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Plotinus, mysticism, and mediation

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Abstract: The Plotinian scholar, John Bussanich, has noted that the issue of classifying mystical union with the One consists in deciding between either theistic union or monistic identity. For advocates of theistic union, during mystical union the soul retains its identity and can be distinguished from the One; for advocates of monistic identity, during the union the soul loses its identity and becomes absorbed into the One. Both camps, however, believe that noetic activity is transcended in the union. In contradistinction to the theistic union and monistic identity views, I argue for what I call a *mediated union* position in Plotinus's doctrines whereby the noetic part of the soul – understood as a multi-faceted cognitive capacity – is not transcended in union with the One.

When the seer sees himself, then when he sees, he will see himself as like this, or rather he will be in union with himself as like this and will be aware of himself like this since he has become single and simple.

Plotinus *Ennead*, VI.9.10.9–11

Theistic union and monistic identity

The Plotinian scholar John Bussanich, has noted that the issue of classifying union with the One is 'summarily boiled down to deciding between *theistic union* or *monistic identity*' (my italics). Dissatisfied with this divergence, Bussanich calls for a re-evaluation of the more recent claims regarding Plotinian mysticism (1997, 364–365). Bussanich's call is on the mark since there are serious questions concerning mystical union with the One: is the mystic cognitively aware of the union? If not, does Plotinus endorse some other form of awareness? Does the mystic really lose total self-identity in the union? How can Plotinus recount his own experience of the One in the forms of concepts, allegories, analogies, and images if all awareness or self-identity is lost in the union?

Bussanich is right to be dissatisfied with the present state of scholarly agreement concerning mystical union. However, he has set up a false dilemma by claiming that theistic union and monistic identity are the only options concerning the issue of classifying mystical union. Actually, the attempt to answer these questions can be seen as dividing scholars into *three* camps, not two. In contradistinction to the theistic union and monistic identity positions, I will argue that Plotinus can be interpreted as espousing what I will call a *mediated union* position regarding mystical union with the One. But first, a brief look at theistic union and monistic identity.

The essential difference between theistic union and monistic identity is the following: for advocates of theistic union, during mystical union the soul retains its identity and can be distinguished from the One; for advocates of monistic identity, during the union the soul loses its identity and becomes absorbed into the One. The interesting and perhaps frustrating thing to note is that Plotinus has been interpreted as espousing either view. Consider the following passages that seem to express theistic union during mystical union. (A): 'There one can see both him and oneself as it is right to see: the self glorified, full of intelligible light' (VI.9.9.58–59). (B): 'When the seer sees himself, then when he sees, he will see himself as like this, or rather he will be in union with himself as like this and will be aware of himself like this since he has become single and simple' (VI.9.10.9–11). (C): 'For since the soul is other than God but comes from him it is necessarily in love with him, and when it is there it has a heavenly love' (VI.9.9.27–30). (D):

The soul too, which is other than the one, has its being more in proportion to its greater and real being. It is certainly not the one itself And what has separate parts, like a chorus, is furthest from the one, and what is a continuous body is nearer; and the soul is nearer still, but still participates in it. (VI.9.1.34–36)

Now consider the following passages that seem to express monistic identity during mystical union. (A):

So then the seer does not see and does not distinguish and does not imagine two, but it is as if he had become someone else and he is not himself and does not count as his own there, but has come to belong to that and so is one, having joined, as it were, center to center. For here too when the centers have come together they are one. (VI.9.10.15–17)

(B): 'There were not two, but the seer himself was one with the seen ... he was one himself, with no distinction in himself' (VI.9.10.10–11). (C): 'For we are not cut off from him or separate ... but we breathe and are preserved because that Good is always bestowing gifts as long as it is what it is' (VI.9.9.11–12). (D): 'But when the soul wants to see by itself, seeing only be being with it and being one by being one with it, it does not think it yet has what it seeks, because it is not different from what is being thought' (VI.9.3.10–12).

These passages, amongst others, are the primary reason for the difference of interpretation among scholars concerning Plotinian mystical union. John Rist is

a classic representative of the camp of scholars who view Plotinus's mysticism as theistic union. Condemning pantheism and monism, Rist notes that in the merger between the soul and the One the soul is 'neither obliterated nor revealed as the One itself, nor as the *only* spiritual substance' (1967, 227). Synthesizing the positions of René Arnou (1967), R. C. Zaehner (1961), and A. H. Armstrong (1946, 1940), Rist maintains that the soul may be 'oned' with the One, but the soul ultimately retains its identity like the single note in a tune or a distinguishable voice in a chorus (1967, 227–229).

Bussanich also espouses theistic union and situates Plotinus with respect to the views of Bernard McGinn (1982), Pierre Hadot (1994, 1973), and Louis Dupré (2000, 1974). Rather than speaking of union with the One in Jamesian terms of experience (James 1971), McGinn prefers to speak of the event as a *consciousness* that oscillates between the presence and absence of the divine (1982, 128–130). Hadot sees the philosopher as a spiritual guide, noting that union with the One usually comes as a result of a long contemplative process (1973, 105). Dupré distinguishes between a state of union with the 'ground of being' from 'episodic experiences of ecstasy' (2000, 143; also 1974, 163). Bussanich is sympathetic to the interpretations of these thinkers, and comments that the normative state of the soul while in union with the One 'is realized as an integral part' of the experience (1997, 360). As another representative of theistic union, Bussanich argues against a monistic interpretation of the union; the soul may be a 'radically different' consciousness in contact with the One, but it is still a consciousness (1997, 360).

