# How to Become Unconscious

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**Abstract**
Consistent materialists are almost bound to suggest that 'conscious experience', if it exists at all, is no more than epiphenomenal. A correct understanding of the real requires that everything we do and say is no more than a product of whatever processes are best described by physics, without any privileged place, person, time or scale of action. Consciousness is a myth, or at least a figment. Plotinus was no materialist: for him, it is Soul and Intellect that are more real than the phenomena we misdescribe as material. Nor does he suppose that consciousness depends on language (as Stoics and modern materialists have sometimes said): wordless experience is actually superior. And much of what counts towards our present consciousness is to be discarded. It is better *not* to remember most of what now seems more significant to us; better to discard images; better that the intellect be 'drunk' than 'sober', losing any sense of separation between subject and object. The goal of the Plotinian intellectual is to join 'the dance of immortal love', but it is a mark of the good dancer that she is not conscious of what she does. There is therefore a strange confluence between Plotinus and modern materialists: *our* experience at least is transitory, deceitful, epiphenomenal, and 'reality' is to be encountered when we have shed our illusions.

## 1. The Materialist Problem

Consistent materialists are almost bound to suggest that 'conscious experience', if it exists at all, is no more than epiphenomenal. A correct understanding of the real requires that everything we do and say is no more than a product of whatever processes are best described by physics, without any privileged place, person, time or scale of action. Consciousness is a myth, or at least a figment, and the real causes even of what we seem to ourselves to think and do lie out of sight and hearing, in the motions and chemical reactions of our brains. Really consistent materialists are prepared to say (if 'saying' is anything that they actually believe they do) that 'conscious selves' and choice are as fictitious as planetary angels. Less consistent, but marginally saner, materialists speak reverently of the way that new properties 'emerge' from the conjunction and association of lesser parts – though they cannot themselves have any causal impact (it's just convenient sometimes to pretend they do).[1]

[1] An 'emergent' property of a whole differs from a 'resultant' in that whereas the latter has an intelligible, mathematical relationship with the

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Plotinus was no materialist: for him, it is Soul and Intellect that are more real than the phenomena we misdescribe as material, and the road to reality is through the 'inward turn', whereby we recognize the power and dignity of our souls, and realize that it is what is known through intellect that is real, rather than the flux of ego-centered sensation. It is impossible – he supposes – that either soul or intellect could 'emerge', without ever having previously existed, from the collocation of material elements. I shall not readdress either his or other arguments against the mere materialist.[2] But there is a strange convergence between Plotinian and modern materialist: the undivided origin, the One, cannot be conscious of itself, and most of what passes for our consciousness should be discarded. The fluctuating, partial We (for he usually employs the plural *Hemeis* where we might speak of the Ego[3]) is not our identity, even on the bodily plane. 'There are a great many things which the whole being does not notice.... And this is all the more so when the body is of great size, as they say happens with great sea-beasts, with whom, when a part is affected, no perception of it reaches the whole because of the smallness of the disturbance.'[4] Most of the world, including our own bodies, is managed by 'Nature', without any help from us, and we would do better not to get involved with it, or at least not to tie our fortunes to it. Nor are we necessarily aware of our 'higher self'[5] – which is no odder than remembering that we

properties of the parts, the former does not. There are no really convincing instances of such 'emergence' that are not simply versions of the very puzzle, the so-called Hard Problem of Consciousness, that we face: a problem created, as I suppose, by first imagining a merely material world and then being surprised that once purged of any so-called 'secondary' qualities it has no intelligible connection with those same 'secondary' (but for us immediate) properties themselves.

[2] See my 'Plotinus: Body and Mind' in *Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, edited by Lloyd Gerson (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996), 275–91; and 'A Plotinian Account of Intellect', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* **71** (1997), 421–32.

[3] See Pauliina Remes, *Plotinus on Self: The Philosophy of the 'We'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[4] Plotinus, *Ennead* IV.9 [8].2,14–9. All translations, unless otherwise identified, are from A. H. Armstrong's edition for the Loeb Classical Library: *Plotinus: the Enneads* (London: Heinemann, 1966–88).

[5] Cf. Andrew Smith, 'Unconsciousness and Quasi-consciousness in Plotinus', *Phronesis* **23** (1978), 292–301.



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are not actually aware of our bodily self much of the time, nor fully at any time, even though – for the modern materialist – that *bodily* self is what makes us what we are. In becoming Intellect, or even rising to the 'higher' level of soul, we forget or put aside all merely parochial or particular memories. Heracles' shadow, maybe, might recall his earthly life, but Heracles himself no longer minds such things.[6] The souls of the stars need not remember where they've been.[7] Plato's myth of Er, in *The Republic*, imagined that inferior souls drink their fill of Lethe, river of Forgetfulness, while superior souls, aimed at enlightenment, restrain their thirst – and remember. Plotinus, in effect, rewrites the story in a way that Dante might approve.[8] Purification is a waking up from inappropriate images,[9] and going naked into the shrine.[10] Oblivion allows us to awaken to the higher realm.[11] Even the universal Intellect itself, which is intelligible reality, exists almost in error: 'beginning as one it did not stay as it began, but, without noticing it, became many, as if heavy, and unrolled itself because it wanted to possess everything – how much better it would have been for it not to want this, for it became the second!'[12] And soul in its turn, when it comes out of the intelligible world, 'cannot endure unity, but embraces its own individuality and wants to be different, and so to speak puts its head outside, it

[6] *Ennead* IV.3 [27].27, after Homer, *Odyssey* 11.601ff. See also IV.3 [27].32, 24f.

[7] *Ennead* IV.4 [28].8, 41ff.

[8] *Purgatory* §33, 91–9; 127–9: Dante at the top of Purgatory peak drinks first of Lethe, banishing all memory of sin, and then of Eunoë, restoring an objective, guiltless knowledge of what has been.

[9] *Ennead* III.6.5, 23ff.

[10] See my 'Going Naked into the Shrine: Herbert, Plotinus and the Constructive Metaphor' in D. Hedley and S. Hutton (eds), *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 45–61.

[11] See Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth*, translated by Janet Lloyd (New York: Urzone, Inc., 1996), 181n107, citing IV.3.32, IV.4.1 after René Schaerer, *Le Héros, sage et l'événement* (Paris: Aubier, 1965), 193–4 and Edward Warren, 'Memory in Plotinus', *Classical Quarterly* **15** (1965), 252–60.

