

CONTEMPLATION AND HYPOSTATIC PROCESSION IN PLOTINUS

It is certainly paradoxical that the grand system-builders in the history of philosophy are so often the very thinkers whose work is most difficult to comprehend systematically. In this regard, Plotinus takes second place to no one. In this paper I should like to undertake, in a modest fashion, to impose some measure of order on one pervasive feature of Plotinus' system, the formal mechanism of hypostatic procession. This procession, or emanation, is hardly uniform throughout the system. But though it occurs very differently at different hypostatic levels, there are certain features of hypostatic procession which are found at every level at which this procession occurs. It is these general features, rather than the idiosyncracies of any particular level, which will interest me in what follows.

I shall initiate the discussion by mentioning a couple of these general features. First, there is a supreme subject (the One) which in some manner gives rise to an object; this object in turn becomes the subject of an activity which results in a further object; and this process continues until we finally arrive at an object which does not become the subject for any further object or activity. Second, this processional structure is at every stage advanced by the occurrence of a "contemplation" which in some way informs the procession to the next stage. But what exactly is the nature of this contemplation, what object is being contemplated, and how does contemplation contribute toward generating the hypostatic system?

Plotinus begins his discussion of contemplation with these remarks:

If as a preliminary jest, before we seriously start with our inquiry, we said that all beings, rational but also irrational animals, plants and the earth that begets them, aspire to contemplation and are directed towards that end and that due to their differing capacities some really achieve contemplation while others only accomplish a reflection or image of it, we should no doubt be told that this was an absurd statement.¹

Absurd or not, Plotinus immediately makes it clear that he is not jesting, embracing as "our own doctrine" the view that every level of reality has a species of contemplation which is appropriate to it. It should be clear, however, that a contemplation which extends from the One down to sensible matter will not always bear much resemblance to human contemplation, regardless of how the latter might be interpreted. Any understanding we might hope to gain with respect to contemplations other than our own will have to be based on metaphors and analogies. Plotinus suggests one such analogy when he writes: "If one desires to attribute some sort of cognition or sensation to nature, these resemble the usual cognition and sensation only as those of a man who is asleep resemble those of a man who is awake. For nature remains at rest while contemplating her object . . ."² It looks as though the *content* of contemplation, at least, may be irreducibly metaphorical; fortunately, things are not quite so opaque when it comes to the formal structure of contemplation, though here too analogy plays a large part in the exposition.

There are apparently two species of contemplation, one which precedes, not temporally but logically, the act of hypostatic creation, and another which takes as its object the product of this creative activity. As Plotinus says, "Begetting originates in contemplation and ends in the production of a form, that is, a new object of contemplation."³ In the latter case it is the created product which is

contemplated. What, then, is contemplated in the former case? Plotinus writes: "All doing must be guided by a *logos*, and will therefore be distinct from that *logos*; the *logos*, then, as accompanying and guiding the work, will be distinct from the work; not being action but *logos*, it is, necessarily, Contemplation."⁴ Contemplation seems to be some sort of "awareness" (or an appropriate analogue thereof) of certain rational forms, resulting in a creative activity distinct from, but in accordance with, the contemplation. Elsewhere Plotinus compares contemplative activity to an artist who contemplates a model and then produces an image of the original, which can in turn become an object of contemplation.

So hypostatic creation has its logical genesis in the contemplation of a *logos*. But the *logos* is more poorly imitated the further we descend the chain of hypostases: "Here again the begotten being had to be inferior, had to be an image . . ." What is it about contemplation which can account for this hypostatic "descent"? We might, for example, postulate a single *logos* (presumably in Intelligence) to serve as the model for all contemplative production. Here the inferiority of lower hypostases could not be traced to any defect in the contemplated pattern, but must rather lie in the limited powers of the contemplating subject. This is certainly not Plotinus' view, for it suggests that all orders of reality have a direct and unmediated grasp of Intelligence, as though a number of mirrors focused on a single object were to reflect qualitatively different images due to the variable imperfections of their surfaces. The lower hypostases *are* variably imperfect; but they also labor under the handicap of mediated access. The analogy of mirrors focused on a single object suffers in yet another way. The highest reality is also the source, the "begetter", of all that comes after it; it is the creator (to return to our analogy) of the mirrors, as well as the images reflected in the mirrors. But if the relation between the highest reality and the mirrors reflecting it is direct and unmediated, there is nothing to account for their variable imperfection, other than the absurd suggestion that the One, having generated the next lower hypostasis (Intelligence), then inexplicably produced one even lower, and so on. This would be a system of multiple emanations from a single source, whereas Plotinus speaks of a single emanation reaching from the One to sensible matter.

