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Source: *The Journal of Religion*, Jan., 1996, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Jan., 1996), pp. 28-42

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1204284>

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“Solitary” Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius*

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The final words of the *Enneads*, according to Porphyry’s ordering, are almost certainly the best known of all Plotinus’s writing: “the flight of the alone to the Alone” (*phygê monou pros monon*), “escape in solitude to the solitary” (Armstrong), “Flucht des Einsamen zum Einsamen” (Harder), “fuir seul vers lui seul” (Bréhier) (VI, 9 (9) 11, 50); and they seem to sum up for many the character of pagan mystical thought: self-absorbed, solitary, narcissistic, and world-renouncing; in short, the apparently absurd renunciation of everything we take to be valuable: intimacy, companionship, light, delight, and joy.¹ Harder suggests that the ascent of the soul toward its own supreme reflection might legitimately be termed “autoerotik,”² but Julia Kristeva goes a little further to suggest that Plotinus substitutes “autoerotic reflection” for the “narcissistic shadow,” thereby rehabilitating “the activity of the narcissistic process” and causing

* A version of this article was first read at a meeting of the International Society for the Classical Tradition at Boston University in March 1995. I should like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its generous support in the preparation of this article and in the larger project of which it is a part. I am also grateful to the referees of the *Journal of Religion* for their suggestions.

¹ “The flight of the alone to the Alone” is the translation of Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (New York, 1992), p. 51; compare the rendering of Stephen Mackenna “the passing of solitary to solitary” in *Plotinus: The Enneads*, trans. S. Mackenna, 4th ed. revised by B. S. Page (London, 1969; reprint, New York: Burdett, 1992), p. 709; *Plotinus*, 7 vols., trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass., 1966–88), 7:345; *Plotins Schriften*, 5 vols., German trans. R. Harder (Hamburg, 1956), 1a:207; *Plotin: Ennéades*, 7 vols., ed. and French trans. É. Bréhier (Paris, 1924–38), 7:187.

² Harder, *Plotins Schriften* I b, 381 on I 6 (1) 9, 8. Compare Pierre Hadot, “La mythe de Narcisse et son interprétation par Plotin,” *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 13 (Spring 1970): 105.

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Platonism to fall into “subjectivity.”³ Thus, of the closing words of the *Enneads* she writes: “The *Enneads* close with an apology of solitude oriented toward the One, as by an assumption of narcissism.”⁴ Or again, for Andrew Louth “the flight of the alone to the alone” “enshrines the essence of the mystical quest as [Plotinus] sees it: a solitary way that leads to the One, sovereign in solitary transcendence,” which marks the “radical opposition between the Platonic vision and Christian mystical theology.”⁵ For Plotinus, on the one hand, “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 . . . or any positive understanding of the co-inherence of man with man.”⁶ In Christian mystical theology, on the other hand, there is not only co-inherence of fellowship, but communion of the soul with God in loving grace and even, in Pseudo-Dionysius, God’s own ecstasy: “The soul in ecstasy meets God’s ecstatic love for herself. Here is no union with Plotinus’ One, immutable and unconscious either of Itself or of the soul.”⁷ According to this account, then, Plotinian mysticism is essentially solitary, subjective, and self-absorbed (or subsumed in a new experience of pure interiority). But how far is this true? Neither Kristeva nor Louth detects any further ambiguity in the word *monos*, but it is surely an important

³ J. Kristeva, *Tales of Love* (New York, 1987), pp. 108–9, 117. References and translation are from Arnold I. Davidson’s introduction to Pierre Hadot’s *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* (Plotin ou la simplicité du regard), trans. Michael Chase (Chicago and London, 1993), pp. 10–11.

⁴ Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 108, and *Histoires d’amour* (Paris, 1983), pp. 110–11. Kristeva’s analysis is a little more subtle than these comments would suggest, however. Kristeva recognizes that the *monos pros monon* formula is “untranslatable,” and, under the influence of E. Peterson (see n. 11 below), she notes both its dependence on earlier Egyptian and Neopythagorean sources and its new significance at the same time in Plotinus: “Plotin fait du même [*monos*] un autre même [*monon*]. Il crée une unité clivée mais harmonisée que symbolisent les mains jointes de la prière. Avant d’être une invocation, une demande, ou une imploration, cette posture subjective *nouvelle* est, dans sa topographie propre indignant simplement la relation de *soi à soi* par l’intermédiaire de l’Un” (*Histoires d’amour*, p. 111). In the words *phygê monou pros monon*, Kristeva sees “an assumption of narcissism” (*Tales of Love*, p. 114) in the sense that “the sad chthonic flower” (Narcissus) is “comme assumée, déplacée, subsumée dans l’expérience devenue désormais non pas narcissienne mais intérieure” (*Histoires d’amour*, p. 111); more generally, see pp. 101–31 of *Histoires d’amour*.

⁵ Louth, p. 51; see, generally, pp. 36–51. For other assessments, see Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard*, pp. 97–113; D. J. O’Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 103–10; P. Aubin, *Plotin et le christianisme, triade plotinienne et trinité chrétienne* (Paris, 1992).

⁶ Louth, p. 51, cf. pp. 80–97 on Gregory of Nyssa; pp. 159–78 on Denys; and pp. 179–90 on Patristic mysticism and Saint John of the Cross.

