. Here, Plotinus writes that all activities must be ascribed to the will of the One: "For if we were to grant activities to him, and ascribe his activities to what we might call his will (οἷον βουλήσει)—for he does not act without willing—and his activities are what we might call his substance, his will (βούλησις) and substance (οὐσία) will be the same thing."³⁹ Thus, the positive attributes of the One must be considered in relation to His will. Plotinus adds the detail that the One's will is the same as its substance in order to avoid the One's will being determined by its essence,⁴⁰ rendering It supremely free. Plotinus also equates the will of the One with Its thought (νόησις).⁴¹ Yet, what is most striking is the attribution of love, as both ἔρωσ and ἀγάπη, to the One. Concerning ἔρωσ, Plotinus writes, "And he, that same self, is lovable (ἐράσμιον) and love (ἔρωσ) and love of himself (αὐτοῦ ἔρωσ), in that he is beautiful only from himself and in himself."⁴² De Vogel denies that Plotinus attributes ἀγάπη to the One,⁴³ but fails to provide a reason why we should not take the following citation about ἀγάπη as seriously as the preceding one about ἔρωσ, "he (the One) does not look to them, but they to him; but he is, if we may say so, borne to his own interior, as it were in love with himself (οἷον ἑαυτὸν ἀγαπήσας), the 'pure radiance,' (αὐγὴν καθαρὰν) being himself this which he loves (ἡγάπησε)."⁴⁴ Thus, it appears that the most striking attribute of the One is love, both ἔρωσ and ἀγάπη.

³⁶ Dominic J. O'Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 68.

³⁷ "In order for this approach to lead not only to extremes, i.e. to practice negative dialectic and to deny the One the most general predicate, Plotinus tries out, above all in VI 8, the unlocking power of affirmations, so far as they are understood under the οἷον *provisio*. This does not have the function of a systematic weakening or pejorizing for positive predicates for the One; rather, it sharpens the sense of the sheer inadequacy of defenselessly stated affirmations about the One/Good and thereby only makes a more accurate positive understanding of speech about that which is in itself unsayable possible" (Beierwaltes, *Wahre Selbst*, 112 [italics in original]).

³⁸ E.g., Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8 [39] 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.5–8; cf. 13.18–20 where the same statement is made in relation to θέλησις.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.10–20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 15.1–2.

⁴³ "However, at the same time this will make clear that Plotinus' declaration that 'the one is Eros' differs altogether from the N.T.-writer's word that 'God is Love'" (Cornelia J. De Vogel, "Greek Cosmic Love and the Christian Love of God: Boethius, Dionysius the Areopagite and the Author of the Fourth Gospel," *VC* 35 [1981] 57–81, at 70).

⁴⁴ Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8 [39] 16.11–14 (trans. modified). The phrase αὐγὴν καθαρὰν is surely coming

The passages noted above might lead one to think that the love of the One extends only as far as the One Itself.⁴⁵ Rist, however, provides a definition of ἔρωϛ in relation to the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius that is also applicable to the sort of love that is attributed to the One. He writes, “True Eros needs nothing and indeed is perpetually overflowing in goodness to the entire universe.”⁴⁶ Onians has made a similar point on the basis of the etymology of ἔρωϛ.⁴⁷ Thus, we find that the One’s perfect, self-directed ἔρωϛ overflows into creation. While it is conceivable that the One could have willed Himself to be perfect without a further generation, such a “perfection” would not actually be perfect because it is not productive; this follows in accordance with the belief that “everything which is perfect produces something else.”⁴⁸ This is also in line with the Platonic axiom *bonum est diffusivum sui* (The good is self-diffusive). Crouzel has emphasized that productive perfection should be applied to both the One and everything posterior to it.⁴⁹ Armstrong, on the basis of 6.8, teases out a further conclusion, noting, “In VI.8 the One is called pure will, absolute ἐνέργεια, love, and that love of Himself, and the cause of Himself, and thus the cause of all that proceeds from Him, not merely the ground of all being in the sense of a primal element, but deliberately willing Himself and all that comes from Him. He is said to include all His effects.”⁵⁰ Thus, Armstrong connects the One’s deliberate willing of Himself to His overflow, concluding that the overflow

from Plato’s ἐν ἀγῆ καθαρά (in pure light) at *Phaedr.* 250c4. Plotinus is, here, clearly using the term in reference to the One, but Philo used καθαρός ἀγῆϛ with reference to the intelligible world (*Opif.* 31.6); Clement of Alexandria interprets Plato similarly (*Strom.* 5.14.138.3). It is worth remembering that “The first principle of reality for the Middle Platonists is a transcendent Mind or God” (Armstrong, *Plotinus*, 18). Plotinus appears to have placed the ἀγῆ καθαρά on the side of the transcendent, rather than intellectual (Νοῦϛ), as he laid out his understanding of a fully transcendent One; perhaps this is because it is the One that illuminates Νοῦϛ.

⁴⁵ Esp. Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8 [39] 13.56–59.

⁴⁶ John Rist, “A Note on Eros and Agape in Pseudo-Dionysius,” *VC* 20 (1966) 235–43, at 243.