An alternative view would, without denying the contemplative limitations of lower hypostases, insist that the identity of the contemplated *logos* depends on the hypostatic level at which the contemplation occurs, and that lower hypostases involve inferior *logoi*. This alternative can be accommodated metaphorically by changing the focus of the mirrors in the earlier defective analogy. Consider an object reflected in an imperfect mirror, and this reflection in turn reflected in a second imperfect mirror. The reflection in the second mirror is not primarily a reflection of the original object, for the second mirror contributes only one level of distortion to what is seen in it, whereas what is seen in it is doubly distorted with respect to the original object. Rather, what the second mirror reflects is the already distorted image in the first mirror; the first and second mirrors model their images after different patterns. This analogy is a much more accurate representation of what Plotinus has in mind.

There is little that is controversial in this account. It does, however, open up an issue over which there is considerable disagreement. Granted that the contemplated *logos* varies from level to level. But how exactly is the level of the contemplator related to the level of the *logos* that is the object of contemplation? There are two

initially plausible answers to this question: (1) The contemplator and the object contemplated belong to the same hypostatic level; or (2) the contemplator belongs to the hypostatic level immediately below that of the contemplated *logos*. The latter alternative is perhaps the more commonly held. For instance, J.M. Rist writes that “Nous contemplates the One and creates Soul. Soul contemplates Nous and creates matter.”⁶ And he states even more explicitly: “Its [the Soul’s] objects are the intelligibles, but it has to look *up* to them . . . rather than within itself . . .”⁷ There are many passages in the *Enneads* for which this is clearly the most natural interpretation, e.g.: “With regard to the universe at large we will find Intelligence the true maker and demiurge of the world . . . The soul gives the four elements their cosmic form, but it is Intelligence that provides her with her forms, just as an artisan receives his instructions from his art as it is handed to him.”⁸ This passage certainly seems to indicate that the soul contemplates a *higher* form (namely Intelligence) in order to produce the hypostasis which proceeds from it. Yet I shall argue that this interpretation is incorrect, and that in general it is impossible for a hypostatic subject to contemplate a *logos* higher than the *logos* of its own hypostatic level.

Contemplation, or *theōria*, is a “beholding” of something, an “awareness” of some sort of “vision”. These terms are all psychocentric, deriving their primary meaning from the hypostasis of Soul. They can be applicable to other hypostases only by analogy. But if they are applicable at all, it must be due to some formal similarities uniting all contemplations of whatever level. Let us see what we can learn from the metaphor of contemplation as “awareness”. Before beginning, however, it should be noted that Plotinus carefully distinguishes contemplation from *antilēpsis* and *parakolouthēsis*, both of which Armstrong translates as ‘awareness’ (or ‘conscious awareness’).⁹ Plotinus maintains that *noēsis* (intellectual activity) is normally accompanied by a *phantasia*, or mental image, but that it is not necessary that this happen; it happens only “when that in the life of the soul which is active in thinking is in a way projected back, as happens with a mirror-reflection when there is a smooth, bright, untroubled surface.” He then adds that “in these circumstances when the mirror is there the mirror-image is produced, but when it is not there or is not in the right state the object of which the image would have been is all the same actually there.”¹⁰ He also suggests that activity unaccompanied by “awareness” is more pure and vital than when it is “spilt out into perception (*aisthesis*).”¹¹ It is fairly clear from the gist of this discussion that Plotinus does not intend to deny that *theōria* and *noēsis* are species of awareness, but rather to distinguish them from those species of awareness which are like perception in that they rely on *eidōla* (images) or *phantasiai* (which Armstrong translates as ‘mind-pictures’).

I should like to distinguish between two levels on which awareness (and thus contemplation) may operate. *Explicit* awareness is focused upon its object in a reflective and attentive way, so that it can manipulate the object in thought, know it self-consciously, and describe what it knows; *implicit* awareness is a subconscious, indefinite, and subsidiary awareness. Implicit awareness might accompany explicit awareness as a subconscious acquaintance with the context or “gestalt” in which the explicit awareness occurs; when one directs his attention to a particular object, he may remain implicitly aware of the other objects which surround it. In this case — say, where my explicit attention is focused on the typewriter but I retain an implicit sense of the whole room in which I am typing — the objects of which I am implicitly aware belong to the same order of reality as the object of which I am explicitly

aware. I should like to term this particular duality of explicit-implicit awareness a *horizontal* awareness (horizontal with respect to a posited “vertical” hierarchy of reality). Horizontal awareness would be contrasted with *vertical* awareness. What would vertical awareness be like? The explicit-implicit duality in vertical awareness would involve objects of awareness at different levels of reality, e.g., a hypostatic subject at one level might be implicitly aware of an object or reality at a higher level, perhaps as the concomitant or “gestalt” (in a *very* loose sense) of an explicit awareness of an object at its own level.