⁷ Louth, p. 176.

question to ask whether “to be isolated,” as the soul is said to have become “alone” “when it comes to be in plants” (III, 4 [15], 1) means the same as (or something analogous to) the experience of being alone “in oneself” in relation to the supremely “alone” (I, 6 [1], 7).⁸ Surely the two experiences are only superficially alike, but does this mean that they are not really alike at all? In fact, Plotinus clearly distinguishes the narcissistic case of self-absorption (I, 6 [1] 8) from the meaning of “aloneness” in the sense he intends and enjoins the reader to flee (*pheugômen*) the experience of Narcissus. The “flight” he speaks of at the end of VI, 9, then, is *not* narcissistic or self-absorbed and solitary in the sense that Louth or even Kristeva understands this, but something rather different.

What I shall do in this article is, first, examine precisely what is meant by such “aloneness” in the *Enneads*⁹ and then compare this understanding with a few passages in Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius. I shall argue that despite important differences (which we should of course expect), there is a pronounced affinity among all four thinkers on this question of the “solitariness” of mystical contemplation and that it is profoundly misleading to characterize the difference between pagan and Christian mysticism by the simplistic contrast between quasi-solipsistic isolationism, on the one hand, and coinherent communion, on the other, for this antithesis does not even begin to do justice to the highly sophisticated dialectic of positive and negative “ways” which both traditions develop as part of a common heritage.

What is the meaning of *monos* in Plotinus? The word occurs frequently in several different combinations: (a) as subject and object, as in the phrase *hina dexêtai monê monon*, “in order that the soul alone may receive the Good alone” (VI, 7 [38] 34, 7–8); (b) in a reflexive usage, as in the dative formulation, *monos monô*, “just as for those who go up to the celebrations of sacred rites there are purifications and strippings off of the clothes they wore before, and going up naked, until, passing in the ascent all that is alien to the God, one sees with one’s self alone That alone [*autô monô auto monon*], simple, single and pure” (I, 6 [1] 7, 6–10)—clearly influenced by *Symposium* 211 e 1;¹⁰ and (c) a prepositional usage, as in VI, 9 (9) 11, 50, *phygê monou pros monon*, or V, 1 (10) 6, 9–12, “Let us speak of it [Intellect] in this way, first invoking God himself, not in spoken words,

⁸ See *Enneads* III 4 (15) 1, 5: *hoion monê genomenê*; IV 4 (28) 23: *monê . . . kai eph’ heautês pôs; eph’ heautês . . . tôn en autê, kai monon noêsis*; and I 6 (1) 7, 1–2, esp. *heôs an tis parelthôn en tê anabasei pan hoson allotrion tou theou autô monô auto monon idê eilikêines, haploun, katharon*.

⁹ On this see also Hadot’s excellent treatment of “solitude” in the final chapter of *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard*.

¹⁰ Plato, *Symposium* 211 e 1 ff.: *auto to kalon idein heilikrines, katharon, amikton . . . all’ hauto to theion kalon . . . monoeides katidein*. Compare Alcibiades’ speech at *Symposium* 217 b 2–3: *syneginomên . . . monos monô*.

but stretching ourselves out with our soul [*tê psychê ekteinasin heautous*] into prayer to him,¹¹ able in this way to pray alone to him alone (*monous pros monon*). E. Peterson (1933), E. R. Dodds (1961), M. Atkinson (1983), and P. A. Meijer (1991) have discussed these formulations¹² and their forerunners in Thessalus of Tralles, Numenius, Plato, the Attic dramatists, and Homer.¹³ Peterson, in particular, distinguishes, on the one hand, a metaphysical aspect which he relates to the dative formulation and which, he argues, expresses the unity of isolation and community, "Absonderung und Verbundenheit," in an actual relation, and, on the other hand, a mystical, contemplative aspect (i.e., that of prayer), which he relates to the prepositional usage.¹⁴ He also argues that in Plotinus we have something altogether new which cannot be traced to earlier usage in Numenius or Thessalus of Tralles. Plotinus manages to unite the "*persönlich*," "*privat*," "*vertraulich*," "*intime*," or relational meaning of *monos monô* with the conceptual meaning of his metaphysics and mystical philosophy;¹⁵ and in VI, 9 (9) 11, 50, the formula "*phygê monou pros monon*" "grasps the mystical and the metaphysical together."¹⁶ Dodds goes even so far as to talk of magic in connection with this last passage "by the inspired addition of *phygê*," but does not tell us what this means.¹⁷

However, as Meijer has recently argued,¹⁸ it is not possible to separate metaphysical or magical aspects from the mystical. All the passages under discussion (but esp. I, 6 [1] 7, 8; VI, 7 [38] 34, 7; VI, 9 [9] 11, 50) are equally mystical. Moreover, there is clearly to be found in Plotinus's usage a development of the *monos* formula which has ancient roots but first takes on its distinctive character in Numenius. Ever since Homer, *monos monô* denotes a private conversation (as it does also in *Symposium* 217 b).¹⁹ These

¹¹ For prayer as a stretching out of the soul as Stoic theory, see E. Peterson, "Herkunft und Bedeutung des *Monos pros Monon*—formel bei Plotin," *Philologus* 88 (1933): 30–41; W. Theiler, *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus* (Leipzig, 1930), p. 134; and M. Atkinson, *Plotinus: "Ennead" v.1: A Commentary with Translation* (Oxford, 1983), p. 130; and for *epektasis* in Gregory of Nyssa, see J. Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique* (Paris: Aubier, 1944); also K. Corrigan, "Ecstasy and Ectasy in Some Early Pagan and Christian Mystical Writings," in *Greek and Medieval Studies in Honor of Leo Sweeney, S.J.*, ed. William J. Carroll and John J. Furlong (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 27–38.