[12] Plotinus, *Ennead* III.8 [30].8,32–36. Armstrong interprets the 'heaviness' as that of drunken sleep (as is possible), but there may be reason to suspect instead that it is the 'heaviness' of pregnancy, as Stephen Mackenna preferred in his translation of the *Enneads* (*The Enneads* edited by J. Dillon (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991); an abridged edition of the original Faber 1956 edition); see also *Ennead* VI.7 [38].15.



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thereupon acquires memory.'[13] The things we do not know matter more for what we are than those we think we do: whatever we are, we are not *Cartesian* selves.[14] Our journey back, to Reality and Beyond, can be described as a progressive stripping away – first of words, then of memories, and even of intelligence (as that is ordinarily understood). What will be left at each stage may, in a way, be conscious – but it could as easily be described as being *unconscious*, on the far side of division. So how are we to achieve it (whatever quite it is)? And why?

## 2. Wordlessness[15]

First, let us consider the notion of wordless experience. One way that modern materialists have sought to explain our consciousness away is to equate it with our habit of talking about things (including what we think of as ourselves).[16] It is not a new idea. It has been a philosophical trope at least since the early Stoics that thought requires language. Those who cannot speak, it has been said, can't think. Nor can they experience or feel.[17] 'Only a creature which has a theory of mind (or, at least, a concept of experience, or of types of experience) is capable of enjoying conscious experiences, or of having phenomenal

[13] *Ennead* IV.4 [28].3: 'memory', in this context, indicates that our soul is now conscious of something that is not *present* to it in the way that reality is *present* to an eternal view (on which, more below).

[14] See Richard E. Aquila, 'On Plotinus and the "Togetherness" of Consciousness', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* **30** (1992), 7–32.

[15] Some of the material in this section was presented under the title 'Plotinus and the Sounds of Silence' at a conference on Naturalism at Bristol University, May 2002.

[16] 'Talking', they suppose (?), is simply voicing strings of symbols, rather than any strongly intentional act: once our computers can simulate a conversation 'well enough' they will be held to be 'conscious' in the only way that anything can 'really' be. Cf. Alastair Hannay, 'Comments on Honderich, Sprigge, Dreyfus and Rubin, and Elster' in *Synthese* **98** (1994), 95–112: 'If I should ever deny the existence of consciousness or begin to agree that the presently extant theories, including all extant versions of functionalism, provide adequate accounts of all we ever need to know or imply by saying we are conscious, I trust there will be some independent evidence that I have lost my mind' (99).

[17] So also in the *Hermetic Corpus* 9.1–2: 'there is no evidence of understanding without reasoned speech. … and without understanding it is impossible to have sensation' (translated by Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 27).



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feels'.[18] Most people find the conclusion grossly implausible: even if they can agree that dogs don't meditate on metaphysics, they rarely concede that dogs don't think or feel. Even Carruthers, at the close of his weirdly tendentious argument that there is really *nothing* it is like to be a bat, or cat, or horse,[19] hurriedly concedes that human infants do discriminate between experiences – and so have them – because they belong to a species which has evolved a capacity to do so (though they themselves have no theory of mind, no language and no concept of experience). Even Carruthers does not *explicitly* draw the conclusion that it is a waste of time to trouble with anaesthetising animals, and claims that it is at least wrong to do what you *think* hurts them (those who don't think anything can hurt them, presumably, can be as callous as they please).

The persistence of this argument – or so it seems to me – owes more to human egoism and a dislike of change than any rational consideration. If no-one can identify any event or object till they have a word for it (and follow the public rules for using just that word), how can they possibly acquire the knowledge? What must this be but a miracle, phylogenetically as well as ontogenetically? 'The discussions that assume that language determines thought carry on only by a collective suspension of disbelief. A dog, Bertrand Russell notes, may not be able to tell you that its parents were honest though poor, but can anyone really conclude from this that the dog is *unconscious*?'[20] Apparently, some people can. It is some comfort to me that any experimentalist who acted on Carruthers' theory (at any rate within the jurisdiction of the Animal (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986) would certainly lose her licence (and probably her job).

But what did Plotinus have to say about the possibility of wordless experience? He would agree that *human* animals have access to their own higher selves, and to the Intellect – which is to say, an intellectual grasp of the whole world – but not because they speak. The star-gods,

[18] Peter Carruthers, *Language, Thought and Consciousness: an Essay in Philosophical Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 158. Carruthers goes on to suggest that conscious awareness of its own states could only evolve and persist in conjunction with a capacity to distinguish appearance and reality. So an omniscient being, presumably, for which there is no such distinction, must be unconscious.

[19] Cf. T. L. S. Sprigge, 'Final Causes', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* **45** (1971), 149–70, introducing the notion 'what it is like to be something'. See also A. L. Washburn, *The Animal Mind*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 3ff., on what it is like to be a wasp.

[20] Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: the New Science of Language and the Mind* (London: Allen Lane, 1994), 58.



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Plotinus is ready to suppose, live in the light of that singular cosmos, needing neither memory nor verbal speech. Non-human animals, animated by souls the equal of our own, involve those souls more deeply in the corporeal and particular, so that they have no access to the intellects whose souls they are – but not because they *don't* speak. *Human* animals, that is, live in between two sorts of entity that, paradoxically, resemble each other more than either resemble ordinary humanity. Neither have any need for human speech. Neither need have any detailed, individual memories (stars less so than animals). Neither act self-consciously, but both have experiences. Or at any rate the animals do, in that they form *images*, and respond not only to what we – but this is more contestable than we like to think – regard as 'objectively real', but also to their own images of those things. It is through *images* also that we, initially, are led to a greater understanding, though these too must be abandoned in the end.

The most obvious context for wordless experience is the mystical appreciation of the One, to which I shall return. That presence superior to being and knowledge, which sheds its light on the intelligible and phenomenal world, is of course vital to an understanding of Plotinus' system whether it is given a metaphysical or psychotropic interpretation – but it is not my only topic in this paper. For it is not only the One that lies beyond language: the Intellect itself, even in its triune mode (constituted as thinker, object thought, and thinking),[21] is wordless.