Now there is clearly something very like an implicit vertical awareness in Plotinus; it is the “memory” of our divine origin in the higher hypostases from which we have proceeded. Plotinus accepts the view of learning as recollection which Plato outlined in the famous passages in the *Phaedo* and *Meno*. If an individual soul wishes to ascend to a higher level of reality, “he will have to be introduced to philosophy by arguments that will lead him to be convinced of truths which he possessed in himself without knowing.”¹² The object of memory must in some way be the possession of the subject before remembering occurs, else there would be no experience of recollection, only the acquisition of a completely new bit of information. On the other hand, if the object of memory were the possession of explicit awareness it would not need to be remembered. Hence it must belong to what I have called “implicit awareness”, and remembering could then be understood as the raising of an object from implicit to explicit awareness.

Plotinus’ own language favours this interpretation. I shall offer just one example:

How does it happen that, while we possess in us such great things, we are not aware of them, but some of us often, and some always, do not activate those capacities? These realities themselves, Intelligence and the self-sufficient existence superior to Intelligence, are always active. The soul, too, is always in motion. But the operations that go on within her are not always perceived. They reach us only when they become objects of perception. When anything that is active within us does not transmit its action to the part that perceives, this action is not communicated to the entire soul.¹³

This suggests that there is a sense in which the soul is “in” the hypostases which precede it, in that the soul has the potential for activating these higher principles within itself. But the soul is typically unaware of these possibilities, since its explicit attention is focused at a lower level; and it is just this lack of awareness which stands in the way of the actualization of these possibilities. We are already “in” the upper hypostases; yet we can be said to *attain* to them insofar as we raise the level of our explicit awareness. When we do focus on these higher levels, they are communicated to the whole soul, and the soul rises to their level.

Hypostatic life is the life of *thought*, or *noēsis*, which Plotinus often uses interchangeably with *theōria*, or contemplation. Plotinus indeed equates hypostases with the relative strength or weakness of the contemplation which occurs in them. This is very clearly stated when Plotinus says of the soul that has “won its way” to the Intellectual Realm that “it will be in contemplation of that order, and have its Act upon the things among which it now is; failing such Contemplation and Act, its being is not there.”¹⁴ But this is not true of Intelligence alone; it is a general feature of

all hypostatic life.

All life is some sort of thought (*noēsis*) which, like life itself, shows various degrees of strength. The clearest thought is also the highest life, and the highest life is identical with the highest intelligence. The supreme life is also the supreme thought, the life of the second rank is also thought of the second rank, and the last rank of life is also the last rank of thought. Every life is of this kind and is thought.¹⁵

Just as the pure being which exists at the level of Intelligence is true thinking, so the impure being which exists at lower levels is the thinking which occurs at those levels. Plotinus certainly does not mean that hypostatic existence is identical with particular instances of thinking, as though existence were to *occur* when thinking occurs; but rather with the *level* of thinking which is available to the existent whenever it *does* think. This level is determined by such things as natural endowment and, more importantly, intellectual training. The soul is, of course, capable of thinking at a higher level; but only after further self-development.

If this is so, it should be impossible to engage in contemplation above one's own level of existence, since the latter is apparently defined in terms of the former. Were one to contemplate above one's own level, this would indicate that one was already at that higher level, and not below it. This seems to be the case with Plotinus' account of the ascent of the soul, for he never speaks of anything else which, in addition to an explicit conscious activity at a certain level, is necessary in order to raise the soul to that level. "And because the soul possesses its content more completely it is quieter than nature, and because it has a greater content it is more contemplative; but because it does not have perfect possession it desires to learn more thoroughly what it has contemplated and gain a fuller contemplation, which comes from examining it — *theōrian tēn ex episkepseōs*."¹⁶ The upshot of this introspective inquiry is that "contemplation ascends from nature to soul, and soul to intellect, and the contemplations become always more intimate and united to the contemplators . . ."¹⁷ To modify the slogan of an earlier philosopher, the way up is the way in.

If all contemplation of the order of explicit awareness is directed inward toward what the contemplating hypostasis already possesses, then we must offer some explanation for why Plotinus so often speaks of hypostatic subjects contemplating higher *logoi*; for it is quite characteristic of him, as we have already noted, to speak of soul contemplating Intelligence, and Intelligence contemplating the One. I think that this apparent contradiction will dissolve upon a closer look at the notion of an "object of contemplation".