P. Mamo (1976), Werner Beierwaltes (1985), and P. A. Meijer (1992) are representatives in the camp of scholars who view Plotinus's mysticism as monistic identity. Mamo thinks that Plotinus advocates a total absorption of the soul into the One during mystical union (1976, 201). Beierwaltes sets up a disjunction between theistic union and monistic identity and, after showing the deficiencies of the theistic union position, concludes that Plotinus was a monist concerning mystical union (1985, 231). Accusing Rist of a 'selective' reading, Armstrong of a 'nonsensical' position, and Bussanich of a 'dangerous' interpretation, Meijer argues: 'Plotinus asserts that there is nothing between the soul of the mystic and the Supreme Entity. ... the conclusion that the soul of the mystic and the Supreme Entity are identical cannot be avoided' (1992, 306; also 307–308, 867n).

It is important to note that, despite their disagreements, *both camps believe that the noetic part of the soul is transcended in mystical union itself*. Whether the soul retains its identity (theistic union) or is completely absorbed (monistic identity) in the union, noetic awareness would seem to have no place therein (Bussanich 1997, 347; Bussanich 1988; Rist 1967, 226–229; Rist 1973, 85–86; Meijer 1992, 299–300). This point is important because, according to the meditated union position for which I will be arguing, there will be some kind of noetic awareness that is retained in Plotinian mystical union.

Mediated union

There is a group of scholars who view *mystical* union with the One as an experience that includes the noetic part of the soul as a form of cognitive mediation. Such scholars fall into a camp that I will term *mediated union* because they believe that some kind of awareness (e.g. self-awareness or an erotic mental state) is retained in the union with the One, and this awareness acts as a mediator between soul and the One. W. R. Inge (1968) and Philip Merlan (1963) seem to subscribe to this view. With respect to Plotinus's position, Inge claims that 'mysticism involves a philosophy and at bottom is a philosophy' (1968, vol. 1, 4). Further, he states that the common take on Plotinus's mysticism is erroneous and Plotinus's philosophy does not 'culminate in a "convulsed state" which is the negation of reason and sanity' (1968, vol. 2, 159). For similar reasons, Merlan claims that Plotinus's brand of mysticism should be called a 'mysticism of reason or simply rationalistic mysticism' (1963, 2).

Steven Katz is another scholar who takes a non-traditional view concerning mystical union. If Katz's view were applied to Plotinus's doctrines, he would be considered a member of the mediated union camp along with Inge and Merlan. His view is this:

There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways ... Even in mystical experience, there seems to be epistemological activity of the sort we know as discrimination and integration and, in certain cases at least, of further mental activities such as relating the present experience to the past and future experience, as well as traditional theological claims and metaphysics. (Katz 1978, 26, 60)

Katz fortifies his assertions by stating further that the 'mystic brings to his experience a world of concepts, images, symbols, and values which shape as well as colour the experience he eventually and actually has' (1978, 46; cf. Jantzen 1987, 1989; Murillo 2000). Bussanich applies Katz's criteria to Plotinian mysticism and concludes that, if pure *noetic* activity is understood to be mystical (as it appears to be by scholars in the mediated union camp), then Katz's position seems to have value.

However, Bussanich points out the obvious in Plotinus. Plotinus seems to indicate that a mystical experience of the One does not and cannot include the epistemic world of concepts, images, symbols, and values to which thinkers like Inge, Merlan, and Katz claim we are soldered (Bussanich 1997, 347–349; also see Porphyry 1956, 17). This passage from Plotinus is representative: 'Our awareness of that One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with other intelligible things, but by way of a presence superior to knowledge' (VI.9.4.1–3).

What are we to make of Katz's claims in light of the divergent views held regarding union with the One? Despite this last quotation, can a Katzian account of mysticism be applied to Plotinian mysticism? Is there proof for the mediated union position in Plotinus's doctrines? Proponents of theistic union and monistic identity claim that no mediation is required in the actual union with the One. This is another way of saying that the noetic part of the soul, self-awareness, or any other form of cognitive awareness ultimately has no place in *mystical* union, since the soul either becomes 'oned' with the One (Rist's account of theistic union), or becomes 'one' with the One (Meijer's account of monistic identity). Katz's alternate view is that some kind of cognition mediates the experience of the One because of the 'sorts of beings we are ...'. This mediated aspect of all our experience seems an inescapable feature of any epistemological inquiry' (1978, 26). From the Plotinian perspective this would mean that the noetic part of the soul – understood as a multi-faceted cognitive capacity – could never really be transcended, no matter what claims to transcendence Plotinus himself (or Porphyry, or any person claiming to have a mystical experience) makes. In this paper I will attempt to show that it is possible to glean a position from Plotinus's writings that is both consistent with the meditated union view and resonates with Katz's claims regarding *mystical* experience.

The ineffability of the One

There is clearly a metaphysical separateness of the One in Plotinus's writings. The One stands before all things as utterly simple, wholly untouched by multiplicity and wholly self-sufficing as the First (το πρῶτον, V.4.1.1; all translations from Armstrong 1966). The One is 'beyond reality' and therefore lacks the qualities attributable to anything having being (V.1.10.1–5, VI.6.1.1). Being utterly simple, the One is necessarily 'behind' both the 'many' (viz. souls and material constituents of the universe) and the 'many in one' (viz. Nous or forms) understood as το ἐν (I.7.1.1), το πρῶτον (V.4.2.10) and το ἀγαθόν (VI.9.3.7). As το ἐν and το πρῶτον, the One is beyond the universe as its cause (III.8.9.23) or source (VI.9.9.1). As το ἀγαθόν, the One is equated with the Good having an 'older and prior power' than all good and beautiful things in the universe (V.5.12.38–40).