¹² Peterson, pp. 30–41; E. R. Dodds, "Numenius and Ammonius" in *Les sources de Plotin, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique* (Vandoeuvres-Genève: Fondation Hardt 5, 1960), pp. 3–32, esp. pp. 16–18; Atkinson, pp. 131–32; P. A. Meijer, *Plotinus on the Good or the One ("Enneads" VI, 9): An Analytical Commentary* (Amsterdam, 1992), pp. 157–62.

¹³ For references and for an explanation of the "untranslatability" of the formula, see Peterson, pp. 34–39; Dodds, p. 17.

¹⁴ Peterson, pp. 32–33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 35 ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁷ Dodds, p. 17.

¹⁸ Meijer, pp. 157–62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

The Journal of Religion

salus of Tralles in a letter to Claudius mentions his wish to speak with God, and even the priest is asked to withdraw so that Thessalus can speak with God alone (*ei monô pros monon homilein epitrepseien*).²⁰ In Numenius, however, for the first time the notion of private conversation gives way to that of a private meeting between the soul and the Good (*homilêsai tô agathô monô monon*).²¹ Meijer concludes rightly, “The structure of the Plotinian monology is already entirely foreshadowed in Numenius fr. 2.”²² So the *monos monô* and *monos pros monon* formulae signify a private meeting in the sense that no one else is present to such intimacy. If this is true, it would appear that such an experience could not be “solitary” in the way Louth understands it or “autoerotic” as Kristeva sees it, for such a meeting, in the first place, would rather be the opposite of solitary self-absorption, and it is not yet clear, in the second place, what an interiority that “subsumes” narcissism²³ actually involves. But can we go further than this and show clearly on other grounds that *monos* must be understood in a different, more subtle sense?

“To be alone” in the sense of “solitary,” “isolated,” or “abandoned” in Plotinus means to be in, or to belong to, something else (“to be of it”) so that one is alienated (*allotriôn*) from oneself. To be “in oneself,” by contrast, is to be “alone” in a different sense, that is, self-gathered and self-dependent,²⁴ not like the impassive Stoic sage according to Zeno of Cit-

²⁰ *Catalogus codicum astrologorum* (Brussels: Lamertin, 1898–1912), VIII 3, p. 136, 30; cf. *Catalogus codicum astrologorum* VIII 4, p. 253 ff.

²¹ Numenius, fragment 2, in Edouard des Places, trans., *Fragments* (Paris, 1973), lines 11–12.

²² Meijer (n. 12 above), p. 162.

²³ See Kristeva, *Histoires d'amour* (n. 4 above), p. 111.

²⁴ The principle is more generally stated as follows: everything is either in its cause or in something else (V 5 [32] 9, 1–2; cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology* [Oxford: Dodds, 1963], proposition 35), but to be in the cause is, in different senses, to be “alone” or “in oneself.” So for a human being or for soul to be “alone” means to be “separate” from body and its concerns in the sense that one belongs entirely to the divine (*holê tou theiou*) so that everything which belongs to Intellect is soul’s own beauty (*oikeion*) and not another’s (*allotriôn*), “since then is it really only soul” (*tote estin entôs monon psychê*) (I, 6 [1] 6, 9–18; I, 2 [19] 3–7). The “moral” separation of soul from body is ultimately not to live the life of a part of oneself, but to live “entirely” (*holôs*) (i.e., with the whole of oneself) “the life of the gods” (I, 2 [19] 7, 21–30; cf. Aristotle, *Ethika Nikomacheia* [EN] VI, 7, 13; X, 7). Consequently, this sense of “aloneness” or of “self-dependence” is also one of integration, of becoming oneself, or of being “more” or “most” of what one is, and Plotinus can even apply such language to the One (cf. V, 8 [31] 9, 47; V [10] 6, 50–53; VI 8 [39], 12–16; 15, 16–23; 21, 4–5; 26–8; 8, 15–16, etc.). Unlike illness which is *allotriôn* and *oikeion*, the presence of the Good is more like “the quiet companionship of health” (*hygeia . . . êrema synousa*), “for it comes and sits by us as something which belongs to us, and is united to us” (*hate oikeion kai henoutai*) (V, 8 [31] 11, 27–30). At the height of vision (*malista tote hora*) (V, 5 [32] 7, 29–30) when Intellect veils itself “from the rest” in interiority and sees no longer “one light in another” (*allo en allô*), but *auto kath' heauto monon katharon eph' hautou exaiphnês phanen* (V, 5 [32] 7, 30–35), this would appear to be an experience of unification (VI, 9 [9] 11, 6), of rootedness in oneself and in

ium,²⁵ but self-dependent in an integral way: “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; so 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” (I, 4 [46] 15, 21–25). Consequently, even at the level of practical affairs, to be “alone” does not mean to be removed from every human consideration, but rather to be capable of more consideration.²⁶ But how does this relate to mystical union, for surely such an experience is isolated or cut off from everything else? This may well be true, but only in a special sense. Stripping to a new radical nakedness (cf. I, 6 [1] 7) or cutting away everything (cf. V, 3 [49] 17) is a precondition of the ascent to union, and that ascent is painful, laborious, even terrifying (cf. VI, 9 [9], 3, 4 ff.); but the aloneness which ensues is (a) an aloneness of greater intimacy, (b) an aloneness of identity and unlikeness to everything else, and (c) an aloneness which though different from everything else, nonetheless in a sense extends to everything else. Let me take up each of these in turn.