> There is no deceit There; or where could it find any thing truer than the truth? What it speaks, then, is that, and it speaks it afterwards, and speaks it in silence.[22]

> Often I have woke up out of the body to my self, and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in

[21] *Ennead* V.3 [49].5, 44. All Neo-Platonists distinguish the One and the Intellect: the latter is essentially complex in that thinking and the objects thought are distinct, and the objects of thought, the whole interconnected system of intelligible reality, are many. They are unified through the presence of 'the One', which lies beyond both intellect and being (as Plato said: *Republic* 6.509b).

[22] *Ennead* VI.7 [38].34.



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> the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning (*logismos*), I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body, when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, when it is in the body. Heraclitus, who urges us to investigate this, positing 'necessary changes' from opposite to opposite, and saying 'way up and way down' and 'changing it is at rest', and 'weariness to toil at and be subjected to the same things', has left us guessing, since he has neglected to make clear to us what he is saying, perhaps because we ought to seek by ourselves, as he himself found and sought. And Empedocles, when he said that it is a law that sinful souls should fall into this world, and that he himself has come here as 'an exile from the country of the gods' who 'put his trust in raving strife', revealed just as much as the riddling statements of Pythagoras and his followers about this, and many other matters (and besides, he is unclear because he writes poetry).[23]

Students of Plotinus may feel that he has a nerve to complain of Heraclitus' deliberate obscurity or Empedocles' poetic riddles – though the difficulty of *Plotinus'* text is almost always the effect of his attempting to explain and argue[24] – but it is at least clear that *this* 'mystical experience' is not of the One, but of the Intellect: seeing the eternal beauty of things strikes him speechless. How can it ever have happened – if we were once in full and perfect communion with the Being and Beauty of all things – that we came down into individualized existence, each with a single, distorted perspective on the world? It is as if we somehow 'got bored with being together' and each wanted our own little world more than the view, as it were, from nowhere and from everywhere.[25] Even without resort to metaphysics, we can wonder how it is that once we have seen things straight – objectively (as we now suppose) – we forget so quickly, and revert to our usual egocentric, linear and temporal experience. The momentary experience of things as they are 'in themselves' and not merely as they are 'for us' is wordless.

This claim runs counter to Richard Sorabji's reply to Anthony Lloyd on the subject of 'non-propositional thought'. According to

[23] *Ennead* IV.8 [6].1.

[24] Actually, Plotinus takes considerable pains to be clear, and criticises those who don't: see especially II.1 [40].1, II.9 [33].15, and Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 13, on his response to Thaumasius' wish for general statements. But his readers don't always do him justice.

[25] *Ennead* IV.8 [6].4.



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Sorabji 'Lloyd ascribes to non-discursive thought four attributes which [Sorabji] think[s] belong only to the higher level of union with the One. He mentions that non-discursive thought involves no complexity, and hence (secondly) is not directed at propositions, since they are complex. He believes, thirdly, that it involves no self-consciousness, and fourthly that it is typically described in terms of contact.'[26] Sorabji argues contrariwise that noetic thought, however unifying and unified, is still of many things and hence *could* be propositional, and is also self-aware. In this, he is, I think, simply mistaken. But neither Lloyd nor Sorabji have Plotinus' reasons clear.

First, there is indeed a firm distinction between discursive and noetic thought. The soul reasons step by step towards a conclusion. The intellect grasps everything together: the distinction is like that between someone who laboriously counts how many sheep there are on the hillside, and one who simply sees.[27] Of course it is still, in Plotinus' terms, a *complex* entity: what it grasps, which is intelligible reality, is itself complex, and there is a distinction in thought between the intellect and what it thinks. That distinction *in thought* does not, of course, permit the distinct parts any independent existence: *nous, noesis* and *noeton* are all one.[28] Sorabji is right to say that non-discursive thought is complex, but quite wrong – in Plotinus' terms – to suppose it is propositional.

> One must not then suppose that the gods and the 'exceedingly blessed spectators' in the higher world contemplate propositions (*axiomata*), but all the Forms we speak about are beautiful images in that world, of the kind which someone imagined to exist in the soul of the wise man, images not painted but real. This is why the ancients said that the Ideas were realities and substances. The wise men of Egypt, I think, also understood this, either by scientific (*akribes*) or innate (*sumphute)* knowledge, and when they wished to signify something wisely, did not use the forms of letters which follow the order of words and propositions (*logoi* and *protaseis*) and imitate sounds and the enunciations of philosophical statements (*prophoras axiomaton*), but by

[26] Richard Sorabji, 'Myths about non-propositional Thought' in *Language and Logos. Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy, presented to G. E. L. Owen*, edited by M. Nussbaum and M. Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 295–314: 310.

[27] Few of us can see many more than seven or eight such sheep as a *Gestalt*: angels, presumably, see any number of things like that.

[28] *Ennead* V.3 [49].5, 44. This is the real Plotinian Trinity: see also *Enneads* VI.8 [39].15, where lover, beloved and love are also unified.



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> drawing images and inscribing in their temples one particular image of each particular thing, they manifested the non-discursiveness of the intelligible world, that is, that every image is a kind of knowledge and wisdom and is a subject of statements, all together in one, and not discourse (*dianoesis*) or deliberation (*bouleusis*).[29]

The intellect does not apprehend propositions *about* reality, but the realities themselves: 'there the truth is not correspondence with something else, but really belongs to each individual thing of which it is the truth'.[30] Any attempt to represent or evoke that apprehension must in its turn provide us with living (that is, self-moving) images, not words. 'Even though the soul is always moved to intelligent activity it is when it comes to be in the image-making power that we apprehend it .... [W]e are always intellectually active but do not always apprehend our activity'.[31] Words, propositions, theorems and the like are the province of a lower mode. And the images we employ must sometimes and somehow be coincident with the images that nature herself evokes, or with the realities she mirrors.

> It is not just bare theories and rules [*theoremata* and *kanones*]; it deals with things and has real beings as a kind of material for its activity; it approaches them methodically and possesses real

[29] *Ennead* V.8 [31].5f, citing Plato, *Symposium* 215b; see also *Ennead* IV.3 [27].11. It is commonly suggested that Plotinus is here mistaking the nature of hieroglyphs, but there is good reason, despite later oversimplifications or inventions (on which see Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: its Impact on the West*, translated by David Lorton (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001)), to think that he got it right. 'The Egyptians do not hesitate to call hieroglyphs "gods", and even to equate individual signs in the script with particular gods; it is quite in keeping with their views to see images of the gods as signs in a metalanguage. As is true of every Egyptian hieroglyph, they are more than just ciphers or lifeless symbols; the god can inhabit them, his cult image will normally be in the same form, and his priests may assume his role by wearing animal masks' (Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: the One and the Many*, translated by John Baines (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 124).