Plotinus mentions that there must exist something more simplex than Nous that acts as the fundamental principle (ἀρχή) of the universe. The search for such a foundation did not originate with Plotinus. As Rist tells us, it is

... commonplace that the Milesian philosophers were seeking for a single cause of the universe, some substance or ἀρχή, as they called it, from which all things were derived and of which they are all in some sense composed. This ἀρχή was viewed in different ways, but yet was always seen as some *one* thing. (1965, 329)

Similarly, Dominic O'Meara notes that 'throughout the history of philosophy and science can be found the idea that everything made up of parts, every

composite thing, depends and derives in some way from what is not composite, what is simple. This idea might be called the “Principle of Prior Simplicity” (1993, 44). Plotinus follows this tradition and calls our attention to the One as this prior simple.

Given this metaphysical separateness of the One, it is no wonder that throughout the *Enneads* Plotinus claims that an activity of the intellect will not be involved in an experience of the One. The One is beyond description or ineffable (VI.9.5.12). Such an experience would seem to transcend all prospects of knowledge and this is why what awareness we do have of the One must come ‘not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception ... but by way of a presence superior to knowledge’ (VI.9.4.1–3). On another occasion Plotinus tells us that anyone who wants to contemplate what transcends Nous must ‘let the intelligible go’ (V.5.6.18–19); there is no concept or knowledge of the One (V.4.1.9–10). In fact, we ‘diminish the reputation’ of the One and ‘rob’ it of its authenticity as the absolute good if we try to describe it in intellectual terms (V.5.13.13–16).

In *Ennead* VI.9.1–4 Plotinus gives two fundamental objections to taking Nous as the primary unity. The first objection has its roots in Plato; the second has its roots in Aristotle. Concerning the first objection and its roots in Plato, E. R. Dodds has shown a parallel between sections 137d–146a of the *Parmenides* and the doctrines of Plotinus, principally those of *Ennead* V and VI. It is Dodds’s contention that Plotinus derives his theory of the One from this one passage only, although Plotinus ‘ignored one or two more fanciful conclusions’ and gave a ‘new turn’ to those he adopted (1928, 130). Further, the influence of *Republic* 509b on Plotinus is obvious and can be seen in *Ennead* VI.9.3.37, when Plotinus equates the Good with ‘the First’. It is clear that Plotinus agrees with Plato concerning the status of particular beings and their participation in being itself (VI.9.2). It is also clear that Plotinus agrees with Plato that being itself is the world of the forms, and that this world is identical with Nous. Plotinus wants us to note that there is not simply one form, but a world of forms whose unity is that of the cosmos (VI.9.2.25–29).

On this account, with respect to the world of the forms, Rist notes further that if ‘we are to be able to say anything about a form, therefore other than that it is a self-predicating standard, we will find that it is not simply a one, but a one and many’. When speaking about the nature of the forms, it is necessary in some sense to attribute ‘aspects to their being which are not precisely their selfhood’ (1967, 23). Thus, even of *one* specific form, *many* things can be said of it. Plotinus recognizes the multiplicity inherent in the world of forms, and concludes that they cannot be the primary unity. If Nous is identical to the world of forms, then it too exists as a manifold and cannot be the primary unity.

In *Ennead* VI.9.3 Plotinus raises a second objection to taking Nous as the primary unity, and this objection has its roots in Aristotle. Aristotle saw the utmost value in the human mind because of its capacity to reflect upon itself. There is

a most perfect activity, an activity of pure actuality in the process of self-thinking thought. Rist tells us that this activity of self-thinking thought is a

... faculty which men (and gods, if any) possess. Aristotle not only assumes that thought is the *sine qua non* of human existence, but also that it is *the* most important activity of human existence. In its highest and purest form it is contact with the unchanging; hence it *is* the unchanging; hence it is divine (θεός); and (perhaps), if it is divine, the gods (or God) must possess it. (1973, 76–77)

Aristotle's notion of active intellect is applied in a perfect form to God, and this is correct since the activity of self-thinking thought is the one activity of the prime mover. In thinking itself, the prime mover is pure act (*Metaphysics* 1072b20–30); and as such, the prime mover exists as the one principle *for which* (*qua* final cause) all things in reality move. Plotinus takes issue with Aristotle's position because, on his account, the activity of self-thinking thought is the first or the primary unity. Plotinus argues that the activity of self-thinking thought cannot be a unity because such activity exhibits the *two* realities of *the subject* (viz. the thinker) and *the object* (viz. what the subject is thinking, even if it is the self that is the object of the subject's thought). By definition, the fundament of reality must be a simplex, and not a duo, as Aristotle would have us believe on his account of pure act (cf. V.4.2 and VI.9.2.26–27).

The intelligibility of the One and some misinterpretations

However, Plotinus recognizes that human beings must utilize a rational activity in order to discern reality. If knowledge principally comes by way of some noetic activity, asks Plotinus, then how can the One be brought within our grasp (III.8.9.22–23)? How are we to 'fit it into our thought' (VI.9.6.1)? Such a question has caused a flurry of responses on the part of commentators allying themselves in the theistic union and monistic identity camps, or otherwise.