⁴⁷ “No satisfactory etymology has been found for ἐράω (ἔρωϛ Eros, etc.) applied to one moved sexually. It was, I suggest, in origin just ἐράω ‘I pour out (liquid)’, related to ἔρση. Cf. p. 177, n. 9. This use of ἐράω occurs in compounds (ἐπ-, ἐξ-, κατ-, μετ, etc.). The simple form seems to have developed early the specialised application and so the sense of ‘love’. ἔραμαι would thus originally mean ‘I pour out myself, emit liquid’ (Middle) or ‘I am poured out’. . . στυγέω ‘I hate’ began in the physical ‘I freeze, stiffen at’” (Richard B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate: New Interpretations of Greek, Roman, and Kindred Evidence, Also of Some Basic Jewish and Christian Beliefs* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951] 202 n. 5).

⁴⁸ Armstrong, *Plotinus*, 34. Dillon explains that Plotinus is “making use of a principle developed by Aristotle in biological contexts, to the effect that every entity, when it comes to perfection, is naturally generative or productive, he lays down that the One, his first principle, being perfect, must be productive” (John Dillon, “Plotinus at Work on Platonism,” *GR* 39 [1992] 189–204, at 193).

⁴⁹ “Anything that reaches perfection, whether this is of the One or of beings who are inferior to It, cannot bear to remain alone in itself and so it generates or produces (engendre ou produit)” (Crouzel, *Origène et Plotin*, 18–19).

⁵⁰ A. Hilary Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940) 3, see also 1–13. Needless to say, Plotinus couples this belief with the declension thesis.

is just as deliberate as the One's self-constitution. This point, one should note, squares with the account we read from O'Meara earlier. Yet, not only is the One understood as deliberately willing that which proceeds from Himself, but He is also understood to include all of His effects. This latter point reinforces the fact that the One is no hollow entity.

Nevertheless, this positive entity is approached apophatically due to a failing of language to contain the One, not some failure on behalf of the One. After all, how could the *δύναμις πάντων* (power/capacity of all) be impotent?⁵¹ Kenney captures this relationship between the positive nature of the One and the failure of language when he notes,

the One has a positive nature; while Plotinus is loathe to use descriptive language of the One, for several reasons we will subsequently consider, this indicates only that the One exceeds finite description and that Plotinus thinks that such predication can be misleading. This is a second-order judgment regarding the nature of theological language, not an implicit representation of the One as a primal void.⁵²

One particularly clear instance of the way in which Plotinus discusses the One without making any definitive claims about it is through prefacing descriptions of the One with *οἷον* (as if).⁵³ This allows Plotinus to assert the positive nature of the One without restricting the One to whatever attribute he is discussing.

The understanding of the One laid out above plays a vital role in reassessing Plotinus's mysticism. We have seen that, instead of being a vacuous nothingness, the One is a supreme fullness and a unity that animates the beings that come after it, earning it the moniker *δύναμις πάντων*. Moreover, we have also observed that the perfect self-love of the One overflows into what some have considered a deliberate act of creation. All of this has sparked a desire in Plotinus to discuss the One, but, in deference to the inability of language to contain the One, Plotinus must resort to "as if" language in order to discuss the One with his audience.⁵⁴ This understanding of the One gives us sufficient grounds on which to reconsider the understandings of the "flight of the alone to the alone" discussed in the previous section.

■ Φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον

The One's status as a hyper-abundant unity rebuffs claims of both nihilism and solipsism. By clarifying that the One is hyper-abundant, beyond even the category of abundance, it is clear that the One has positive value. Moreover, we have seen

⁵¹ This is a common description of the One, e.g., *Enn.* 5.1 [10] 7.9–10; 5.4 [7] 2.38; etc.

⁵² Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism*, 109.

⁵³ Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8 [39] 13.50.

⁵⁴ Pierre Hadot points to a commonality between Platonic apophatic thought and the thought of Wittgenstein by observing that what cannot be said must be shown ("Réflexions sur les limites du langage à propos du «Tractatus logico-philosophicus» de Wittgenstein," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 64 [1959] 469–84, esp. 474–76).

that one approaches the One apophatically because the One's hyper-abundance transcends anything that words can indicate. Moreover, insofar as the One is both a hyper-abundance and a supreme unity, one finds that an ascent to the One is not a move towards isolation, but a move towards a heightened unity. Indeed, should one come to identify with the higher, more unified, hypostases of *Nous* and the One, then one would also come to identify more closely with those around oneself. Consider Armstrong's note,

The over-quoted "flight of the alone to the alone" which ends the last treatise of the *Ennead* (perhaps over-quoted because it is so very easy to find) is misleading if it induces us to think that there is any stage in the ascent of the soul according to Plotinus when it stands isolated, apart from the whole, aware only of itself and God. . . . According to Plotinus we seek God by enlarging ourselves to unity with all that he brings into being and find him and leave all else for him only after and because of that enlargement.⁵⁵

Armstrong is quite clear that the ascent to the One is neatly connected to one's unity with all of being.⁵⁶

It is a happy accident of the English language that Plotinus's famous phrase, *φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον*,⁵⁷ should be translated, "the flight of the alone to the alone," especially because the etymology of the English word "alone" is "all one."⁵⁸ Thus, the English is open to a word-play that does not exist in the Greek: "the flight of the unified to the supremely unified."⁵⁹ While this is a bad translation of Plotinus's

⁵⁵ A. Hilary Armstrong, "The Apprehension of Divinity in the Self and Cosmos in Plotinus" in *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (ed. R. Baine Harris; Studies in Neoplatonism, Ancient and Modern 1; Norfolk, VA: Old Dominion University, 1976) 195.