[30] *Ennead* III.7 [45].4. See also *Ennead* V.5 [32].1: 'They [*sc*. truth and the intelligible] are certainly not "premises" or "axioms" or "expressions"; for then they would only say something about other things and would not be the things themselves, as when [one says] "Justice is beautiful", though justice and beauty are different [from the words used].'

[31] *Ennead* 4.3 [27].30, 12–6.



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> things along with its theories … So it does not know about propositions (*protasis*) – they are just letters – but in knowing the truth it knows what they call propositions, and in general it knows the movements of the soul, what it affirms and what it denies, and whether it affirms the same thing as it denies or something else, and if things are different from each other or the same; whatever is submitted to it it perceives by directing intuition, as sense perception also does, but it hands over petty precisions of speech to another discipline which finds satisfaction in them.[32]

So Plotinus' conception of knowledge strictly so-called is rather of a direct acquaintance with reality than anything that requires a language. And this is actually quite plausible. Most of us can recall a few scientific formulae, but we do not demonstrate our understanding merely by repeating the words, nor even by translating them into our mother tongue. We begin to understand them when we can *see* them, and the little flutter of delight that accompanies such dawning comprehension is a hint of the spirit that more dedicated lovers feel: 'this is the spirit that Beauty must ever induce, wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight.'[33] Can we even say that the *route* to knowledge must be dialectical, and so propositional? Intellect is accessible to us (as humans) because our souls have not descended too far from it (or rather, that is what it *means* that our souls have not descended too far). Our souls retain a *logos* of the intellect, and can reason their way back to it, even if they abandon discursive reason at the end.

> It [*sc*. dialectic] stops wandering about the world of sense and settles itself down in the world of intellect, and there it occupies itself, casting off falsehood and feeding the soul in what Plato calls 'the plain of truth', using his method of division to distinguish the Forms, and to determine the essential nature of each thing, and to find the primary kinds, and weaving together by the intellect all that issues from these primary kinds, till it has traversed the whole intelligible world; then it resolves again the structure of that world into its parts, and comes back to its starting point; and then, keeping quiet (for it is quiet insofar as it is present There) it busies itself no more, but contemplates (*blepei*), having arrived at unity. It leaves what is called logical

[32] *Ennead* I.3 [20].5.
[33] *Ennead* I.6 [1].4, McKenna's translation.



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> activity, about propositions and syllogisms, to another art, as it might leave knowing how to write.[34]

Though dialectic is a favoured route to reason, it does not follow that higher souls are always thinking propositionally. Nor is it the only possible way: lovers and musicians have their own directions.[35] As I have already observed, Plotinus also advocates the use of wordless imagery to awaken intellect. Words come later.

> They [*sc*. the stars] always see [God]; and while they see him it is surely not possible for them to say that they have seen him: this would be something that would happen to those who have ceased to see.[36]

The God that the star-gods see, in this context, is the Intellect itself. The route that we must follow to that vision is itself one that we can talk about once we have traversed it – but the travel itself need not be – perhaps must not be – accompanied by any verbal monologue.

> The soul runs over all truths, and all the same shuns the truths we know if someone tries to express them in words and discursive thought; for discursive thought, in order to express anything in words, has to consider one thing after another: this is the method of description; but how can one describe the absolutely simple [the One]? But it is enough if the intellect comes into contact with it; but when it has done so, while the contact lasts, it is absolutely impossible, nor has it time, to speak; but it is afterwards that it is able to reason about it.[37]

In other words, we *can* talk about the truth, but *seeing* the truth is positively inimical to speech. 'In proportion as the confidence is clearer, the contemplation is quieter … [and] what it utters, it utters because of its deficiency, with a view to examining it, trying to learn thoroughly what it possesses'.[38] Nor is speech the only or the best route upwards to the truth. We do not even need speech to understand.

[34] *Ennead* I.3 [20].4, citing Plato, *Phaedrus* 248b6.
[35] See *Ennead* I.3 [20].1f.
[36] *Ennead* IV.4 [28].7; see Edward W. Warren, 'Consciousness in Plotinus', *Phronesis* **9** (1964), 83–97: even here-now we are only conscious that we were reading when we are no longer absorbed in the content of what we were reading.
[37] *Ennead* V.3 [49].17.
[38] *Ennead* III.8. [30].6, 14 & 27–9.



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> Nor do I think that we should suppose that they use speech in the intelligible world, and altogether, even if they have bodies in heaven, there would be none of that talk there which they engage in here because of needs or over doubtful and disputed points; but as they do everything they do in order and according to nature they would not give orders or advice and would know by intuition (*sunesis*) what passes from one to another. For here below, too, we can know many things by the look in people's eyes when they are silent; but there all their body is clear and pure and each is like an eye, and nothing is hidden or feigned, but before one speaks to another that other has seen and understood.[39]

Speech may actually disguise our meaning – so 'let [one who wishes to understand] abandon the verbal signification and grasp the meaning of what is being said':[40] a plea that any author must occasionally murmur.

Compare and contrast Carruthers' remark:

> To say that creative thinking is done wordlessly may only mean that it is done non-consciously. Not for nothing have poets traditionally prayed to the Muses for inspiration; for we often have no idea where our genuinely novel ideas come from, nor is there much that we can do intentionally in order to get them. Sometimes a relaxing environment can help – a hot bath, a daydream, or a good night's sleep. But when ideas do come, they seem to us to come of their own accord, often with no discernible history.[41]

Carruthers' actual arguments for the 'non-consciousness' of wordless 'thought' are feeble. But Plotinus too suggests, as I remarked earlier, that we need not be aware of everything that affects us. His example (that of the great sea-beasts) is actually used to suggest that you and I *might* after all be a single soul even though neither of us, here and now, as the soul-body composites we currently are, shares the

[39] *Ennead* IV.3 [27].18; see also V.8 [31].4, and II.3 [52].7. The phrase is also used by J. K. Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible*, translated by J. Rieck (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 33: working on Zen *koans* has the object of extending enlightenment from the mind's eye through the whole body, so that 'the whole body is an eye'. Kadowacki (*Ibid*., 13, 49) also emphasises the body language that precedes 'oral speech'.