Eschewing both the theistic union and monistic identity interpretations, Lloyd Gerson downplays Plotinus's personal experiences of transcendence as 'accidental, nugatory and hence, incapable of being used as evidence by anyone else'. The discarnate state of an individual 'is not a mystical experience if this is understood as a "leap" beyond forms to their virtual source' (1994, 219–220). Gerson refers to *mystical* union as 'Nous-mysticism', and views such a union as an 'accidental feature' of Plotinus's philosophy. In fact, Gerson reads Plotinus as a straightforward Aristotelian contemplative with respect to *mystical* experience. Of the union, Gerson maintains that 'Plotinus is talking about the life that Aristotle says God has always and we have occasionally. And no one supposes that Aristotle is being a mystic when he does this' (1994, 218).

The Gerson viewpoint is a misinterpretation of Plotinus for a few reasons. First, as was explained above, in *Ennead* VI.9.3 Plotinus discredits the contemplative life laid out by Aristotle as the paradigm of mystical experience. So, *mystical*

experience cannot be cashed out as an Aristotelian ‘Nous-mysticism’. Second, union with the One hardly seems to be an *accidental* feature of Plotinus’s philosophy, since such an anticipation of union acts as an *efficient* cause for the soul’s movement back to the One (III.8.10.1), and the rest therein acts as the *final* cause of the soul’s movement (VI.9.9.15). God is the soul’s ‘beginning and end; its beginning because it comes from thence, and its end because its good is there’ (VI.9.9.20–21). A third reason Gerson’s view is a misinterpretation is because there seems to be a desire on the part of Plotinus to *prescribe* a path to the One. For any rational person, the journey ought to begin with the life of civic and natural virtue (I.2; cf. Porphyry 1988, para. 1–3). It should continue with dialectic (I.3) and contemplation (III.8.6.1), and if one is so fortunate, it will reach its highest point in the beatific vision of the One (VI.9.11.48–50). This is why Frederick Copleston can maintain that the highest type of knowledge should culminate in *mystical* knowledge of God, and that *mystical* experience is the ‘supreme attainment of the true philosopher’ (1962, 472).

A further reason why the Gerson interpretation is off the mark has to do with the fact that there is a desire on the part of Plotinus to *describe* both the path to the One as well as the very experience of the union itself. What can be said of this description? Despite the fact that they subscribe to the theistic union view, Dodds and Rist want to ratify the necessity of intellectual activity every step of the way on the path to the One. Dodds tells us that ‘Plotinian ecstasy’ or union with the One ‘comes only as the rare crown of a long intellectual discipline – a discipline which in the supreme moment is transcended but not denied’ (1928, 142). Dodds finds Plotinus to be exceptional in his time because, as the last great Greek rationalist, he rejects ‘every short cut to wisdom proffered by Gnostic or theurgist, Mithraist, or Christian’ and champions ‘reason as the instrument of philosophy and the key to the structure of the real’ (1928, 142). Likewise Rist notes that, according to Plotinus, ‘without intellectual life (with its ultimate limitations) man’s highest capabilities cannot be realized’. Plotinus insists on the ‘progress of man to intellectual life, so when concerning himself with a higher life than that of mind, he refuses the seductive notion that the use of the mind is unnecessary’ (1973, 81).

Dodds and Rist see the value of Nous as a final stepping-stone to the One. However, they both agree, as do Armstrong (1940, 12), Arnou (1967, 237), Bussanich (1988, 186), Hadot (1980, 265–266), Halfwassen (1998, 30), and O’Meara (1990, 155) that Nous ultimately must be abandoned in *mystical* union itself. Thus, Bussanich can maintain that ‘there are features of mystical experience of the One for Plotinus that are unanticipated and transcend his conceptual scheme’ (1997, 348).

If it is true that Nous is abandoned, then we can see how thinkers in the monistic identity camp could make their case that the soul loses all self-awareness and self-identity, and becomes ‘one’ with the One. Both Mamo and Meijer prefer to interpret ‘θεὸν γινόμενον, μάλλον δε ὄντα’ at VI.9.9.17–18 as ‘*being* God’

rather than 'becoming' or 'being like' God. Thus the mystic, *being* God, shares the same pure, weightless light of God that *is* God itself. Given this important section in the *Enneads*, along with the passages quoted in the beginning of this paper (viz. VI.9.10.15–17, VI.9.10.10–11, VI.9.9.11–12, VI.9.3.10–12; cf. IV.8.1.1–10, VI.9.2.33–36, and VI.9.6.10–12), Mamo and Meijer come to the conclusion that the soul must become subsumed into the One such that the two become identical (Mamo 1976, 214–217; Meijer 1992, 265–266).

However, the monistic identity position seems to be a misinterpretation of Plotinus. According to Plotinus's metaphysical hierarchy of being, the soul just is what it is *as an emanation* from the One, and the One just is what it is *as emanator*. For all intents and purposes the One acts as a cosmic stanchion; it is 'always perfect' and 'produces everlastingly'. But what it produces is inferior to or 'less than' this generating principle (V.1.6.39–40; also V.2.1; IV.3.10; IV.4.11). The rational soul is the highest level of the ordinary human psyche. In the hierarchy it is situated between the summit of cosmic soul, that is in constant transcendent contemplation of the eternal Nous, and the irrational or animal soul, which is responsible for appetitive, emotive, and vegetative movements in living material beings (cf. I.1.8–9; IV.3.4; IV.9.5). It would be metaphysically impossible for rational soul to become identical with the One since it is *three times removed* from the One (!) as can be seen in the following illustration: [ONE→(1) NOUS→(2) COSMIC SOUL→(3) rational soul→(4) irrational soul→(5) nature→(6) body→(7) matter] (cf. IV.7.2; V.1.6; V.2.1). Thus, Plotinus clearly states that the