⁵⁶ For a Christian parallel, consider 1 John 4:20: *ἐάν τις εἶπη ὅτι ἀγαπῶ τὸν Θεόν, καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῇ, ψευδῆστις ἐστίν· ὁ γὰρ μὴ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν ὃν ἑώρακε, τὸν Θεὸν ὃν οὐχ ἑώρακε πῶς δύναται ἀγαπᾶν;*

⁵⁷ Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9 [9] 1.51.

⁵⁸ "Alone," *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (3rd ed; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://www.oed.com/>. One could make a similar case in the German translation, following Harder's "Flucht des Einsamen zum Einsamen," but not the French, as rendered by Émile Bréhier in Plotinus, *Ennéades* (ed. Bréhier) 4.2e: "fuir seul vers lui seul." Corrigan notes the following about being "alone" in Plotinus: "To be 'in oneself,' by contrast, is to be 'alone' in a different sense, that is, self-gathered and self-dependent" (Corrigan, "'Solitary' Mysticism," 32).

⁵⁹ It would appear that the Gospel of Luke places a similar emphasis on the unity of the knower for enlightenment; Luke 11:34 (cf. Matt 6:22): The lamp of the body is the eye; therefore, whenever your eye is sound (lit. simple, *ἀπλοῦς*), all your body is full of light (*φωτεινόν*), too. *Ἀπλοῦς* has clear connections to "simplicity" (*ἀπλότης*), suggesting that the simplicity or unity of the knower is the key to knowing. Thayer has suggested that the word is formed from *πλέκω* (weave/plait) and that the *ἀ* is privative, rendering *ἀπλοῦς* as something "without folds" (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [ed. Joseph H. Thayer; New York: American Book Company, 1886] s.v. *ἀπλοῦς*). Strong differs slightly by suggesting that the etymology is *ἀ* "as a particle of union" coupled with "πλέκω" (*A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament with Their Renderings in the Authorized English Version* [ed. James Strong; New York: Abingdon Press, 1890] 573); *ἀπλοῦς*, on this reading, means simple, single, whole, sound, or woven together. Although not differing on definition, LSJ s.v. *ἀπλόος* suggests that *ἀπλόος* comes from *πλοῦς*, a ship's tack. Beeks expands

Greek, it is a good representation of his philosophy, especially given the fact that the key to one's ascent to the One is that one be simple (*ἀπλός*).⁶⁰

Most intriguingly, Plotinus tells us that it is only once one has become fully unified and comes to encompass the "all" that one is able to make the turn to teach. He writes, "The truly good and wise man (*σπουδαῖος*), therefore, has already finished reasoning when he declares what he has in himself to another; but in relation to himself he is vision (*πρὸς δὲ αὐτὸν ὄψις*). For he is already turned to what is one, and to the quiet (*Ἦδη γὰρ οὗτος πρὸς τὸ ἓν καὶ πρὸς τὸ ἥσυχον*) which is not only of things outside but in relation to himself, and all is within him (*πάντα εἴσω*)."⁶¹ Thus, it is upon one's realization that one embodies the all that one is able to turn to teach the other. Yet, it should be noted that Armstrong translates *Ἦδη γὰρ οὗτος πρὸς τὸ ἓν* as "For he is already turned to what is one," despite the fact that *πρὸς τὸ ἓν* could simply be rendered "towards/facing the One," or even "in the presence of the One." These alternate translations, which have a stronger sense of the One's presence to the individual, or, rather, the individual's presence to the One, reinforce the fact that teaching is the way in which the *σπουδαῖος* responds to the experience and presence of the One. Plotinus, moreover, writes that, while the One is unspeakable, it is possible to teach others about the One, and to set them on the path to seeing the one, but each must do the "seeing" of the One for themselves.⁶² Plotinus, a close reader of Plato, no doubt values the return to the cave as part of the philosopher's vocation,⁶³ which could lead one to reasonably think that the ascent to the One demands a turn towards teaching. A successful "flight of the alone to the alone," therefore, results not only in a wholeness of the individual, which unites the individual with others, but it also produces an innate didactic desire in the individual.

■ Plotinus and the *Phaedrus*

The understanding of the One depicted above and our discussion of the "flight of the alone to the alone" set the stage for properly interpreting Plotinus's presentation of the *ἀγάμα* passage from the *Phaedrus*. *Phaedrus* 254b7 makes reference to the way in which a lover works on the statue of his beloved in order to make the beloved more like his god. Plotinus, however, presents this passage as an exhortation for the individual to work on his *own* statue (*Enn.* 1.6 [1] 9.13–15), leaving us with

this etymology by claiming that *ἀπλοῦς* is derived from *πλέω* (*Etymological Dictionary of Greek* [ed. Robert S. P. Beekes; Leiden: Brill, 2009] s.v. *Ἀπλόος*). Regardless of whether *πλοῦς* or *πλέω* is the etymology of *ἀπλόος*, there remains a unique convergence of "alone, simple, healthy" in the word *ἀπλόος* that is most illuminating for our present investigation.