First, the aloneness of greater intimacy. For Plotinus, perception is an act of relative generality. I perceive a bundle of qualities in matter and the thing perceived stays outside me.²⁷ Thought, by contrast, is immediately its object, a determinate entity (*tode ti*).²⁸ But even in thought there is the distinction or separation between subject and object. This separation disappears in mystical union where neither body nor soul nor intellect obtrudes.²⁹ Plotinus defines such “aloneness” in V, 1 (10) 6 in terms of

one’s own substance (VI, 9 [9] 11, 12–16; cf. V, 4 [7] 2, 21, 34; Plato, *Timaeus* 42 e: *en tō oikeiō êthei*), yet simultaneously rapture (VI, 9 [9] 11, 12–13), simplification, pure loving tendency (VI, 9 [9] 11, 22–25; VI, 7 [38] 35), a going beyond selfhood and substance (11, 39–42), “becoming another” (10, 14–17) which yet remains “company” or “being with” (10, 15–18; 11, 41–42) (cf. Aristotle, *EN* VIII–IX) and which clearly includes “grace” (VI, 7 [38] 21–22). On this generally, see Plotinus, *Traité 38, VI, 7: Introduction, traduction, commentaire et notes*, by P. Hadot (Paris, 1988); G. J. P. O’Daly, “The Presence of the One in Plotinus,” in *Plotino e il neoplatonismo in oriente e in occidente* (Rome, 1974), pp. 159–69; F. M. Schroeder, “Synousia, Synaesthesia, Synesis in Plotinus,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 36, no. 1 (1987): 677–99; Corrigan (n. 11 above); and on the “solitary” as self-integrity, see W. Beierwaltes, *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit* (Frankfurt, 1991), pp. 208–10; with regard to VI, 4–5 (22–23), see also D. J. O’Meara, “The Problem of Omnipresence in Plotinus, *Ennead* VI, 4–5: A Reply,” *Dionysius* 4 (1980): 61–73; and on *erôs* in Plotinus and Origen, see J. M. Rist, *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen* (Toronto, 1964), esp. pp. 204–20.

²⁵ Hans Friedrich August von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta (SVF)* (Stuttgart, 1968); see *SVF* III, 448, 452, 453.

²⁶ See also in relation to soul IV, 3 (27) 4, 21–37; and by contrast with n. 24 above, see *SVF* III, 616, 628.

²⁷ VI, 3 (44) 8; V, 5 (32) 1, 17–19. For other views, see E. K. Emilsson, *Plotinus on Sense-Perception* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 113–40.

²⁸ V, 5 (32) 6, 5–6.

²⁹ VI, 7 (38) 34, 14–20; 35, 5–19.

The Journal of Religion

vision, proximity, and togetherness of being:³⁰ “Everything longs for its parent and loves it, especially when parent and offspring are alone [*monoi*]; but when the parent is the highest good, the offspring is necessarily with him [*synesti autô*] and separate from him only in otherness” (V, 1 [10] 6, 50–54). And when the vision is even more intense, not even otherness separates the two: there is nothing whatever “in between” (cf. VI, 7 [38] 34, 7 ff.; VI, 9 [9] 8, 34). To be “alone” in this sense, then, is the opposite of isolation, but the fullest intimacy the soul has always desired (“wishing to be mingled with it” [*sygkerasthênai*]) (I, 6 [1] 7, 13; cf. VI, 7 [38] 35). Plotinus consciously describes this union in physical, even sexual terms, and so it is not surprising in a late treatise for him to insist that the experience of lovers in sexual intercourse would be inexplicable without the Good. This aloneness is not removed from sex and desire, but the ground and root of all desire (III, 5 [50] 1, 21–30).³¹ It also appears as a *single activity* which gets split up into the multiplicity of Intellect’s vision and split yet again into the phenomenal multiplicity of the sense-world.³²

Second, the aloneness of identity seems at first glance to confirm the autoerotic thesis of Kristeva. One sees the Good when one is “most oneself,”³³ Plotinus tells us; or when the soul “comes-to-be there it becomes itself and what it was” (VI, 9 [9] 9); it enters into its own (*oikeios*) and is then itself when it belongs purely to itself separate from everything else (cf. VI, 9 [9] 9, 51). However, the central contrast for Plotinus here is one between what belongs to oneself (*oikeios*) and what belongs to another (*allou, allotrios*). To be oneself is to be likened to God, according to the Platonic *dictum*,³⁴ and this is the “flight from here” (I, 2 [19] 1; 3–4), “a stripping off of everything alien” (*allotriou*, 3, 5–6), a flight to meet alone (*prosomilein*) with the Good rather than to associate with (*prosomilein*) everything alien (cf. VI, 9 [9] 11, 42; I, 6 [1] 5, 55; 6, 7). So this aloneness is a search for the source of identity (not subjectivity)—a search for the Beautiful itself and the source of love, as in the *Symposium*. Much of the language Plotinus employs is undoubtedly colored by Stoic usage,³⁵ but his thought has a clear affinity with that of Plato in the *Symposium*. What is the principle of identity? Diotima asks, and it turns out that while this

³⁰ There is “nothing between” (V, 1 [10] 6, 49). This is not only true of Intellect’s vision of the One (cf. Atkinson [n. 11 above], p. 152 on V, 1 [10] 6, 48–49), for in the relation of cause and caused they constitute a single *energeia* as in Aristotle (*Physics* III 3, 202 b 5–16), but it is especially true of the union of Soul or Intellect with the Good (VI, 7 [38] 34, 1–14).

³¹ See esp. VI, 7 (38) 31–35.