... soul too, which is other than the one, has its being more in proportion to its greater and real being. *It is certainly not the one itself* ... And what has separate parts, like a chorus, is furthest from the one, and what is a continuous body is nearer; and the soul is nearer still, but still *participates* in it. (VI.9.1.34–36, my italics)

We must wonder why thinkers like Meijer and Mamo would subscribe to such a monistic view in the first place. How can we forget that emanationism is a Plotinian doctrine regarding the origin and ontological structure of the world? All that exists – including the rational soul – is an emanation from the primordial unity. It is hard to see, then, how effect *actually becomes* cause. Nonetheless, this is what the monistic interpretation would have us accept. The One is what it is as a pure and luminescent reality (VI.9.9.1–10). The soul is an irradiation from the One, and by definition, is closer to the darkness of matter (IV.7.2). How could the dark really become one with the light? The soul and One must retain their identities in the union. The One never can be identical with any individual thing since it acts as the source, principle, or cause that is both *ontologically* and *logically* distinct from individual things (cf. III.8.8, III.8.9). This is the motivation for Rist's claim that when we 'look upon the source of life and sing a choral hymn that is full of God ... The chorus is "full of God" or "inspired". It is not God. God is in the individuals; the individuals are not identical with him' (1967, 227–228).

At best, given Plotinus's schema, one might say that in a *metaphorical sense* the soul becomes one with the One. A reader need only skim the *Enneads* and note Plotinus's use of language that is not only descriptive, analytical, and non-ambiguous, but is also metaphorical, allegorical, and analogical in tone. One paradigmatic example that thinkers in the monistic identity camp point to, when proffering their view, has to do with the extended discussion of concentric circles in VI.9.8 that is supposed to be a way of describing the soul's absorption into the One during union (Mamo 1976, 217; Meijer 1992, 266). I must point out that this example, in Plotinus's own words, is meant to be a metaphorical way of interpreting the union (VI.9.8.10). The idea here is that if you were to draw one circle representing the One, and then drew another circle representing the soul over it, you would not be able to distinguish the two circles from one another; in effect the second circle you drew would be 'absorbed' into the first. This is an interesting and helpful image used to make sense of the union.

Consider a modified version of the example. Let's say the circle representing the One was coloured blue, while the circle representing the soul was coloured red. The different colours denote the fact that these are two different things. To say that these are two different things is consistent with Plotinus's emanation schema; the One is emanator, the soul is an emanation. Now, if a person were to draw one circle over the other, it would be true that the two circles would become one in that the colour purple would emerge. However, one could still distinguish the red hue from the blue hue. Something like this, I think, is what thinkers in the theistic union camp are getting at when they maintain that the soul retains its identity in the union. An 'ecstatic tune' is produced when in contact with the One; but the notes are distinguishable from one another. So too, a 'chorus' is formed in the union; but the singers can be delimited (cf. Rist 1967, 227–229). Likewise, a person can visually parse out the blue from the red in this purple circle illustration; and this represents the idea that the soul (red hue) can be identified, even in union with the One (blue hue).

The intelligibility of the One and the mediated union position

Inge and Katz see the Plotinian mystical experience as both conceptualizable and interpretable. Somewhat ironically, Inge thinks that the road to the One is paved with 'abstract conceptions', while the experience of the union itself is an 'awaking, a living realization' that is more real and more clearly understood than the journey to such an experience. Inge likens the union to Meister Eckhart's 'cloud of unknowing' where two important things occur. First, the soul is not 'gotten rid of'; it retains its identity. Second, of more interest, is that the 'cloud' is cognized, recognized, and categorized as such (Inge 1968, II, 148–149). Inge is definitely committed to a non-monistic interpretation of the union; but because of the cognizability of the union, his position should

not be considered as squarely within the theistic union camp (cf. Merlan 1963, 4–5).

Inge's position concerning mystical experience alludes to a cognitively mediated union with the One. Unfortunately, he does not develop the point much further. Katz's more straightforward and bolder position is that cognitive awareness, as well as discrimination, integration, and creativity are a part of the mystic's experience. His view is Kantian, in that the mind plays an active role in shaping and ordering the objects of its perception and knowledge, rather than passively receiving information (cf. Kant 1933, A 77–8/B 103). Commentators like Edward Moore (2001), John Dillon (1986), and E. F. Bales (1982) have put forward a Kantian reading of Plotinus; so there is some precedent for this way of thinking about Plotinus's psychology. Katz thinks that there is no reason to think that this kind of psychological schema is not retained in mystical experiences. The union with the divine would be mediated by the soul's own array of conscious mental states (1978, 26, 46, 60). This Kant/Katz view is interesting because it is a retreat from the standard mystical interpretations that claim all noetic activity is abandoned in mystical union. Recall that, despite their disagreements, both the theistic union and monistic identity camps believe that the noetic part of the soul is transcended in mystical union itself. The question now becomes whether this Kant/Katzian kind of mediated union interpretation can be found in Plotinus's doctrines.