⁶⁰ In the lead up to the famous *φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον*, consider the way in which becoming simple (*ἀπλοῦν γενόμενον*, *Enn.* 6.9 [5] 10.11) is key to the mystical experience which is "difficult to put into words," but ultimately described as being "one with oneself" (*ἓν πρὸς ἑαυτὸν*, 6.9 [5] 10.21).

⁶¹ Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.8 [30] 6.37–40.

⁶² Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9 [9] 4.14–16.

⁶³ Plato, *Resp.* 516c–517a.

little explanation for why he has changed this account. Modern commentators often present this as a single-subject,⁶⁴ “autoréflexif” (self-reflexive)⁶⁵ retelling of the *Phaedrus*, and Harder, as we observed earlier, even describes this passage as “Autoerotik.”⁶⁶ Such interpretations pair well with the charges of spiritual solipsism. Despite this, there appears to be more to this presentation of the *Phaedrus* than mere narcissism.⁶⁷

Let us recall some points in the *Phaedrus* which prove key to Plotinus’s interpretation of the dialogue. Shortly after one reads about the softening of the scabs and the regrowth of the wings,⁶⁸ one reads about the lover’s ascent to his god; Plato notes, “and they touch (ἐφαπτόμενοι) him by memory, inspired (ἐνθουσιῶντες) they take from him ethics and customs (τὰ ἔθη καὶ τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα) insofar as it

⁶⁴ Kalligas also notes concisely, “whereas for Plato the lover works on the loved one in order to render him deiform, here the process is not intersubjective, but is wholly internal to the single subject” (Paulos Kalligas, *The Enneads of Plotinus: A Commentary* [trans. E. K. Fowden and N. Pilavachi; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014] 215). Narbonne simply notes the location of the passage in the *Phaedrus* without passing further comment (Plotinus, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome 1, volume 1. Introduction; Traité 1 (I 6): Sur le beau* [ed. Jean-Marc Narbonne, Martin Achard, and Lorenzo Ferroni; Budé 482; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012] 66). Armstrong writes, “he uses the metaphor of ‘working on the statue’ from the *Phaedrus* with a very significant change. Plato showed the lover working on his beloved to make him more godlike, and becoming more godlike himself in the process. Plotinus exhorts the lover of absolute beauty to go on working on ‘his own statue’ so as to make himself perfect and fit for the final vision” (A. Hillary Armstrong, “Platonic Eros and Christian Agape,” *DRev* 79 [1961] 105–21, at 112).

⁶⁵ See Darras-Worms in Plotinus, *Traité 1* (ed. Darras-Worms), 229: “In Plotinus, this statue is, firstly, ours. It is not that of the beloved, that the lover of the *Phaedrus* works to sculpt: there is no reference to others in the interpretation of the Platonic text by Plotinus, but there we see, on the other hand, the marks of a self-reflexive movement (mouvement autoréflexif).”

⁶⁶ Hadot writes against Harder, “Despite these texts, which may appear decisive if we do not put them back (replaçant) in the general movement of Plotinus’s thought, I think that the term autoerotic (Autoerotik) is chosen very poorly and can only lead to misinterpretations” (Pierre Hadot, “Le mythe de Narcisse et son interprétation par Plotin,” *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 13 [1976] 225–66, at 251). Corrigan, notably, interprets this text squarely within the “general movement of Plotinus’s thought,” when he writes, “This is not self-absorption or pure self-direction, but already reflexive. The ‘we’ of Plotinus’s discourse—a dialogue ‘among ourselves’ but open to ‘anyone’—already pervades his whole approach to love and ascent: the self that one is asked to go back into is already a shared ‘you’” (Kevin Corrigan, *Love, Friendship, Beauty, and the Good: Plato, Aristotle, and the Later Tradition* [Veritas 26; Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018] 68).

⁶⁷ Given that Plotinus explicitly critiques Narcissus (*Enn.* 1.6 [1] 8.8–12), it would be most surprising if Plotinus were to be guilty of spiritual Narcissism. Hadot has reflected extensively on the motif of Narcissus in “Le mythe de Narcisse,” and emphasizes that, for Plotinus, Narcissus’s problem is an inability to achieve the ends of his love. In Plotinus’s worldview, this should be applied to the pursuit of material ends. Hadot notes, “The point of departure of this spiritual movement supposes, therefore, that we are not ignorant that the beauties of the visible world are just a reflection and a fleeting image of transcendent beauty. It is precisely this ignorance which, in the eyes of Plotinus, characterizes the madness of Narcissus” (“Le mythe de Narcisse,” 243). Odysseus, whom Plotinus presents as making a journey to the intelligible Πατρίς (fatherland), is presented as a counterpoint to Narcissus (*Enn.* 1.6 [1] 8).

