

Intellect Sober and Intellect Drunk: Some Reflections on the Plotinian Ascent Narrative

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Illustrative passages

1. "Then, at the very center of the light, something else appeared... an opening. I was no longer looking *at* the slowly spinning light at all, but *through* it. The moment I understood this, I began to move up. Fast. There was a whooshing sound, and in a flash I went through the opening and found myself in a completely new world – the strangest, most beautiful world I'd ever seen." (Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven*, p. 38)
2. "Seeing and hearing were not separate in this place where I now was. I could *hear* the visual beauty of the silvery bodies of those scintillating beings above, and I could see the surging, joyful perfection of what they sang. It seemed that you could not look at or listen to anything in this world without becoming a part of it – without joining with it in some mysterious way. Again, from my present perspective, I would suggest that you couldn't look *at* anything in that world at all, for the word *at* implies a separation that did not exist there. Everything was distinct, yet everything was also a part of everything else, like the rich and intermingled designs on a Persian carpet – or a butterfly's wing." (ibid. pp. 45-6)
3. "They all flow, in a way, from a single spring, not like one particular breath or one warmth, but as if there were one quality which held and kept intact all the qualities in itself, of sweetness along with fragrance, and was at once the quality of wine and the character of all tastes, the sights of colours, and all the awareness of touch, and all that hearings hear, all tunes and every rhythm." (Plotinus, *Enn.* VI 7, 12, trans. Armstrong).¹
4. 'And so, if one likens it to a living, richly-varied sphere, or imagines it as a thing all faces (*pamprosopon ti khrêma*), shining with living faces, or as all the pure souls running together into the same place, with no deficiencies, but having all that is their own, and universal Intellect sitting on their summits, so that the region is illuminated by intellectual light – if one imagined it like this, one would be seeing it somehow as one sees another from outside. *But one must become that, and make oneself the contemplation.*" (*Enn.* VI 7, 15, 25ff.)
5. But this is not the end, or the summit, of the adventure. Alexander now approaches a level of being which he calls 'the Core' (pp. 46-8):

"I continued moving forward and found myself entering an immense void, completely dark, infinite in size, yet also infinitely comforting. Pitch black as it was, it was also brimming with light: a light that seemed to come from a brilliant orb that I now sensed near me. An orb that was living and almost solid..."²

¹ All following translations from the *Enneads* will be from A. H. Armstrong's Loeb edition, with in some cases minor modifications.

² Interestingly, God, as supreme principle, is described as 'darkness' (*skotos*), not by Plotinus, but by his older contemporary Origen (the Christian), in his *Commentary on John* II 172, arising out of the exegesis of John I: 5, where precisely God is declared to be "a light shining in darkness". This is also a feature of the mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, who, at *Myst. Theol.* I. 1, concocts the notable phrase *hyperphôtos*

He describes himself as feeling somehow 'like a fetus in a womb', floating and nourished by an invisible mother:

"In this case, the 'mother' was God, the Creator, the Source who is responsible for making the universe and all in it. This Being was so close that there seemed to be no distance at all between God and myself. Yet at the same time, I could sense the infinite vastness of the Creator, could see how completely miniscule I was by comparison."

6. "It came in three parts, and to take one more shot at putting it into words (because of course it was initially delivered wordlessly), it would run something like this:

You are loved and cherished

You have nothing to fear

There is nothing you can do wrong

If I had to boil this entire message down to one sentence, it would run this way:

You are loved

And if I had to boil it down further to just one word, it would (of course) be simply

Love

Love is, without a doubt, the basis of everything. Not some abstract, hard-to-fathom kind of love, but the day-to-day kind that everyone knows – the kind of love we feel when we look at our spouse and our children, or even our animals. In its purest and most powerful form, this love is not jealous or selfish, but *unconditional*. This is the reality of realities, the incomprehensibly glorious truth of truths that breathes at the core of everything that exists or that ever will exist, and no remotely accurate understanding of who and what we are can be achieved by anyone who does not know it, and embody it in all of their activity." (ibid. pp. 70-1)

7. "When anyone, therefore, sees this light, then truly he is also moved to the Forms, and longs for the light that plays upon them and delights in it (*glikhomenos euphrainetai*), just as with the bodies here below our desire is not for the underlying material things, but for the beauty imaged upon them. For each is what it is by itself, but it becomes desirable when the Good colours it, giving a kind of grace to them and passionate love to the desirers. Then the soul, receiving into itself an outflow from thence, is moved and dances wildly and is all stung with longing and becomes love.

Before this it is not moved even towards Intellect, for all its beauty; the beauty of Intellect is inactive (*argon*) till it catches a light from the Good, and the soul by itself 'falls flat on its back', and is completely inactive, and, though Intellect is present, is unenthusiastic about it. But when a kind of warmth (*hōsper thermasia*) from thence comes upon it, it gains strength and wakens and is truly winged, and though it is moved with passion for that which lies close by it, yet all the same it rises higher to something greater which it seems to remember. And as long as there is anything higher than that which is present to it, it naturally goes on upwards, lifted by the giver of its love" (*Enn.* VI 7, 22, 1-20).

gnophos, 'darkness beyond/above light', to characterize the quality of this ultimate vision. Many later mystics also, such as Jacob Boehme, Heinrich Suso, and Jan van Ruysbroek, attest to this paradoxical sensation of a 'dazzling obscurity'.