Every object below the One is the image of some other object. Images are appearances or manifestations of their model; what's more, they also resemble and imitate their model. An image is thus a species of *representation*. Now there is a double aspect to representations: they are themselves objects (the first aspect), but objects of a peculiar sort, in that they represent *other* objects (the second aspect). Thus an object of consciousness can be interpreted in one of three ways: (1) a representation *qua* object; (2) an object represented by a representation as it is *known through* the representation; (3) an object as it is in itself, unmediated by any representation.

Now in Plotinus "object of contemplation" is ambiguous in much the same way, and this poses special difficulties of interpretation inasmuch as the sense in which Plotinus is using the term in any given instance must invariably be deciphered

from the context in which it appears. It might be possible to get around our difficulties with lower hypostases contemplating higher hypostases if it is possible to interpret every seeming case of (3) (direct contemplation) as really a case of (2) (mediated contemplation). The hypostases which have come into existence are representations of real beings — *hai ginomenai hypostaseis mimēseis ontōn ousai*.¹⁸ Every hypostasis except the lowest throws its image on the hypostasis below it, and any knowledge which this lower hypostasis may achieve with respect to its parent hypostasis is *mediated* by the image of the higher hypostasis, an image *which is that lower hypostasis itself*. All knowledge, then, is self-knowledge. There is no direct, unmediated grasping of higher forms of life. It is only as a soul is able to raise *itself* that it can gain knowledge of higher forms, but this is only to the extent that the soul *becomes* that very higher form which it contemplates.

This representational interpretation receives explicit support in a number of passages in the *Enneads*. Speaking of the contemplative activity of Intelligence, Plotinus says: “. . . even when that object is the One itself, it is not seen as a unity . . .”¹⁹ Here Plotinus clearly distinguishes between *how* one sees what he sees, and the *object* of the seeing. Intelligence can be said to contemplate the One even though what it sees, properly speaking, is not the One at all, since it contemplates unity *through disunity*. This imperfect representation is discovered within the contemplator itself. “By what sort of simple intuition could one grasp this which transcends the nature of intellect? We shall say to the person to whom we have to explain how this is possible, that it is by the likeness (*homoios*) in ourselves.”²⁰ And again: “A trace (*ichnos*) of the Good is seen in it, and it is in the likeness of this that one should conceive its true archetype, forming an idea of it in oneself from the trace of it which plays upon Intellect. It is this trace of the Good which Intellect possesses in its vision.”²¹ Here he says very clearly that what Intelligence is immediately aware of is merely an image of its object of contemplation, and that this image lies within its own hypostatic level. Contemplation is representative in nature; there is no direct, unmediated awareness of the One.

Lest it be thought that this holds only due to the peculiar difficulties in cognizing a One which is beyond Being, Plotinus says the same thing regarding the soul’s contemplation of Intelligence: “When the soul contemplates Intelligence, she possesses the object of her contemplation within herself and as her own . . .”²² Here the phrase ‘object of contemplation’ obviously refers to the representation, that of which one is *immediately* aware, rather than the object represented, that of which one is *mediately* aware. Contemplation of Intelligence is directed toward objects within the soul itself. But the soul is not Intelligence. Thus the soul’s inward vision of Intelligence attains nothing more than the image of Intelligence which she finds within herself.

Plotinus does on occasion make an overt distinction between contemplation of higher realms, and contemplation of one’s own realm; and it might be wondered why he would do this, if all cases of the former are really disguised cases of the latter. For example: “Now it is the function of Intelligence to contemplate the things that are above it, those which belong to it, and the things that proceed from it.”²³ But it is easy to accommodate this passage, given the double nature of representations. Thus “to contemplate the things that are above it” is just to contemplate “those which belong to it” *in their representative aspect* (i.e., as representing the things that are above it). We might compare this passage with another in which Plotinus says of

nature “that it quietly holds contemplation in itself, not directed upwards or even downwards, but at rest in what it is, in its own repose and a kind of self-perception (*synaisthēsis*).” Now were one to come upon these two passages in isolation from the rest of the *Enneads*, the most natural interpretation might be to suppose that it is characteristic of Intelligence to look up and down, and for nature to look only within; one might then conclude that he had uncovered a definitive difference between these two hypostases, and feel no need for a representational account of the object of contemplation. But this second passage, immediately after denying that the contemplation of nature is “directed upwards or even downwards,” continues: “and in this consciousness and self-perception it sees what comes after it, as far as it can . . .” How could this be, unless it can see within itself (without the need for a downward glance) a representation of “what comes after it”? The same sort of ambiguity occurs when Plotinus says (this time of the soul):

If there is to be perception of what is thus present, we must turn the perceptive faculty inward and hold it to attention there. Hoping to hear a desired voice, we let all others pass and are alert for the coming at last of that most welcome of sounds: so here, we must let the hearings of sense go by, save for sheer necessity, and keep the soul’s perception bright and quick to the sounds from above.”²⁴

Does the soul apprehend “the sounds from above” by contemplating a reality higher than its own? Only representationally. The soul attends to these “sounds” by turning *inwards*, not upwards; it apprehends the sounds only through the representational “echoes” which reach its own hypostasis.