[40] *Ennead* VI.4 [22].2; see also IV.8.9.

[41] Peter Carruthers, *Language, Thought and Consciousness: an Essay in Philosophical Psychology, op. cit*., 59; see also 138f.



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other's perceptions. It is the nature of soul, after all, to be diverse: to experience things severally. Even our individual soul is not always fully transparent to itself – in fact it hardly ever is. We don't know who we are, nor what we know.[42] 'We are always intellectually active but do not always apprehend our activity.'[43] And it is not even clear that we always should, or that we should for always. *Self*-consciousness may be a foolish distraction from the consciousness of something better,[44] though we may need for a while to enlarge our awareness of what lies within. The goal of the Plotinian intellectual is to join 'the dance of immortal love', but it is a mark of the good dancer that she is not conscious of what she does.

> The dancer's intention looks elsewhere; his [*sic*] limbs are affected in accordance with the dance and serve the dance, and help to make it perfect and complete; and the connoisseur of ballet can say that to fit a particular figure one limb is raised, and other bent together, one is hidden, another degraded; the dancer does not choose to make these movements for no reason, but each part of him as he performs the dance has its necessary position in the dancing of the whole body.[45]

Our partial intellects *may* know themselves, as one such intellect amongst many, one of the multitudinous communities that are Plotinus' intelligible cosmos.[46] But the proper focus of intellect is the One, and the proper focus of soul is intellect itself. *Self*-consciousness in the ordinary sense is closer to the error made by

[42] *Ennead* VI.7 [38].41.

[43] *Ennead* IV.3 [27] .30,15. See Richard E. Aquila, 'On Plotinus and the Togetherness of Consciousness', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* **30** (1992), 7–32.

[44] *Ennead* I.4 [46].10: a reader is not conscious of the act of reading.

[45] *Ennead* IV.4 [28].33; see also VI.9 [9].38.

[46] In Hilary Armstrong's words: 'Plotinus' divine mind is not just a mind knowing a lot of eternal objects. It is an organic living community of interpenetrating beings which are at once Forms and intelligences, all "awake and alive", in which every part thinks and therefore is the whole; so that all are one mind and yet each retains its distinct individuality without which the whole would be impoverished. And this mind-world is the region where our own mind, illumined by the divine intellect finds its true self and lives its own life, its proper home and the penultimate stage on its journey, from which it is taken up to union with the Good' (A. H. Armstrong and R. A. Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960), 27).



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Narcissus:[47] of focusing outside our own activity upon some product of that activity. Or else it lies in thinking how we might seem to others. Self-consciousness enfeebles activity.[48] 'Consciousness is more of a memory than a presence. It is inexorably tangled up in time. All it can give us is images, which it tries to fixate by expressing them in language.'[49] Better to call upon a Muse. Better, certainly, to call upon a Muse than to expect an answer from mere Matter.

Notoriously, Matter is almost as difficult to conceptualize as the One itself. None of us ever encounters Matter directly, but only the golden chains that bind it.[50] Soul (both the Soul of the All, and the Soul of each of us) creates the living world: without it there would only be 'the darkness of matter and non-existence, and "what the gods hate"'.[51] One view has been that it is

> By names that the world was called,
> Out of the empty air,
> With names was built and walled,
> Line and circle and square, dust and emerald;
> Snatched from deceiving death
> By the articulate breath.[52]

And without those names, 'animals' are – it has been thought – contained within an 'unchanging Here'. Plotinus' position is closer to William James':

> We may, if we like, by our reasonings, unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world we feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulating strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. Other sculptors, other statues from

[47] See *Ennead* I.6 [1].8.

[48] *Ennead* I.4 [46].10.

[49] Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision*, translated by Michael Chase (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 32. Amusingly, the notion that consciousness is a report of what *has* happened also turns up in Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* as a modern insight.

[50] *Ennead* I.8.15; cf. *Ennead* I.6.9, on the golden screen or advance guard that is placed between us and the Good.

[51] *Ennead* V.1.2, after *Iliad* 20.65.

[52] Edwin Muir, 'The Animals' in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1960), 208.



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> the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them. How different must be the worlds in the consciousness of ant, cuttlefish or crab![53]

The worlds we make – that all souls make – need not rely on names, nor any other words. Which is just as well: if we had to rely on words to make our worlds, we would never even have acquired the words to make them. It is not naming, but our *attention* that calls the worlds to life, even if it is by song – a wordless song – that this attention is attracted.

'Looking out of the window of your house or monad, you do not see words but things',[54] even though we who have learnt to speak find that our 'soul permanently rustles with words that are gradually taking over the density of things and their representation'. Calling a halt to that incessant chatter – and especially to that lumbering giant, the Ego – is a necessary step before we can even see what is straightforwardly in front of us.

## 3. How to Lose Your Mind[55]

But the goal is not only wordless, and self-forgetful. It is also in another sense quite mindless. We may reason our way towards a proper understanding and simultaneous recognition that what we then realize has been there all along, but vision transcends both words and sober thought.

> Intellect also, then, has one power for thinking, by which it looks at the things in itself, and one by which it looks at what transcends it by a direct awareness and reception, by which also before it saw only, and by seeing acquired intellect and is one.

[53] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Macmillan, 1890), Vol.1, 288f.

[54] Cornelis Verhoeven, 'Wordless', translated by Jo Verhoeven in *Wordlessness*, edited by Bart Verschaffel and Mark Verminck (Antwerp: Lilliput Press, 1993), 36–42. My thanks to Panayiota Vassilopoulou for this reference.

[55] Some of the material in this section was presented at an ISNS conference at the University of Liverpool in the summer of 2004. See also 'Conclusion' in Panayiota Vassilopoulou and Stephen R. L. Clark (eds), *Late Antique Epistemology: Other Ways to Truth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 289–301.