It is hard to see that all conceptualization could be abandoned in mystical experience. In the union Plotinus notes a distinction between the mystic (ὁψεται or ὁρῶν at VI.9.10.11–12) and the One (τὸ ὁφθέν at VI.9.10.12). It is the *soul* that enters the realm of formless non-being (VI.9.3.40); the *mind* that comes to know the Good transcending all other good things (VI.9.6.11–12); the *person* who goes on mounting to the One (VI.9.3.4–5); the *those* who are awakened (VI.9.3.16); the *we* who are purified when coming close upon the First (VI.9.3.27); the *you* who tries to conceive the Beyond Reality (VI.9.6.25); the *man* who experiences change (VI.9.10.34); and the *selves* who know God (VI.9.9.15–20). Such references bolster the positions of scholars in the mediated union camp since the soul, self, or mind appears to retain its identity. This is to say that one of the mediating concepts the soul can bring to the experience of the One is *the very knowledge of the self experiencing such a union*. A key quotation comes from *Ennead* VI.9.109–112: in mystical union, 'when the seer sees himself, then when he sees, he will see himself as like this, or rather he will be in union with himself as like this and will be aware of himself like this since he has become single and simple'. We cannot seem to avoid the conclusion that in the union where the soul 'takes another life' (VI.9.9.15–20) there is something between the soul and the One, viz. the soul's own identity.

The mystic is obviously aware of the goal to be achieved (VI.7.26). But Plotinus seems to go further and gives us indications that the mystic is aware of the

experience of union itself. An important passage is the following where Plotinus clearly describes the union: 'There one can *see both him (the One) and oneself* (my italics) as it is right to see: the self glorified, full of intelligible light' (VI.9.9.58–59). At V.3.14, Plotinus notes that we are never 'utterly void of' the One in the union. There is an inner awareness that attends the utter peace and tranquility experienced by the mystic (see VI.9.9.39–40), and this seems to be the motivation for this statement: 'And surely what has by itself the natural power to perceive, if the Good comes to it, has the power to know and to say that it has it' (VI.7.26.1–2). The Good strengthens and awakens the soul (VI.7.22). How else would the soul know it has reached the 'end of the Journey' (VI.9.11.47–48)?

Plotinus makes it clear that the rational faculty found in the human soul is not only necessary to *discern* reality, but it is also necessary to *communicate* reality. The mystic, qua τελεστικός, must be able to talk about the experience of the One with other persons, as when Plotinus claims that 'Often I have woken up out of the body to myself ... I have come to identity with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality' (IV.8.1.1–3). Plotinus offers prescriptive rules for the novice mystic as at V.5.10.10–12: 'When you see him, look at him as a whole; but when you think him, think whatever you remember about him, that he is the Good'. Plotinus spoke to Porphyry (see Porphyry 1962; 1988, 39); and, obviously, we the readers do comprehend what is written in the pages of the *Enneads*. This report requires some kind of conceptual scheme having a subject–predicate relation or else we would not be able to claim 'The One is like *x*' or 'The One is not *x*', etc. This is possible despite Plotinus's claim that the One is beyond all statement (V.3.13.1–2). Speaking specifically about noetic experience, Armstrong notes that although contemplation is foundational, 'communication is secondary, and hinders rather than helps contemplation, though it is the philosopher's duty to impart what he has seen to others and help them to see it for themselves' (1979, 194). Armstrong's comment is insightful because the same could be said of mystical experience itself.

Mediated union, noetic experience, epistemology, and ontology

Besides the claims regarding the soul's self-knowledge and self-identity in the mystical experience, as well as the communicability of the experience of the One after the union, there is a further reason for suspecting that the experience of the One is mediated. We note a curious passage where Plotinus states that the Supreme exists 'in a way like Intellect. But Intellect is an actualization; so that he is an actualization' (VI.8.16.16–18). Further, in *Ennead* VI.9.9.13–15, Plotinus also claims that 'life in that realm [union with the One] is the active actuality of intellect'. Also, Plotinus notes, with respect to mystical union, that 'the soul not only *conceives* beauty, goodness and righteousness when filled with God, but

conceives this same God as the actuality of Intellect' (VI.9.9.10–13). What is being said here? It sounds as if Plotinus is equating the One with noetic activity. In light of these passages, how should we interpret the thesis that we must go beyond Nous in order to experience the One? Do these passages aid in making the Kant/Katzian case regarding the mediated mystical experience?

The Kant/Katzian interpretation of mystical union forces us to make a distinction between the epistemological and ontological realms in Plotinus's accounts of mystical union with the One. There is nothing illegitimate in making this kind of distinction since Plotinus recognizes that there is a mental sphere of reality as well as an extra-mental sphere of reality. There exists the 'totality of intelligible things for a rational kind of soul' that is separate from the 'existents' that ultimately are made possible by the One through the forms (IV.8.3). It is precisely from the epistemological standpoint that Katz's position will have its greatest impact and value. From the ontological perspective the One wholly transcends Nous; the utter Simplex is nothing like this first instance of duplicity. However, from the epistemological perspective of the soul's engagement in mystical union, there seems to be reluctance on Plotinus's part wholly to divorce the activity of Nous from the One. Such a reading of Plotinus would make sense of the above passages where Nous and the One are equated.

Plotinus is aware of the problems associated with trying to come to know the One despite its utter unknowability as at III.8.9 and VI.9.4. Bussanich accuses Katz of an 'anachronistic projection of contemporary epistemological criteria' into Plotinus's doctrine, principally because of Katz's neo-Kantianism (1997, 346). But Bussanich makes this claim because he fails to draw the distinction between the ontological and epistemological realms in Plotinus's doctrines. He fails to note that ontologically, the One transcends Nous and noetic experience, whereas epistemologically, the One must be a part of that noetic experience. Actually, Katz and Plotinus are aware of the same difficulties, making Bussanich's comments regarding anachronistic projection out of place. Katz's suggestion is that there are no unmediated mystical experiences. If this amounts to the claim that mystical union of the One somehow must be filtered through some sort of conceptualization, then, despite the numerous ways in which Plotinus seems to reject such a position, a survey of the *Enneads* suggests moments when Plotinus does in fact embrace a Katzian position.