Let us look at one final “problem” passage. Plotinus says of the soul that, “In directing herself to what is superior to her, she thinks; in directing herself to herself, she preserves herself; in directing herself to what is inferior to her, she orders, administers, and governs it.”²⁵ It should be possible to gloss this passage as follows: (1) Thinking occurs when the soul’s *logos* is understood to represent intelligible realities above it, to which it has no direct access unless it clarifies its indirect and mediated access by intellectual exercise; (2) When the soul considers its *logos*, not as representing higher realities, but as the rational principle of its *own* level of reality, it understands it as the principle which guides and *preserves* the soul’s activity and life; (3) In contemplating lower hypostases the soul contemplates that to which it has imparted life and order, and over which it is sovereign. In reading these passages in this way, we need not suppose that the soul has explicit awareness of any *logos* higher than its own.

We must not, however, lose sight of an important difference between the contemplation which occurs at higher and lower levels of reality. The former is said to be more “intimate”: “But, as contemplation ascends from nature to soul, and soul to intellect, . . . the contemplations become always more intimate and united to the contemplators.”²⁶ Lower orders of contemplation, on the other hand, are more “external”: “It is soul which contemplates, and makes that which comes after it, that which contemplates in a more external way and not like that which precedes it.”²⁷ Now representations and images are simply *present* to the one who has them; they are neither more nor less intimate or external. But the *object* of which these are representations may be more or less distant from the contemplator, while the representations may offer a more or less accurate account of that which they repre-

sent. Moreover, there is more to the lower hypostases than the defective image they bear of the higher realms of being, for contemplation of this image can trigger in them the hitherto dormant “memory” of their emanational origin; an implicit and unmediated awareness of what Intelligence is like *in itself* must accompany explicit contemplation of one’s own hypostasis, if such contemplation is to result in the ascent of the soul. Otherwise there could be no accounting for the fact that the soul becomes dissatisfied with its poor images; and even more extraordinary, that it should come to understand these images as *representations* of something higher. As the soul ascends, its representations become closer approximations of its “remembered” home and origin, thus becoming *oikeioterōn*, more familial and intimate.

Hypostatic ascent occurs purely through contemplation. The soul does not *first* contemplate a higher pattern, and *then* ascend in imitation of that pattern — the ascent has already occurred once the contemplation has taken place. But further ascent is possible only insofar as what the soul contemplates is a mere representation of something higher; the soul’s ascent terminates with the coincidence of representation and object represented. This occurs for Plotinus at the level of Intelligence. Intelligence is thought thinking itself, in which the conceptions which constitute thought “are the very things of which they are the conception, and achieve the union of intelligible object and thought.”²⁸

I believe that the processional and contemplative mechanism I have described is tolerably clear, and that it is recommended by nearly everything that Plotinus says in the *Enneads*. I have, however, largely avoided the real anomaly in Plotinus’ system. The acid test for any interpretation of Plotinus is the extent to which it can account for what he says about the One. It is certainly not *obvious* that the account I have provided can deal adequately with the role assigned to the One. In particular, the One, unlike the other objects of contemplation, is not a *logos*, and thus would require a very different treatment. I happen to think that the account I have offered can be made to accommodate the peculiar role of the One, and indeed that certain things which Plotinus says about the One can only be explained on this model — but that is another, and rather lengthy, story.

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Notes

1. *Enneads* III.viii.1.
2. III.viii.4.
3. III.viii.7.
4. III.viii.3.
5. V.i.7.
6. Rist, J.M., *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p.90.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
8. V.ix.3.
9. I.iv.10.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. I.iii.1.

13. V.i.12.
14. IV.iv.1.
15. III.viii.8.
16. III.viii.6.
17. III.viii.8.
18. III.viii.7.
19. III.viii.6.
20. III.viii.9.
21. III.viii.11.
22. V.i.3.
23. VI.ix.3.
24. V.i.12.
25. IV.viii.3.
26. III.viii.8.
27. III.viii.5.
28. V.ix.7.