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> And that first one is the contemplation of Intellect in its right mind, and the other is Intellect in love, when it goes out of its mind 'drunk with the nectar'; then it falls in love, simplified into happiness by having its fill, and it is better for it to be drunk with a drunkenness like this than to be more respectably sober.[56]

What sort of drunkenness is this? And how can it be better to be *drunk*? As so often, Plotinus deliberately subverts more usual metaphors, and may be signaling this in his choice of *nectar* rather than wine as the intoxicating agent.[57] For most philosophers, getting drunk is losing one's mind and morals. So Philo of Alexandria: allegorizing the story of Lot's daughters, he suggests that 'they made their father drink Wine' means that 'they brought complete insensibility on the mind, so that it fancied itself competent by its own abilities to judge what was expedient, and to assent to all sorts of apparent facts, as if they really had solid truth in them'.[58]

And then there are hangovers. Wine creates as a temporary condition something of the manic-depressive temperament, a neglect of ordinary concerns and a conviction that the world, somehow, is ours, quickly followed by despair. 'Intellect is our king [and] we too are kings when we are in accord with it',[59] but that may sound (at first) a little too much like the drunken conviction that 'Glasgow belongs to me'! According to Chrysippus virtue may be lost in consequence of drunkenness or melancholy,[60] and melancholia has, notoriously, been associated with academic genius since Aristotle.[61]

[56] *Ennead* VI.7 [38].35. This is closer to the thesis of *The Cloud of Unknowing* than to that of Ps-Dionysius. 'For Denys the divine darkness lies beyond the farthest effort of the mind, and it is the mind (the *nous*) that enters it: for the author of the *Cloud*, we enter the cloud of unknowing when we renounce the activity of the mind and rely solely on "the loving power" of the soul': Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Continuum, 1989), 125.

[57] *Ennead* III.5 [50].7: wine had not been invented at the birthday celebrations for Aphrodite, at which Poros got drunk and was seduced by Penia (after Plato's weird story in *The Symposium*: that is, this allegorical event 'precedes' material reality).

[58] Philo, *De Ebrietate* 41, citing *Genesis 19.33*.

[59] *Ennead* V.3.3, 46ff.

[60] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 7.65.

[61] R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1964).



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> Wine in large quantity produces in men much the same characteristics which we attribute to the melancholic, and as it is being drunk it fashions various characters, for instance irritable, benevolent, compassionate or reckless ones.... We are often in a state of grieving, but could not say why, while at other times we feel cheerful without apparent reason.[62]

It is in this context also that Philo warns against rationalist conceit: 'If we mistakenly trust our private reasonings we shall construct and build the city of the mind that destroys the truth... For this reason one who has had a dream finds on awakening that all the movement and exertions of the foolish men are dreams devoid of reality. Indeed mind itself was found to be a dream'.[63] He goes on to mock philosophical pretensions, and philosophers' undue willingness to trust the fallible instruments of reason and experience, pointing out that 'about these very things, and about the different ways of life, and about the ends to which all actions ought to be referred, and about ten thousand other things which logical, and moral, and natural philosophy comprehends, there have been an unspeakable number of discussions, as to which, up to the present time, there is no agreement whatever among all these philosophers who have examined into such subjects'.[64] Philo was as insistent as any modern that our imaginings and reasonings need to be checked, that we need, somehow, to 'get in touch' with the real.[65] And just as a reminder that these matters are not without their practical and political dimension:

> The moral collapse of Vietnam was scarcely caused by an overdose of objective consciousness about what we were doing. It consisted of the failure to expand consciousness beyond mere instrumental tasks to the practical and banal significance of our

[62] Aristotle, *Problemata* 30. He adds that wine is also aphrodisiac, and can sometimes improve a poet (unless the remark is ironical): 'Maracus the Syracusan was a better poet when he was out of his mind'.

[63] Philo, *Legum Allegoriarum* 3.228f. in *Philo of Alexandria: the Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selection*s, translated by D. Winston (London: SPCK, 1981), 151.

[64] Philo, *De Ebrietate*, 48.

[65] See also the Hermetic Corpus 1.27 (*Hermetica*, translated by Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6): 'People, earthborn men, you who have surrendered yourself to drunkenness and sleep and ignorance of god, make yourselves sober and end your drunken sickness, for you are bewitched in unreasoning sleep' (see also 7.1, *Ibid.*, 24).



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> national goals and policies. We kept the war going in Vietnam because our consciousness was mystified by symbols of patriotism, dreams of glory, unyielding pride, and visions of empire. In mood we were exactly what the counter-culture people want us to become. We imagined we were menaced by slant-eyed devils and worthless little yellow men; we enthralled ourselves with visions of our own ineffable majesty. In short, we were stoned.[66]

'Mystics', of course, may tell a different story about drink (including Philo, on other occasions). According to the Chaldaean Oracles, for example, the soul once freed from the body and filled with noetic light 'glories in the harmony with which it is drunken'.[67] Philo also speaks approvingly of the '*sober* intoxication' that possesses the mind 'when it has transcended all sensible substance… on beholding in [the intelligible] realm beauties beyond measure, the patterns and originals of the sensible things in the world below'.[68]

> If then, my soul, a yearning comes upon you to inherit the divine goods, abandon not only your land, that is, the body; your kinsfolk, that is, the senses; your father's house, that is, speech, but escape also your own self and stand aside from yourself, like persons possessed and corybants seized by Bacchic frenzy and carried away by some kind of prophetic inspiration.[69]

That wine, and yet more potent drugs, have this ambiguous reputation is hardly surprising. Back in the days of the 'counterculture' LSD might possibly produce euphoric insights, or hellish hallucinations. Respectable people may plausibly consider all such drugs are dangerous, while also, privately, acknowledging that those strange insights – and even the hellish hallucinations – may sometimes be fruitfully life-changing.[70] Mainstream psychiatry suspects all

[66] Marvin Harris, *Cows, Wars, Pigs and Witches* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989; 1st published 1974), 266.

[67] Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (Le Caire: L'Institut Français d'archéologic orientale, 1956), 420. See also Psellus Comm., 1137A (Kroll 48): Lewy, 198n: 'having nothing mortal she is utterly drunk'.

[68] Philo, *De Opificio* Mundi, 70 in D. Winston (tr.), *Philo of Alexandria: the Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections, op. cit.*, 173. See further Hans Lewy, *Sobria Ebrietas* (Giessen: A. Töppelmann, 1929).

[69] Philo, *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit*, 68f in D. Winston (tr.), *op. cit.*, 169.

[70] See John E. Nelson, *Healing the Split* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 147–52 for a balanced and well-informed discussion of the issues.