³² See VI, 7 (38) 15–16.

³³ See n. 23 above.

³⁴ Compare I, 6 (1) 6, 18–21; I, 2 (19) 3, 20–21.

³⁵ On the transposition of Stoic language onto the metaphysical plane by Porphyry, see P. Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus* (Paris, 1971), 1:488–89.

is certainly not body, neither is it soul or knowledge.³⁶ Her question, in fact, is never directly answered in the dialogue except indirectly, in the Greater Mysteries’ section of Socrates’ speech, by the mystical union with the Beautiful itself in which the soul gives birth to substances, not images,³⁷ and also by Alcibiades’ remark later that Socrates is “unlike” any other human being; for when one discovers the inner reality of both “himself” and his *logoi*, one finds also the uniqueness of his identity as grounded in his pursuit of the Beautiful.³⁸ I suggest that Plotinus’s understanding is similar: one discovers oneself when one is “most what one is,” and this is when one is most uncoordinated with or “unlike” everything else. So to be alone or separate from everything else means to be oneself in the generative presence of the Good: “But if it runs the opposite way, it will arrive, not at something else but at itself, and . . . since it is not in something else it will not be in nothing, but in itself; but when it is in itself alone and not in being, it is in that, for one becomes, not substance, but ‘beyond substance’ by this converse” (VI, 9 [9] 11, 38–42). Is it within or without, Plotinus asks in V, 5 (32) 7–8; a bit of both, he replies, but there is no real “whence.” At the same time, one just has to wait in silence for the light, grace, or gift of the Good which is nonetheless present to everyone according to the capacity of each.³⁹ So in VI, 9, the flight of the alone to the alone is the being not even with another “but one with oneself” (10, 21–22), “beyond substance by this company” (11, 42–43); it is “the life of Gods and of godlike and blessed men, deliverance from the things of this world” (11, 49–51). Apparently, therefore, such a meeting is not incommensurate with community, though perhaps community of a very different sort.⁴⁰ “They are no longer two but both are one. You could not distinguish between them, as long as the One is present; lovers and their beloveds here below imitate this in their will to be united” (VI, 7 [38] 34). At the same time the soul in this experience does not perceive its body “that it is in it, and does not speak of itself as anything else, not man, or living thing, or being, or all” (cf. Numenius, fragment 2) and would be happy “even if everything else about it perished.” Just as in friendship⁴¹ through the discovery of “another self” one discovers one’s own self, so too in such union everything also becomes unimportant by comparison with the other as oneself. To be alone with the alone in this

³⁶ *Symposium* 207 c–208 b.

³⁷ *Symposium* 212 a.

³⁸ *Symposium* 221 c–d.

³⁹ Compare V, 5 (32) 8, 1–5; 12, 33–34; VI, 7 (38) 21–23.

⁴⁰ The later doctrine of “henads” seems prefigured in such passages as VI, 6 (34) 10, 1–4; 9, 24–40; VI, 7 (38) 35, 30–32; III, 8 (30) 10, 5–10.

⁴¹ On Aristotle’s treatment of friendship in *EN* VIII–IX and Plotinus, see Schroeder (n. 24 above).

The Journal of Religion

sense is to be pure transforming, cocreating identity. It is not necessary to be “at work” all the time to be oneself. Activity possesses a purely self-disclosing unity.

Third, the aloneness which “extends” to everything else in the *Enneads* gets little treatment, but is important for understanding what such aloneness means. At VI, 9 (9) 6, Plotinus asks in what sense we call the One “one” and replies that it must be understood in “a larger sense” (*pleionôês*) than a monad or a point are unified.⁴² The One is not in need of anything as everything else needs it, but this does not mean that it is pure isolated self-sufficiency because its presence is already everywhere: “The One is not outside anything [cf. Plato, *Parmenides* 138 e 4], but is in company with all without their knowing [*pasi synestin*]” (VI, 9 [9] 7, 28–29). The One’s presence, therefore, is more comprehensive than anything else. In a much later work, VI, 7 (38), Plotinus explains more clearly what is meant by such a view. The extension of soul is considerable, but more limited than that of Intellect, and that of Intellect in turn more limited than the One: “Not all things desire Intellect, but all things desire the Good” (VI, 7 [38] 20, 18–19). Even beings which have Intellect “do not stop there,” but go beyond Intellect to the Good “before reason” (20, 20–22). “And if they also seek life, and everlasting existence and activity, what they desire is not Intellect insofar as it is Intellect, but insofar as it is good and from the Good and directed to the Good” (20, 22–24). Life, eternal existence, and activity, therefore, possess a wider extension than Intellect. Irrational animals, plants, stones, and the elemental bodies trace existence and life through Intellect to the all-embracing power of the Good and, according to Plotinus’s argument, this is because “desire” in all its diverse forms cannot be explained solely in intellectual terms, but is fundamentally preintellectual in origin, having its direct source in the “gift” of the Good.