⁶⁸ Plato, *Phaedr.* 251b.

is possible for a human to participate in God.”⁶⁹ The crux of our present, Plotinian interpretation of this passage is what follows immediately after this, in the discussion of the relationship between lovers and their beloved: “and indeed they credit these things (αἰτιώμενοι) to the beloved and again love him all the more; and were it so that they draw their inspiration, just as the Bacchantes, from Zeus, they pour it out on the soul of the beloved, they make him as likened unto their god as possible (ὡς δυνατόν ὁμοίωτατον τῷ σφετέρῳ θεῷ).”⁷⁰ Here, we find that the lovers’ turn to the beloved is a response to the beloved acting as the cause (αἰτία) of the lovers’ ascent to, and participation in, their god.

We observed, earlier, that productive perfection is crucial to Plotinus’s thought, and Crouzel emphasized the way in which this principle applies both to the One and that which is posterior to the One. In the case of the *Phaedrus*, it would appear that “perfection” is the ascent to one’s god and that the productivity that follows this is the work one carries out on the statue of the beloved. The connection between this notion and Plotinus’s presentation of the *Phaedrus* becomes unmistakable in the light of the only extant commentary on the *Phaedrus* from late antiquity. In his fifth-century commentary on the *Phaedrus*, Hermias of Alexandria emphasizes that the pivot to work on the other springs from the perfection of the self. In particular, Hermias notes that the attention lovers pay to their beloved comes from the abundance that results from the lovers reaching their own god. He comments,

So far as he [the beloved] is the *archē* of *anamnēsis* for them [the lovers], they treat him as a statue. And the line “and they draw their inspiration from Zeus”; this is, because they draw from the *epistrophē* to their god, they channel (μετοχετεύουσι) these concepts to the beloved, teaching him. And the line “as the Bacchantes,” when they are inspired (ἐνθουσιῶσαι) by the master Dionysios, who is the overseer of the mystic rite, they become inspired by him and become wealthy (εὖποροι) and for this reason they search for others to whom they channel these concepts (μετοχετεύουσιν).⁷¹

Thus, lovers cherish the beloved because the beloved brings lovers to the recollection of their god, making the lovers wealthy (εὖποροι; see also *Symp.* 253a1, εὖποροῦσι). Hermias’s repetition of the verb μετοχετεύουσι makes clear that the lovers are channelling the “concepts (νοήματα),” referred to in the preceding

⁶⁹ Plato, *Phaedr.* 253a2–5 (trans. mine): καὶ ἐφαπτόμενοι αὐτοῦ τῇ μνήμῃ ἐνθουσιῶντες ἐξ ἐκείνου λαμβάνουσι τὰ ἔθη καὶ τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα, καθ’ ὅσον δυνατόν θεοῦ ἀνθρώπῳ μετασχεῖν.

⁷⁰ Plato, *Phaedr.* 253a5–253b1 (trans. mine): καὶ τούτων δὴ τὸν ἐρώμενον αἰτιώμενοι ἔτι τε μᾶλλον ἀγαπῶσι, κἂν ἐκ Διὸς ἀρύτωσιν ὡς περ αἱ βάκχαι, ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ ἐρωμένου ψυχὴν ἐπαντλοῦντες ποιῶσιν ὡς δυνατόν ὁμοίωτατον τῷ σφετέρῳ θεῷ.

⁷¹ Hermias Alexandrinus, *In Platonis Phaedrum Scholia* (ed. Carlo M. Lucarini and C. Moreschini; BSGRT; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012) 200.8–14 (trans. mine; NB: the editors of the edition chose not to correct χᾶν to κᾶν): Ὅτι αὐτοῖς ἐγένετο ἀρχὴ τῆς ἀναμνήσεως, ὡς ἀγαλμα αὐτὸν περιέπουσι. Τὸ δὲ χᾶν ἐκ Διὸς ἀρύτωσι: τούτεστι, ἅπερ ἂν ἐκ τῆς ἐπιστροφῆς τῆς πρὸς τὸν οἰκεῖον θεὸν ἀρύτωσι, νοήματα ταῦτα εἰς τὸν ἐρώμενον μετοχετεύουσι, παιδεύοντες αὐτόν. Τὸ δὲ ὡς αἱ βάκχαι, ἐπειδὴ αὐτὰ ἐνθουσιῶσαι ὑπὸ τοῦ δεσπότητος Διονύσου τοῦ ἐφόρου τῆς τελεστικῆς, κάτοχοι αὐτοῦ γίνονται (καὶ) εὖποροι [γίνονται] καὶ ἅπερ ἐξευρίσκουσιν ἄλλοις μετοχετεύουσιν.

sentence, to their beloved. These “concepts,” moreover, invoke the τούτων from Plato’s και τούτων δὴ τὸν ἐρώμενον αἰτιώμενοι (*Phaedr.* 253a5: and indeed they credit these things to the beloved); this τούτων, moreover, refers to the lover’s reception of the ethics and customs (*Phaedr.* 253a3–4: τὰ ἔθη και τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα) from his god, which the lover thence channels to the beloved. One might also wish to note that by choosing the verb “channel” (μετοχετεύω) Hermias appears to be holding Plato’s notion of drawing water (ἀρύτωσιν, *Phaedr.* 253a6) in tension with the notion of participation (μετασχεῖν, *Phaedr.* 253a5; cf. μετοχή). Thus, the ascent to god, Hermias comments, is that which leads the lover to turn didactically towards the beloved (παιδεύοντες αὐτόν, Hermias 200.11; ῥυθμίζοντες, *Phaedr.* 253b6), a point that Plotinus also makes.⁷² Thus, insofar as one considers the didactic turn as an overflow of the lover’s perfection, there is a clear parallel between the interpretation of this commentary and the overflow of the One’s self-perfection.