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claims to 'higher' consciousness, ignoring what may otherwise seem evident distinctions between psychosis and transcendence (as did the anti-psychiatric movement of the 60s and 70s, with opposite evaluations).[71] I prefer to suppose that there are insights to be had from a long tradition of consciousness-altering practices and theories. Simply calling those insights 'mystical' is unhelpful. It may be that Plotinus is talking about just this sort of ecstasy – but what is 'ecstasy'? What is it even to be 'drunk', whether with love, liquor or sudden madness? 'Drunkenness', according to the anthropologist, 'also expresses culture in so far as it always takes one form of a highly patterned, learned comportment which varies from one culture to another: pink elephants in one region, green snakes in another.... Drinking is essentially a social act, performed in a recognized social context'.[72] Even within a single culture, there are gloomy drunks, and sleepy ones, and violent ones; drunks who dance and sing, and drunks who tell secrets to passing strangers.

The likeliest association for Plotinus is with the passion of love – by which I mean not *charity* but, bluntly, sex.[73] Sexual experience must simultaneously be a real encounter – no-one, Plotinus says, would prefer merely to *imagine* the presence of the beloved[74] – and one that lets us put aside our selves.[75] The beauty that such drunken lovers see has 'penetrated through the whole of their soul', and they are not simply spectators – 'as if someone possessed by a god, taken over by Phoebus or one of the Muses, could bring about the vision of the god in himself, if he had the power to look at the god in himself'.[76] And even this is to be surpassed:

[71] *Ibid.*, 358–9.

[72] Mary Douglas, 'A distinctive anthropological perspective' in Mary Douglas (ed.), *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3–15:4.

[73] *Ennead* VI.7[38].34, 14. See John Rist, *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus and Origen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 77–9: 99. See also Zeke Mazur, 'Having Sex with the One: Erotic Mysticism in Plotinus and the Problem of Metaphor' in P. Vassilopoulou and S. R. L. Clark (eds), *Late Antique Epistemology*, *op. cit.*, 67–83.

[74] *Ennead* VI.7 [38].26, 21f.

[75] I should add – merely to avoid misunderstanding - that Plotinus reckons that 'if [lovers] remain chaste there is no error in their intimacy with the beauty here below, but it is error to fall away into sexual intercourse': *Ennead* III.5 [50].1, 36f.

[76] *Ennead* V.8 [31].10, after Plato, *Phaedrus* 246eff.



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> As if carried away or possessed by a god, in a quiet solitude and a state of calm, not turning away anywhere in his being and not busy about himself, altogether at rest and having become a kind of rest. He had no thought of beauties but had already run up beyond beauty and gone beyond the choir of virtues, like a man who enters into the sanctuary and leaves behind the statues in the outer shrine. …. They are secondary objects of contemplation. But that other, perhaps, was not a contemplation but another kind of seeing, a being out of oneself (*ekstasis*) and simplifying and giving oneself over and pressing towards contact and rest and a sustained thought leading to adaptation (*perinoesis pros epharmogen*), if one is going to contemplate what is in the sanctuary.[77]

Remember that it is those who have *ceased* to see, who can say what they have seen.[78] Our goal is self-forgetfulness, 'on the far side of thought and being'.

## 4. There and Back Again

Materialists, even the sanely inconsistent ones, are bound to suppose that the first reality of things, the world which was before us and will, presumably, outlast us all, is wholly unreflective. There are no privileged places, times or scales in that 'real world'. In the ages – neither short nor long – before there were living creatures there was nothing either good or bad, large or small, long-lasting or short-lived. In the ages before there were time-binding creatures there were no narrative histories or temporal identities: everything arose from everything by whatever 'laws' somehow subsisted 'there'. 'There', on the far side of any human or any animal experience, everything is altogether, and it is only our strange error to suppose that things are any different 'now'. Somehow – and I shall make no effort here to consider how this has come about – we are equipped to notice and acknowledge and sometimes even *prefer* that vision of things to the merely egoistical, parochial and fleeting consciousness we actually inhabit. Reason, on Plotinus' account, is not to be valued because we can, with its help, perform socially useful actions, nor yet because we can, with its help, win more food, water or shelter than less 'clever' creatures.[79] It is to

[77] *Ennead* VI.9 [9].11.
[78] *Ennead* IV.4 [28].7.
[79] Actually, as he points out, non-rational creatures manage very well: *Ennead* I.4 [46].2.31–43.



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be valued – and insight is especially to be valued – because it is the presence in us of beauty. 'Intellect is our king. But we too are kings when we are in accord with it; we can be in accord with it in two ways, either by having something like its writing written in us like laws, or by being as if filled with it and able to see it and be aware of it as present'.[80] Either we simply recite the creed to ourselves, or we somehow, momentarily, live it. But of course in *living* it we are still untrue to it: even the clearest and least parochial glimpse of truth is still untrue, because there is really no such split between observed and the observer. We falsify the world by looking at it.

> The beauty of a landscape just at the moment when no-one is looking at it, absolutely nobody … To see a landscape such as it is when I am not there. When I am anywhere, I pollute the silence of earth and sky with my breathing and the beating of my heart.[81]

Only in *losing* consciousness can we be true – or rather, since *truth* is, exactly, what is *not* forgotten,[82] in losing consciousness we transcend the truth. We're only in the right when we've forgotten how. *Intellect* is king, but not *my* intellect. Nature, the barest trace of soul in the material, temporal world, works in silence, in contemplation: 'what comes into being is what [she] sees in [her] silence'.[83]

[80] *Ennead* V.3 [49].3, 46ff.

[81] Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, translated by A. Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), Vol.2, 423. This thought is not to be taken lightly: it is difficult not to see in it one aspect of Weil's fatal anorexia, but her insights should not be ignored merely because, as it so often does, 'the disease' (that is, the demon) took advantage of them. When she wrote that 'I cannot conceive of the necessity for God to love me, when I feel so clearly that even with human beings affection for me can only be a mistake. But I can easily imagine that he loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am… I must withdraw so that he can see it. I must withdraw so that God may make contact with the beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves' (Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1952), 88), the disease was speaking. How could it be that God loved everything but Weil? See also John Lippitt, 'True self-love and true self-sacrifice', *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* **64–5** (2009).

[82] The punning relationship of *aletheia*, truth, and *lethe*, forgetfulness, is founded on a false etymology, but still has some force: see my *God's World and the Great Awakening* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 48–54.