Now, on this understanding, it is simply mistaken to regard the Good in Plotinus’s thought as an independent, uncaring, philosophical cause or the soul together with it as a detached, autoerotic entity, for the presence of the Good is the most fundamental grace, light, or power *given* to all. The aloneness of the Good is compatible, therefore, with its being “spread out over” (*ektathen*) Intellect and soul: “Playing upon them . . . it . . . *gives* them a blessed perception and vision” (VI, 7 [38] 35, 36–40). This radical aloneness which is the source and coexistence of the aloneness and distinctness of every self is also, then, the most comprehensive power by which everything possesses existence in the first place. Such a conception is diametrically at odds with the views of Louth and Kris-

⁴² Compare V, 5 (32) 10, 10: when you see it, look at it *whole*.

teva. The “alone and solitary one” (*to monon kai erêmon*; cf. Numenius, fragment 2, 16; Plato, *Philebus* 63 6)⁴³ has already extended the gift of existence and life to everything and by its intimate presence awakens the unique identities of all things in and from itself. To say that this is subjectivity, autoeroticism, or uncaring isolation is to miss the point that the word *monos* in this context carries significantly different connotations, which in their turn should not be pushed overmuch since no matter how “gentle and kindly” the Good may be,⁴⁴ the transcendence of the Good still overrides everything.

A similar complex understanding of what is involved in such “aloneness” pervades Proclus’ approach to this question.⁴⁵ At the end of his commentary on the First Hypothesis of Plato’s *Parmenides*, preserved in William of Moerbeke’s translation of Proclus’ *In Parmenidem* (*IP*), Proclus argues (commenting on *Parmenides* 142 a 2–3) that while no description or knowledge can apply to the One, we call it “one” by virtue of the understanding of unity which is in ourselves. For since everything that exists longs for the first cause naturally, this natural indwelling striving cannot come from knowledge, for otherwise “what has no share in knowledge could not seek it” (*IP* 54, 3–10):⁴⁶ “What else is the One except the operation and energy of this ‘birth pang’ in us [*ôdinos huius operatio et adiectio*]? It is therefore this interior [*intrinsecam*] understanding of unity, which is a projection [*provolem*] and, as it were, an expression of the One in ourselves, that we call ‘the One.’ So the One itself is not nameable, but the One in ourselves” (*IP* 54, 11–14). Does this mean that the One is purely subjective? No, simply that it is unnameable by virtue of its supereminence, which here signifies in part (as in Plotinus) that the One extends to and beyond everything: “And much less does everything participate in life or intellect or rest or movement. But in unity, everything.” Consequently, the One is unnameable and unknowable for everything except the “divinely inspired knowledge” (*cognitio indivinata*) “which leads the One in ourselves towards that One” (*in nobis unum illi uni*) (*IP* 62, 21–28). So the One itself is above both affirmations and negations (*IP* 70, 5–10),⁴⁷ and even above the power of generating all things (*IP* 72, 23 ff.), for all of these apply to the One in us (*IP* 70, 7). At the same time, however, it is by virtue of the ultimate unity and singleness in ourselves that

⁴³ Compare Meijer (n. 12 above), p. 160, n. 470.

⁴⁴ Compare V, 5 (32) 12, 33–34.

⁴⁵ See also Porphyry, *Philosophica Historia*, fragment 18, in A. Nauck, ed., *Porphyrii Opuscula* (Leipzig, 1886), pp. 15, 8–12: *he theos . . . monos aei . . . tô mê toutois synarithmeisthai*.

⁴⁶ *Corpus Platonicum Medii Aevi: Plato Latinus*, vol. 3., ed. R. Klibansky and C. Labowsky (London 1953). Direct translations are taken from this volume.

⁴⁷ See already the anonymous commentary on the *Parmenides* attributed to Porphyry by Hadot, *IP*, fragment 2, 9–14, in *Porphyre et Victorinus* (n. 35 above), 2:68.

we are able to approach the aloneness of the One (“Going further and having become intellect, she comes to rest in the One Being, and she approaches the One itself and becomes single [*unire*], . . . everywhere closing her doors and contracting all her activity and being, content with unity alone” (*unione solum*) (IP 74, 6–9). Here the soul must leave behind reason, deliberation, the dialectical method of negation which takes us up to the One, and even the straining or tendency itself to the One (*tensio*).⁴⁸ Finally, having concluded its course “it is lawful for the soul to be with the One [*coesse, syneinai*]. Having become single and alone in itself, it will choose only the simply One [*in ipsa facta solum (et simpliciter una, anima) eliget solum le simpliciter bonum*]” (IP 75, 31–76, 2).

In other words, only at the conclusion of the complete course of all affirmations, negations, negations of negations, and the final dismissal of the whole dialectic itself does Proclus feel himself entitled to repeat in anything like its proper signification the *monos pros monon* formula. Something of the complexity we find in Plotinus is also present in Proclus (the question of self-identity, for instance, and the extension of the One), but if anything, Proclus’ understanding is even more complex. By comparison, the views of Louth and Kristeva do not really begin to approach or unravel the complexity of a formula which concludes *seven* books of commentary on the First Hypothesis of the *Parmenides*.

What then is the contrast between Plotinus and Proclus, on the one hand, and Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius on the other? As far as I can see, the central differences in Gregory are, first, a different conception of God and, second, a new sense of the transformation of the soul and of the whole being effected by the sacraments and the love of God whereby the soul is ceaselessly and ecstatically drawn out of herself into the infinity of the divine *ousia*. Jean Daniélou has identified the doctrine of *epektasis* as one of Gregory’s major innovative contributions to the history of thought, together with a different emphasis on the social dimensions of love and the communion of saints.⁴⁹ This is true, but even elements of the *epektasis* doctrine and the drawing out of the soul into the infinity of the One’s power also exist in Plotinus.⁵⁰ For Gregory, however, God is simple but triune and therefore not “alone” or “solitary” in any immediate sense. The experience of withdrawal and aloneness is, therefore, part of the soul’s communion with itself, first, in preparation for its unified vision of God. This is a different emphasis rather than an entirely different conception. It is described as a solitary life (*idiasomen*; *Vita Moysis*

⁴⁸ See already fragment 1 of *The Chaldean Oracles*, trans. and ed. Ruth Majercik (Leiden, 1989), lines 9–12.