The majority of what Plotinus says concerning Nous has to do with the fact that it exists as an epistemological stepping stone on the path to the One. Even though we are told that Nous ultimately must be abandoned along with all vestiges of this world in the return to the One, *this should be interpreted as an ontological assertion, not an epistemological one*. The ontological–epistemological distinction helps make sense of the debate concerning the status of mystical union. Nous itself is a kind of thing and, as a thing, will have to be abandoned in the union with the grounding of all things. However, as an

epistemological process, noetic activity can never be abandoned, even in contact with the One.

Mediated union and a broadened conception of noetic awareness

If a mediated *rational* noetic experience of the One seems inimical to Plotinus's mysticism, then what about another kind of mediated noetic experience? The noetic experience need not be solely rational, and can be broadened to refer to other states of awareness. Such awareness would include conceptualizing, imaging, and valuing; but also wishing, willing, and feeling. This is not an anachronistic reading of Plotinus's psychology, as he tells us clearly that 'there are very many powers' in the soul, including 'reasoning, desiring, and apprehending' (VI.9.1.41). Emotional disturbances, physical pains, and even physical love (lust) are intelligible realities as well (cf. I.1.7). Plotinus's psychology resembles the classification used by contemporary philosophers of mind that includes an array of mental states ranging from perceptions and ideas to emotions and *qualia* (cf. Chalmers 1995, 200–201). Thus, Inge can claim that Plotinian mysticism is a 'spiritual philosophy which demands the concurrent activity of *thought, will and feeling*' (1968, II, 5; my italics).

At times, the experience of the Supreme is cast by Plotinus in the language of contact as at VI.9.11 or VI.9.7.4–5, where we are told that it is possible to 'touch' the One. At V.3.10.20 the term *θίξις* is used to designate a kind of intellectual contact. In V.3.10.20 and VI.7.36.14 *επαφή* is used to denote an experience of touching the One and the Good. Also, at VI.9.11.25 Plotinus uses an erotic notion, *Εφεις πρὸς ἀφήν*, which means to 'be in touch with' the One. In the introduction to MacKenna's translation of *The Enneads*, Henry notes that Plotinus preferred to speak of mystical union with the One in terms of the sense of touch rather than that of vision. Henry also states that this is noteworthy for a Greek philosopher, and he probably says this because of the fact that the Platonic metaphors of sun, line, and cave, which emphasize sight rather than touch, had enraptured the Greek philosophical world (1962, lxviii). Plotinus states that the 'seeing' involved in *Nous* implies a duality (*δυο* at III.8.11.39–40) of seer and thing seen, whereas touching involves a more immediate and unified kind of noetic contact.

In *Ennead* III.8.10.35–38 Plotinus advocates an intuitive 'thrust' or 'penetration' as a means by which the One may be experienced. On another occasion Plotinus echoes this thrusting forward to attain the Absolute when he states that we must 'rush' to it (V.5.4.10; MacKenna 1962, 406, translates it as a *leap*). The One cannot be sensed and cannot be known *per se*. Therefore, we are led to believe that there might be some other part of our noetic cognition, one having possible erotic connotations, that reverts to and experiences the One. This 'intuitive thrust' may be the part of our cognitive phenomenal experience that accomplishes the task.

In contrast to this thrusting, rushing, or leaping that the soul must undergo in its return to the One, Plotinus also speaks of the soul's contact with the One in terms of a resting or a waiting, as one would wait for the rising of the sun (V.5.8.4–10). This is comparable to Plato's *Symposium* 211, where the vision of beauty itself 'bursts upon' the soul not unlike that of the sun's rising as it bursts upon the eye. If we have become exhausted in our search for the One and are tired from the journey, we can but 'go away in silence and enquire no longer' (VI.8.11.1). Rist sees a justification for Plotinus's claims here:

If we 'pursue' the One, of course we shall always tend to specify it, to see it under some particular aspect. We must learn to be passive, to let it come, as It will come if we take away our own restlessness, that very restlessness which prevents us from being like it. (1968, 225)

Rist is correct in noting that we will desire to specify the One by some activity of the Intellect; it is only natural as rational beings that we do so. Plotinus tells us that we must attribute no shapes or qualities to the One (VI.8.11). However, if we take Katz's claims seriously regarding the fact that the mystic is 'coloured' in mystical union by concepts, images, symbols, and values, then how can we not give an intellectual shape to the One?

Rist's treatment of *ἐρως* in Plotinus's doctrines may be helpful here since, in a certain sense, *ἐρως* means desire. Now, it is not unreasonable to maintain that we desire contact with the One; the One is equated with the Good and, therefore, is something to be desired. Rist claims that one of the qualities of *ἐρως* is that it is 'utterly unselfconscious and, at least in the language of metaphor and imagination, devoid of duality ... it suggests a state in which the activity of the subject is in no way at all hindered by self-consciousness' (1973, 85). If *ἐρως* is a quality of our noetic being, and if it is devoid of duality, then this could be the means by which we achieve contact with the One because it skirts the problem of multiplicity. Rist directs us to *Ennead* VI.7.35 where Plotinus makes a distinction between 'intellect knowing' and 'intellect loving'. *Nous* has two powers, viz. a first power that grasps its own content analogous to the active intellect of Aristotle grasping the sensible species, and a second power that transcends its own activity in the approach to the One. This second activity of *Nous* is envisioned as 'stripped of its wisdom in the intoxication of the nectar as it comes to love' (1973, 86). Rist thinks that the soul is made simplex in this second activity of intellect loving, and if the soul is made simplex, then it is in a position to contact the primal Simplex.