Plotinus begins his interpretation of the *Phaedrus* (*Enn.* 1.6 [1] 9.1–25) with a return to Diotima’s ladder in the *Symposium* (1.6 [1] 9.3–6; cf. *Symp.* 210a4–e1), picking up on his previous discussion of Diotima’s ladder (1.6 [1] 4.1–9). Yet, Plotinus, as part of his spiritual pedagogy, makes a point of splicing the *Phaedrus* into his presentation of the *Symposium*’s ladder. Plotinus notes, concerning the beginning of one’s ascent to the beautiful, “Therefore, first, one must accustom (ἐθιστέον) the soul itself to look at the beautiful customs (ἐπιτηδεύματα)” (1.6 [1] 9.2–3). This sentence, which Plotinus includes as part of Diotima’s ladder, joins the *Symposium* with the *Phaedrus* by pairing ἐθιστέον (one must accustom), derived from ἐθίζειν (to accustom; cf. ἔθη, ethics), with ἐπιτηδεύματα (customs), an apparent nod to the *Phaedrus*’ fine phrase τὰ ἔθη και τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα (the ethics and the customs). In Hermias’s commentary, we observed that it is through the attainment of τὰ ἔθη και τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα that the lover is then able to turn to teach the beloved these same “ethics and customs.” As such, perhaps we could say that Plotinus is making explicit an implicit first step of “working on the statue” of another by making this clear and by urging his students to pay attention to themselves.⁷³

Yet, even more interesting is Plotinus’s sudden shift from the impersonal, third-person singular to the second-person singular, which occurs immediately before

⁷² Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.8 [30] 6.37–40.

⁷³ Strangely, this same movement from self to other does not seem to attract the same scorn when said in the Bible. Consider, in relation to the ἄγαλμα passage, Mark 12:31 (also see Matt 22:39), “and the second, which is similar, is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.” Similarly, consider Matt 7:5, “Hypocrite, first take the beam out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the eye of your brother” (also see Lk 6:42). Also, in relation to the “flight,” consider the way in which Evagrius understands the monastic “flight” as bringing the monk closer to his fellow humans, e.g., “A monk is the one who is separated from all and united with all” (“De Oratione,” in *S. P. N. Nili Abbatis Opera quae reperiri potuerunt omnia* [ed. Jacques-Paul Migne; PG 79; Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1865] 1193.124), and “A monk is one who regards himself with all, because he unceasingly expects to see himself in each person” (*ibid.*, 1193.125).

he urges his student to work on the student's own statue.⁷⁴ Plotinus shifts from an abstracted explanation of how “one” ascends to beauty (1.6 [1] 9.1–7) to a direct exhortation to his audience, “go back into yourself and look” (1.6 [1] 9.7). The section in the second-person singular reads,

Go back into yourself and look (Ἀναγε ἐπὶ σαυτὸν καὶ ἴδε); and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop “working on your statue” till the deiform splendor of virtue shines out on you (μὴ παύσῃ <τεκταίνων> τὸ σὸν <ἄγαλμα>, ἕως ἂν ἐκλάμψῃ σοὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς ἢ θεοειδῆς ἀγλαία), till you see “self-mastery enthroned upon its holy seat.”⁷⁵

This passage would appear to signal a change in Plotinus's anticipated audience. Indeed, it would appear that Plotinus is actually at work on his student's statue. Thus, Plotinus, who achieved *henosis* no less than four times during Porphyry's period of study with him,⁷⁶ has gone from his own fullness to teaching others, and he is working on the statue of his beloved student by telling his students how to work on their own statues. As such, it is not so much that Plotinus is advocating for an “autoréflexif” understanding of the *Phaedrus*, but rather that Plotinus is, himself, polishing his student's statue.

■ *Vita Plotini*: An Example of Unbroken Contemplation in Action

Perhaps the strongest rebuke to any accusation of an autoerotic move inward in the thought of Plotinus is the way in which he himself lived. Plotinus, while a brilliant philosopher, took care of many orphans.⁷⁷ Likewise, Plotinus's zeal for his subject did not stop him from helping young Potamon revise the same lesson over and over, perhaps an allusion to practicing a multiplication table.⁷⁸ Moreover, Plotinus's care for the other did not stop at the young. Porphyry reports that Plotinus could take full and engaged part of a continuous conversation without breaking

⁷⁴ Darras-Worms astutely notes the shift to the second person, but she does not connect this to Plotinus's re-presentation of the *Phaedrus*: “The use of the familiar (tutoiement), the direct address to his interlocutor (this ‘you’ [tu] is not here equivalent to an indefinite ‘one’ [on]), which will continue up to line 25, emphasizes the importance of the moment and of the stakes” (Plotinus, *Traité I* [ed. Darras-Worms], 226).