[83] *Ennead* III.8 [30].4. 5–6.



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The transcendent cause of everything, including Nature, is not itself a thing.

> It is therefore truly ineffable: for whatever you say about it you will always be speaking of a 'something'. But 'beyond all things and beyond the supreme majesty of Intellect' is the only one of all the ways of speaking of it which is true; it is not its name, but says that it is not one of all things and 'has no name', because we can say nothing of it: we can only try, as far as possible, to make signs to ourselves about it.[84]

What we cannot talk about we cannot reason about either. Notoriously, this makes it difficult to understand what Plotinus meant.

> The perplexity arises especially because our awareness of the One is not by way of reasoned knowledge (*episteme*) or of intellectual perception (*noesis*) as with other intelligible things, but by way of a presence superior to knowledge. The soul experiences its falling away from being one and is not altogether one when it has reasoned knowledge of anything; for reasoned knowledge is a rational process (*logos*), and a rational process is many. The soul therefore goes past the One and falls into number and multiplicity. One must therefore run up above knowledge and in no way depart from being one, but one must depart from knowledge and things known, and from every other, even beautiful, object of vision.… Therefore, Plato says, 'it cannot be spoken or written', but we speak and write impelling towards it and wakening from reasonings to the vision of it, as if showing the way to one who wants to have a view of something.[85]

The One itself can neither speak nor know Itself.

> If [the intellect] directed its gaze to a single object without parts, it would be without thought or word (*elogethe*): for what would it have to say about or to understand? For if the absolutely partless had to speak itself, it must, first of all, say what it is not; so that in this way too it would be many in order to be one. Then when it says 'I am this', if it means something other than itself by 'this', it

[84] *Ennead* V.3 [49].13. That the One is not a thing is a doctrine ably discussed by Eric D. Perl in *Theophany: the Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007). On the apophatic tradition, see Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[85] *Ennead* VI.9 [9].4, quoting Plato, *Letter* VII.241c5.



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> will be telling a lie; but if it is speaking of some incidental property of itself, it will be saying that it is many or saying 'am am' or 'I I'.[86]

The One is the transcendent cause of all that is, seen and unseen – and the chief reason why Plotinus is so often regarded as a 'mystic'. Actually, there is another and more naturalistic interpretation: Plotinus is speaking of the various modes of consciousness available to us, and suggesting that there is a radically *simple* mode of a kind familiar in Buddhist practice. Soul experiences things in a linear and fragmentary way. Intellect experiences them as an ordered, beautiful whole. But even beyond Intellect lies a mode of consciousness that is not consciousness *of* anything at all: the bare light of awareness, without any doubleness of subject and object. Is that bare awareness really *awareness* at all? If intellect, object and thinking were the same, all would disappear[87] – and do, into the One. Or contrariwise, it is from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth spring.[88]

So are materialists and Plotinians, in the end, united? So David Hume, through his character Cleanthes, appositely enquires 'how … mystics, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from Sceptics or Atheists, who assert, that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible?'[89] Interestingly, there are 'materialists' who seek to solve 'the Hard Problem' by insisting that since we don't know what 'matter' is we can't rule out the possibility that it has properties sufficient to make 'awareness' an intelligible outcome. 'Matter' is something we know not what! How then indeed does materialism differ from mysticism? How do the star-gods differ from Plotinian plants, who have gone so far into the material as to forget themselves entirely?[90] How does the One, hidden behind its golden veil, differ from Matter, bound in golden chains?[91] We cannot speak accurately of either, and both, in their way, are the *potential*, the starting point, of everything. It is intriguing that, on Hornung's interpretation, 'for the Egyptians the world emerges from the one, because the non-existent is one', and

[86] *Ennead* V.3 [49].10; see also VI.7 [38].35.

[87] *Ennead* VI.7 [38].41; see also *Ennead* V.1 [10].4, 38: 'if you take away otherness, it will become one and remain silent'.

[88] *Tao Te Ching*, ch.1.

[89] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (*1779*)*, pt.4: *Hume on Religion*, edited by R. Wollheim (London: Fontana, 1963), 131.

[90] *Ennead* V.2 [11].2: plants embody the most audacious and stupid part or sort of soul!

[91] Compare *Enneads* I.6 [1].9, 39 and I.8 [51].15, 25.



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that non-existent is also the nothingness, the void, that surrounds the cosmos.[92] But that is another story.[93]

Phenomenologically at least, Plotinus, as it seems to me, has the superior insight: there is a difference, at least for us, in the direction that we face, whether towards the stuff of mere sensation,[94] or towards the One, by which we encounter beauty. There is a difference between two sorts of drunkenness: are we to dull our minds with wine, so to speak, or drink the heavenly nectar? Do we prefer the vegetative dream, or the stellar? The answer is not to be deduced from any prior reasoning, though we may be led, by reason, to a point where it can be 'seen'.

> It is there that one lets all study go; up to a point one has been led along and settled firmly in beauty and as far as this one thinks that in which one is, but is carried out of it by a kind of swell and sees suddenly, not seeing how, but the vision fills his eyes with light and does not make him see something else by it, but the light itself is what he sees.[95]

Seeing and being that light is no longer to be conscious of a self distinct from it. The memory of that light is what gives us such selfhood as we possess.

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[92] See also Ps-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (London: SPCK, 1987), 73: *The Divine Names* 697A: 'Its nature, unconfined by form, is the creator of all form. In it is nonbeing really an excess of being. It is not *a* life, but is, rather, superabundant Life. It is not *a* mind, but is superabundant Wisdom.... And one might even say that nonbeing itself longs for the Good which is above all being.'

[93] E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt, op. cit.*, 253.

[94] This collapse of boundaries, 'the death of the "I" as knower, chooser, and doer', is the sinister image of the Plotinian ascent: see John E. Nelson, *Healing the Split*, *op. cit.*, 43. In a way the psychotic is correct: reality is larger than we know, and full of demons. But if Plotinus is correct, so also was Housman, in his more optimistic mode: 'The world is round, so travellers tell,/ And straight though reach the track,/ Trudge on, trudge on, 'twill all be well,/ The way will guide one back' (A. E. Housman, 'A Shropshire Lad' 36 in *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956; 1st published 1939), 65).

[95] *Ennead* VI.7 [38].36.



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