Alternatively, Terence Irwin makes important points regarding mystical union in Plotinus's doctrine. Irwin distinguishes *inferential* knowledge, which concerns the temporal and subject/predicate relations from *intuitive* knowledge, which takes a thing or things in all at once, 'at a glance' (1989, 191–192). According to Irwin, we have intuitive knowledge of the One, while inferential knowledge is

reserved for most every other kind of inspection of reality. This distinction aids in understanding what may be entailed in mystical union. However, it would seem that intuitive knowledge still requires some kind of conceptual scheme, matrix, or category so that what is being taken in at a glance can be understood. Thus, while mystical union is immediate, ironically it would seem to be a mediated immediacy.

There are questions as to what exactly is meant by this contact with the One had by virtue of either an active leaping/thrusting or passive waiting: Rist thinks that this kind of contact is akin to an erotic, passionate connection (1973, 85–86) – as do Alexandrakis (1998) and Stathopoulou (1999); William James notes that mystical experiences are ‘more like states of feeling than like states of intellect’ (1971, 242); Meijer views this touching as a ‘more intimate activity of perception’ (1992, 304); and Irwin thinks it is an ‘intuitive’ contact that is immediate (1989, 191). In any case, the experience of the One from this perspective seems not to be unmediated. All of these instances of contact can be looked at as parts of one’s noetic experience. Love, desire, intuition, or feeling *itself* become the mediating device between soul and One. Again, we can broaden the notion of noetic awareness to include the kinds of intuition or erotic contact that thinkers like Irwin or Rist mention, and there is nothing illegitimate in this move since Plotinus clearly countenances a wide variety of properties inherent in the rational soul.

We can grant that from the ontological perspective, the experience of unionization places *vous* on a different plane of reality from that of *τὸ ἐν*. So, when describing the very *being* of *vous* in relation to *τὸ ἐν* the extra-mental distinction is made manifest. On this score, proponents of theistic union and monistic identity have made their points; the noetic activity is somehow skirted, transcended or rejected altogether. However, from the epistemological perspective, Katz’s Neokantian insights are correct as it seems we cannot escape our cognitive categories. On various occasions Plotinus uses concepts (e.g., *vous*, *ενέργεια*), images (e.g., *θεός*, beloved), symbols (e.g., well-spring), and values (e.g., *ταγαθόν*) to capture what would *seem* to transcend categorization. Of what use could these conceptualizations be to the philosopher or neophyte mystic if they have no ontological weight? The answer is that they obviously are of epistemological value.

We are still left with two standard accounts of mystical union, viz. theistic union and monistic identity, as well as the mediated union position I have been trying to advance in this paper. The reason why there are such divergent views concerning mystical union may have something to do with Plotinus collapsing the ontological and the epistemological at the upper levels of his hierarchy. Intellect is at the same time the locus *of being* and the locus *of knowledge of being*. So, it becomes more difficult to distinguish ontological claims from epistemological claims when Plotinus discusses the union. Despite this difficulty, the

case for mediated union can be made since the being that is being thought must be *recognized* by the being that is doing the thinking.

Conclusion

It can be argued that the paradoxical claims Plotinus makes with respect to the mystical union actually speak to the fact that Plotinus is trying to locate a place for mediation in the very experience itself. Meijer's contention is that Plotinus is inconsistent concerning his account of the union since in *Ennead* VI.7 (e.g., at 26.1–3), he gives credence to some kind of inner awareness and emotion, but in *Ennead* VI.9 (e.g., at 3.27–29), all emotion and any form of thinking is rejected in the union (1992, 318–319). I think that this inconsistency speaks to the fact that Plotinus tries to carve out a place for the workings of noetic activity in mystical union. I have tried to show that Katz's claims regarding mysticism are consistent with Plotinus's overall ontology and epistemology. Bussanich sees a place for Katz's claims with respect to a *Nous-mysticism*, but quickly dispatches his view when it comes to mystical union with the One in all of four sentences (1997, 348–350). I think Katz's claims should be taken more seriously as applicable to Plotinus's doctrines. In very clear instances, Plotinus views an erotic or other form of cognitive contact as the mediator; in other instances awareness, conceptualization, and self-identity act as mediator.

In a passage describing the soul's awareness and knowledge of the One, Porphyry makes the claim that 'like is known only by like; the condition of all knowledge is for the subject to be assimilated to the subject' (1988, 39). Indeed, *Nous* is the 'image' of the One (V.1.7.30–31), and envisioned by Plotinus as a more unified duality than anything else in reality (V.5.4). If Porphyry's intuition is correct regarding likeness, and *Nous* is the first hypostatic instantiation, *and* the soul can indeed ascend to mystical union, then the subject *qua knowing* knows the Subject *qua known* in the most intimate of ways in this divine coupling – albeit the knowledge can only be the limited knowledge of a limited being.

However, in the end, such a mediated experience of the One need not shake the foundations of what is taken to be Plotinian mystical experience. Irwin says it best:

Though the limitations of our conceptual scheme limit our capacity to describe ultimate reality, the demand for an explanation of our experience forces us to exploit our capacity beyond the limits of its accuracy. Plotinus argues that this conflict between the limits of our resources and the demands we make of them is inevitable, but not intolerable; reason allows us both to know that there is an indescribable ultimate reality, and to find the right way to misdescribe it. (1989, 200)

And a misdescription is still an attempt at a mediated description nonetheless. How could the mystic *misdescribe* the union *without* some form of cognitive awareness of the union itself?

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