⁴⁹ Daniélou (n. 11 above), esp. pp. 259–314.

⁵⁰ See Corrigan (n. 11 above).

[VM] in *Patrologia Graeca* [PG] 46, 332 b),⁵¹ like the withdrawal of Moses “living alone by himself” (*monos monô syzôn heautô*; *In Psalmos*, PG 46, 456 c), a flight “to the higher teaching of the mysteries” (*pheukteon enteuthen*; VM, PG 46, 332 c), where “having been stripped” (*gymnôtheis*),⁵² Moses “was alone” (*eph’ heautou*) and entered into the invisible darkness and “was in company with it” (*synên*) (VM, PG 46, 317 a–b). The flight into solitude, Gregory explains elsewhere, is not the spatial removal (*topikôs*) from earthly things but the intelligible (*noêtôs*) likening of oneself to God (*tês pros ton theon homoiôseôs*), which is the separation of moral excellence from evil (*De Oratione Dominica*, PG 44, 1145 a–b). And in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* he explains further that the soul has two optic activities, one which is *polyommatos*, and related to vain things (*mataia*), and the other “through which alone” one contemplates “the alone” (*In Canticum Canticorum* [CC] VIII, PG 44, 949 c–d), namely, “what is grasped in the unchangeable, eternal nature the true Father, the only begotten Son, and the Holy Spirit” in which there is no separation (*chôrismos*) or alienation (*allotriôsis*) (CC VIII, PG 44, 949 d). “Sharp-edged and perspicacious is he who looks through the one eye of the soul to the Good alone” (*di’ henos tou tês psychês ophthalmou pros monon to agathon*; CC VIII, PG 44, 952 a).

A similar conception to Plotinus is therefore to be found in Gregory where *monos* clearly does not mean “solitary” in the sense of “separated” or “alienated” from all, but separate from everything unworthy because the self is integrated and unified.⁵³ Gregory also transforms the Plotinian notion of the immediacy (“nothing between”) of the union between the lover and the beloved. In his work *On Virginity* he argues that marriage postpones the *Parousia*, whereas true virginity brings about a transcending of time itself, “since it does not fashion any interval between [*ouden diastêma metaxu*] itself and the Presence of God by the generations in between.” Virginity, therefore, brings the gifts of the Resurrection immediately into the present life.⁵⁴ On the other side of the union, as it

⁵¹ *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1857–66).

⁵² Compare *Enneads* I, 6 (1) 7, 6–7.

⁵³ Compare CC II, PG 44, 804 a–805 a. For Daniélou, the major difference between Plotinus and Gregory is that for the latter there is no identity between the soul and God (p. 43); the divine element in the soul is “sanctifying grace,” i.e., the whole of a human being’s “spiritual life” (not the Plotinian *nous*) and something which is “communicated” (not something which belongs to the soul in its own right) (pp. 44–45). This is certainly true, but it is also to ignore the fact that for Platonism the ascent of the soul is ultimately a divine gift (cf. *Symposium* 212 a 5–7) and the culmination of both active striving and passive assistance (e.g., *Enneads*, IV, 8 [6] 1, 1–11, esp. 4–7: *hidrytheis . . . hidrysas*; see also VI, 7 [38] 16, 31–35).

⁵⁴ M. Aubineau, ed., *De virginitate*, in *Sources chrétiennes* (Paris, 1966), XIV, 4, 11–13, p. 440; PG, 46, 381 a. The sense of Gregory’s argument seems to be that death remains active as long as human procreation by marriage is active; it thus postpones the full resurrection by prolonging the life of the flesh. True virginity is already to bring about the resurrection by living the life of grace (*De virginitate* XIV 1–4, Aubineau, ed., pp. 432–44).

were, the Good too is “alone” in the sense that what is contemplated is “in one nature,” since the difference of “persons” makes for no separation or alienation (CC, PG 44, 949 d).⁵⁵ Here we have a new conception of the Good certainly (and on the level of *ousia*), but the idea of “being with” a superessential unity in a union which is not confused, or in which the self is not obliterated but transformed, is one which relates directly to Plotinus⁵⁶ (cf. CC 949 c–d). “To be with God alone” (*meta tou theou einai monou*) is to live an integrated, uninterrupted life of enjoyment unmixed with “the things which tend to the contrary,”⁵⁷ writes Gregory in his treatise *On Virginity*.

In Pseudo-Dionysius, there is an entirely different conception yet again both of the solitariness of the human soul in its approach to the unity of the Godhead and also of the ecstatic love of God. Each order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, for instance, admits of a different kind of union or *synaxis* with God, as if each degree opens up in its own right a new perspective on God and the world; but it is the monk (*monachos*) who by virtue of his solitary state is raised to the highest order of the faithful (*tetelesmenê taxis*) (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* [EH] 536 d). What does the name *monachos* signify? It signifies the purity of their worship of God and their undivided, unified life (*ameristou kai heniaias zôês*), which unifies them (*henopoiousês*) by a recollection without distraction to lead them to the *deiform monad* (*theoeidê monada*) and to the perfection of divine love (*philtheon teleiôsin*) (EH 532 d–533 a). Interior unity and deiformity are equivalent. It is the monk’s duty to restore the primordial unity of his life “and to form only one with the One, to unite with the holy Unity” (EH 536 a). Again as in Gregory and Plotinus, but with a new understanding, the “solitary” nature of the monk (*heniaios*, *monachos*, *monachikos*; cf. EH 536 a) signifies “bringing to unity” and integration in the meeting with God (cf. 536 a–b). For other ecclesiastical orders different communions with God are envisaged (536 c), but the high state of the monk signifies that the unity of this life is “closer” to the unity of God (536 a).