⁷⁵ Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6 [1] 9.7–15 (trans. modified). Note the wordplay between statue (ἄγαλμα) and splendour (ἀγλαία). Origen, similarly, tells us that Christians must set up ἀγάλματα ἀρετῆς in their souls (*Cels.* 8.18.4–10).

⁷⁶ Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.*, 23.16–18.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.5–10.

⁷⁸ Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.*, 9.11–12; for the multiplication table suggestion, see Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2005) 1.

his concentration on the *noetic* world;⁷⁹ thus, it appears that Plotinus was truly present both to himself and to others.⁸⁰ All of this from a mystic and the author of the claim that mystical experience is the flight of the “alone to the alone.” Consider Plotinus’s description of the wise man (ὁ σοφός): “A man of this sort will not be unfriendly or unsympathetic; he will be like this to himself and in dealing with his own affairs: but he will render to his friends all that he renders to himself, and so will be the best of friends as well as remaining intelligent.”⁸¹ Perhaps Porphyry has drawn inspiration from this passage when writing the *Vita Plotini*, especially when he wrote the events noted above. Porphyry seems to have drawn similarly from Plotinus’s thought elsewhere in the *Vita Plotini* (10.21–25) when he noted that Plotinus had a θεός (god), rather than a δαίμων (daemon), as his guardian spirit; this would appear to recall what Plotinus said in *Enn.* 3.4 [12] 6.3–4, where he notes that it is characteristic of the σπουδαῖος (good person/sage; lit. serious/zealous person) to have a θεός for his δαίμων. Perhaps Porphyry’s implication here is that Plotinus himself is a σπουδαῖος? If Plotinus is to be considered a σπουδαῖος, then the earlier didactic turn must be applied to him.⁸²

■ Teaching: Care for the Other as the Response to an Enlarged Self

The didactic turn is important because it shows a heightened sense of concern for others in response to the *unio mystica*. We have just read that the wise man treats others as himself, and we are further suggesting that the wise man’s expanded consideration for others comes from his experience of reality’s deep unity; this certainly seems to be the reason the σπουδαῖος turns to teach. The individual’s ability to glimpse higher, more unified levels of reality is tenable because humans embody the three primordial hypostases of Soul, *Nous*, and the One.⁸³ These levels of reality ascend into greater simplicity: Soul is one and many, *Nous* is one-many, and the One is one.⁸⁴ We, moreover, always embody these three primordial hypostases, but do not always have them “ready to hand.”⁸⁵ Actively engaging

⁷⁹ Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.*, 8.9–15.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.19.

⁸¹ Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.4 [12] 15.21–25.

⁸² Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.8 [30] 6.37–40.

⁸³ Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.1 [10] 10.5–10: “And just as in nature there are these three of which we have spoken, so we ought to think that they are present also in ourselves. I do not mean in [ourselves as] beings of the sense-world—for these three are separate [from the things of sense]—but in [ourselves as] beings outside (ἔξω) the realm of sense-perception; ‘outside’ here is used in the same sense as those realities are also said to be ‘outside’ the whole universe: so the corresponding realities in man are said to be ‘outside,’ as Plato speaks of the ‘inner man’ (εἶσω ἄνθρωπον).” Also consider: πάντα εἶσω (*Enn.* 3.8 [30] 6.40).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.23–26: “but Parmenides in Plato speaks more accurately, and distinguishes from each other the first One, which is more properly called One (ἓν), and the second which he calls ‘One-Many’ (ἓν πολλά), and the third, ‘One and Many’ (ἓν καὶ πολλά).” For a discussion of the One and otherness in Plotinus see Dmitri Nikulin, “The One and the Many in Plotinus,” *Hermes* 126 (1998) 326–40.

⁸⁵ Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.1 [53] 9.12–15: “The intellect is either in touch with the proceedings or it

with these higher aspects of our selves is to accept these higher levels of reality as “another self.”⁸⁶ Yet, it is not just that these higher realities are “another self”: Plotinus notes that the disembodied knower is actually the “true human” (ἀληθῆς ἄνθρωπος).⁸⁷ Thus, we are most truly ourselves when we perceive reality from this higher, more unified vantage.

Not only are these higher realities “another self,” but they also offer one the ability to understand others as “another self.” Three particular features of *Nous* make this possible: first, it should be noted that there are forms of individuals in *Nous*;⁸⁸ second, *Nous* is a dynamic self-contemplation, always contemplating itself;⁸⁹ third, we know that *Nous* is everywhere, undivided, and one and the same.⁹⁰ This full, constant actualization of itself is what Emilsson has called the “holism” of Intellect.⁹¹ Given that there are forms of individuals, that *Nous* is engaged in self-contemplation, and that *Nous* is entirely what it is everywhere, surely it is not unreasonable to suggest that one possesses others just as much as one possesses oneself when one properly engages one’s *nous*. Thus, one can be understood to have the same relationship to the “other” as one does to oneself when one experiences reality at the level of *nous*. Corrigan appears to have this in mind when he writes,

Intelligible beauty is the medium in which subject and object come to reflect each other’s being. Delight in the inner beauty of another person as our own beauty is part of our immediate experience of being. Intelligible beauty, there-

is not (ἢ ἐφῆψατο ἢ οὐ), and so sinless (ἀναμάρτητος): but we ought rather to say that we are in touch with the intelligible in the intellect or we are not—with the intelligible in ourselves; for one can have it and not have it available (δυνατὸν γὰρ καὶ ἔχειν καὶ μὴ πρόχειρον ἔχειν).”