³ This is a thought that Plotinus develops in *Enn.* I 6 and V 8.

8. "And the soul is so disposed then as even to despise intelligence, which at other times it welcomed, because intelligence is a kind of movement, and the soul does not want to move. For it says that he⁴ whom it sees does not move either; yet when this soul has become intellect it contemplates, when it has been, so to speak, made intellect (*hoion noôtheisa*) and has come to be in 'the intelligible place'; but when it has come to be in it and moves about in it, it possesses the intelligible and thinks, but when it sees that god it at once lets everything go (*panta aphîêsin*)..." (*Enn.* VI 7, 35, 1-8).
9. "... and then, as he looks and does not take his eyes away, by the continuity of his contemplation he no longer sees a sight, *but mingles his seeing with what he contemplates*, so that what was seen before has now become sight in him, and he forgets all other objects of contemplation. And perhaps the image would better preserve the analogy (*takha an sôizoi to analogon hê eikôn*) if it was not a mortal who encountered the viewer of the contents of the house but one of the gods, and one who did not appear visibly but filled the soul of the beholder." (*ibid.* II. 12-20)
10. "Intellect also, then, has one power for thinking, by which it looks at the things in itself, and one by which it looks at what transcends it by a direct awareness and reception (*epibolêi tini kai paradokhêi*), by which also before it saw only, and by seeing acquired intellect and is one.⁵ And that first one is the contemplation of intellect in its right mind, but the other is intellect in love, when it goes out of its mind 'drunk with the nectar'; then it falls in love, simplified into happiness by having its fill (*haplôtheis eis eupatheian tôi korôi*); and it is better for it to be drunk with a drunkenness like this than to be more respectably sober." (*ibid.* II. 20-28)
11. "But the soul sees by a kind of confusing and annulling (*hoion synkheasa kai aphanisasa*) the intellect which abides within it – or rather its intellect sees first, *but then the vision actually enters into it, and the two become one*. But the Good is spread out over them and fitted in to the union of both, playing upon them and uniting the two, it rests upon them and gives them a blessed perception and vision, lifting them so high as not to be in place at all, nor in anything other, among things where it is natural for one thing to be in another -- for he⁶ is not anywhere either; the 'intelligible place' is in him, but he is not in anything else." (*ibid.* II. 34-42)
12. "But whoever has become at once contemplator of himself and everything else and object of his own contemplation (*theatês te kai theama hautos hautou*), and since he has become

⁴ We may note here the switch from neuter to masculine that is characteristic of Plotinus' treatment of his first principle.

⁵ A significant reference here to *Rep.* 7. 508c1 and 517b5.

⁶ A phrase interestingly reminiscent of the last sentence of *Enn.* V 3: *aphele panta*.

⁷ *Nous* here, I think, may be taken to refer both to the hypostasis Intellect and to our own particular intellect at its highest level of insight, so I do not capitalize it.

⁸ This distinction between the two levels of activity by Intellect is made, interestingly, in such a passage as *Enn.* V 3, 11, where, however, the contrast is between Intellect's pre-intellectual turning back to the One, which actually constitutes it as Intellect, and its proper activity as Intellect. Here, however, the two activities are both within the capacity of the individual intellect, in no particular sequence.

⁹ We may note, once again, the switch from neuter to masculine, in referring to the first principle.

substance (*ousia*) and intellect and 'the complete living being'¹⁰, no longer looks at it from outside – when he has become this he is near (*engus*), and that Good is next above him (*ephexês*), and already close by, shining upon all the intelligible world." (VI 7, 36, 10-15)

13. "We are taught about it (sc. Plato's 'greatest study') by analogies and negations and knowledge of the things which come from it, and certain methods of ascent by degrees, but we are put on the way to it by purifications and virtues and adornings (*katharseis kai aretai kai kosmêseis*), and by gaining footholds (*epibaseis*) in the intelligible and settling ourselves firmly (*hidruseis*) there and feasting (*hestiaseis*) on its contents." (ibid. II. 7-10)
14. "So to this godlike man above all, who often raised himself in thought, according to the ways Plato teaches us in the *Symposium*", to the first and transcendent God (*eis ton proton kai epekeina theon*), that God appeared who has neither shape nor any intelligible form, but is throned above Intellect and all the intelligible." (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, ch. 23)
15. "In mysticism that love of truth which we saw as the beginning of all philosophy leaves the merely intellectual sphere, and takes on the assured aspect of a personal passion. Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. Hence, whilst the Absolute of the metaphysicians remains a diagram – impersonal and unattainable – the Absolute of the mystics is lovable, attainable, alive." (Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 1955, p. 24.)

¹⁰ *Tim.* 31b1, suggesting the mystic's effective union with the Paradigm, or totality of the noetic world.

¹¹ That is to say, Diotima's Ladder of Ascent, *Symp.* 210A-211B. We may assume, therefore, I take it, that Plotinus used this or some analogous meditative technique, to generate mystical visions.