What is this divine unity? Pseudo-Dionysius’s conception of the divine ecstasy goes far beyond anything in earlier Neoplatonism, but at the same time develops and transforms important elements both in Plotinus and in Plato: “We must dare to say even this on behalf of the truth that the cause of all things himself, by his beautiful and good love for all things, through an overflowing [*hyperbolên*] of loving goodness, becomes outside

⁵⁵ Compare *De anima et resurrectione*, PG 46, 93 c: “When the soul has become simple, uniform and consummately godlike . . . she clings to that only desirable Beloved [*to monon . . . agapêton kai erasmion prosphyetai*] . . . by virtue of the motion and act of love.”

⁵⁶ As Daniélou makes clear; see p. 38.

⁵⁷ *De virginitate* XIII, 28–30, Aubineau, ed., p. 426; PG 46, 376 c.

of himself by his providential care for all beings and is, as it were, charmed [*thelgetai*] by goodness, affection and love, and is led down from his place above all and transcendent of all to dwell in all things in accordance with his ecstatic, superessential power which does not depart from itself” (*De Divinis Nominibus* [*Div. Nom.*] IV 13; PG 3, 712 a–b). Louth sees in this passage a complete break with the description of mystical union in Plotinus and earlier Platonism,⁵⁸ yet the major force of the passage may be said to consist in the fact that it develops and transforms precisely the *Platonic* tradition. First, as in Plotinus, there is only one and the same activity (*mia kai autê energeia*) which in and by virtue of the Thearchy gets split up into the many different participations or dimensions throughout all the hierarchical orders.⁵⁹ Second, the ecstatic love of the Thearchy is more comprehensive than everything else. As in Plotinus and Proclus, the power (and *gift*) of the Good extends further than those of Intellect and Soul, and therefore embraces everything in its superessential providential care.⁶⁰ Third, the notion of divine love and care as overflowing goodness which seems so distinctively Christian not only echoes Plotinus’s overflowing Good (cf. VI, 8 [39] 10, 33; V, 5 [32] 8, 8; V, 2 [11] 1, 8–9)⁶¹ but is couched consciously in the words of Agathon from Plato’s *Symposium*. In the *Symposium*, Love “enchants the thought of every god and human being” (*thelgôn*) and so taking up his residence in people’s hearts (at least the “soft” and “tender” ones) “empties us of alienation and fills us with intimacy, bringing us together” (*Symposium* 197 c–e; 195 e). Here, in Pseudo-Dionysius, the Good itself “is enchanted,” “beguiled” and thus is led ecstatically to dwell in all things. Since in the Neoplatonic tradition the Good already embraces all things and dwells in its own way at the root of everything (cf. Plotinus, V, 1 [10] 10, 5–10; V, 5 [32] 12; III, 8 [30] 10), it is by no means incommensurate with the pagan tradition (Platonic or Neoplatonic) to represent the Christian loving divinity as “beguiled” or “enchanted” by providential love for all things. “Daring,” yes, but unthinkable, no.

To sum up: the final words of VI, 9 (9) 11, *phygê monou pros monon*, should not be taken to signify either a narcissistic, subjectivist ascent of the soul or a solipsistic, uncaring isolationism. Such a flight involves the painful stripping away of all that is alien or accessory to identity, but it also signifies an integral meeting and union which gives meaningful existence, grace, and light to everything which will come from it. In this con-

⁵⁸ Louth (n. 5 above), p. 176.

⁵⁹ *Div. Nom.* 709 c; 713 d; 912 d; *kat’ energeian mian*; Proclus, *De decem dubitationibus circa providentiam* I, 118; see R. Roques, *L’Univers dionysien* (Paris: Aubier, 1954), p. 114, n. 1.

⁶⁰ *Div. Nom.* 709 d–712 b.

⁶¹ Compare Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, proposition 133.

The Journal of Religion

text, *monos* in the phrases *monos monô*, *monê monon dexêtai*, *monos pros monon*, and so forth, cannot mean “solitary” in the sense of “abandoned,” “self-absorbed,” “without companions” (though it does simultaneously connote “stripped” or “bare” of all accretions), for it signifies primarily that which is without barriers or distinctions which could prevent the most complete union; so the lover might wish to belong alone to his or her beloved (cf. *Div. Nom.* IV, 712 a). Proclus’s understanding of the term is even more complex, for in the context of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, *monos* or *solus* connotes a divinely inspired, precognitive knowing which leads the “One” of the soul beyond sense, deliberation, and thought, in silence to the One itself. In this complex context, Christian thought, though very different and perfectly creative in its own right, should not be taken to develop an antithetical, coinherent community view of the mystical quest.⁶² There are significant differences, but when Pseudo-Dionysius develops perhaps *the* most distinctive view of the ecstatic all-embracing love of the Thearchy, it is altogether in the spirit of a shared philosophic enterprise that he should do this consciously in the context of Plato’s *Symposium* and Plotinus’s *Enneads*. Really good ideas always spring from their own soil, but if they are to be form-creating, they are not, and should not be, too rigid respecters of territorial determinations.

⁶² For a similar view, see J. M. Rist’s excellent comparison of Origen and Plotinus in *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen* (Toronto, 1964), pp. 195–220.