⁸⁶ Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.1 [10] 11.4–13.

⁸⁷ Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.1 [53] 10.1–10, 7.14–17. Pauliina Remes has observed that this disembodied knower is “both the true self as well as the normative ideal that every human being ought to strive towards” (*Plotinus on Self: The Philosophy of the ‘We’* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011] 31). Lloyd P. Gerson has made a nearly identical claim about the thought of Plato in *Knowing Persons: A Study in Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 9: “The fundamental contrast for Plato is between the ideal disembodied person or self we strive to become and its embodied image.” Gerson also discusses this theme in Plotinus in *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013) e.g., 253.

⁸⁸ Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.7 [18] 3.20–23. Rist inaugurated recent discussions of this when he argued that Plotinus is consistent on the subject; see John M. Rist, “Forms of Individuals in Plotinus,” *CIQ* 13 (1963) 223–31. Blumenthal challenged Rist’s position in Henry Blumenthal, “Did Plotinus Believe in Ideas of Individuals?,” *Phronesis* 11 (1966) 61–80. Mamo was first to critique Blumenthal in P. S. Mamo, “Forms of Individuals in the ‘Enneads,’” *Phronesis* 14 (1969) 77–96; Rist also responded with his article, John M. Rist, “Ideas of Individuals in Plotinus: A Reply to Dr. Blumenthal,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 24 (1970) 298–303. This conversation has continued on: J. Igal, “Observaciones al Texto de Plotino,” *Emerita* 41 (1973) 92–98; A. Hilary Armstrong, “Form, Individual and Person in Plotinus,” *Dionysius* 1 (1977) 49–68; Paul Kalligas, “Forms of Individuals in Plotinus: A Re-Examination,” *Phronesis* 42 (1997) 206–27; Panayiota Vassilopoulou, “Plotinus and Individuals,” *Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2006) 371–83; Gwenaëlle Aubry, “Individuation, particularisation et détermination selon Plotin,” *Phronesis* 53 (2008) 271–89.

⁸⁹ Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.8 [30] 3.18–23.

⁹⁰ Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.1 [53] 8.5: ὅτι ἀμέριστος καὶ εἷς καὶ πανταχοῦ ὁ αὐτός.

⁹¹ Eyjólfur K. Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007) 199–207.

fore, reveals the essential connectedness of self to others and of self to self in more immediate ways than our otherwise divided, more external experience of other things. Being is more immediately experienced than becoming.⁹²

Armstrong makes a similar observation, writing,

The second, quite different question is: does one discover oneself in the course of the philosophic ascent as an isolated individual, progressing towards a solitary perfection, or as part of a larger whole? The answer to this has already been given. One discovers oneself as part of the largest possible whole, and a part which in a sense is that whole. The boundaries of the self are those of the intelligible cosmos.⁹³

Thus, it seems as if “vertical” transcendence to *Nous* and the One grants one a certain “horizontal” transcendence that allows one to go beyond oneself through an enhanced ability to identify with the “other.”⁹⁴ Consequently, if mystical experience gives one an enlarged understanding of oneself, it is reasonable to think that teaching is a response to seeing the “other” as another self.

■ Conclusion

We have argued, herein, that Plotinus’s understanding of *unio mystica* renders the mystic more integrated with the world, rather than less. This cuts against the frequent trope that the *φύγη μόνου πρὸς μόνον* isolates the mystic from the world and that Plotinus’s presentation of the *Phaedrus*’ *ἄγαλμα* passage promotes autoeroticism. By presenting the One as a supreme fullness, simplicity, and unity, we have argued that the flight to the One is a flight towards a supreme unity with the rest of being. Likewise, through a positive reading of the One and observance of the principle of productive perfection, it has been suggested that Plotinus is making explicit implicit steps in the *Phaedrus* passage and that he, himself, is actually at work on the statue of his student. We invoked the *Vita Plotini* in order to demonstrate that Plotinus’s philosophy led him to live a deeply communal life that was devoted to others. Finally, we suggested that the didactic turn, as a response to mystical experience, intimates that an expanded sphere of concern is a result of mystical experience. Thus, the standard portrayal of the “flight of the alone to the alone” as an isolationist turn fails to portray the way in which this flight unifies the mystic with the whole of being.

⁹² Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus*, 232.

⁹³ Armstrong, “Apprehension of Divinity,” 195.

⁹⁴ Speaking about the “axes” of the self has emerged as a succinct way to relate the disembodied and embodied selves. This seems to be a newer way in which to discuss the self; see e.g., Lloyd P. Gerson, “Plotinus” in *A History of Mind and Body in Late Antiquity* (ed. Anna Marmodoro and Sophie Cartwright; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 67–84, at 69; Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus*, 145–46. Gerard O’Daly does not use this language when relating the historical self to the higher self in his *Plotinus’ Philosophy of the Self* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1973).