Pao-Shen Ho

Plotinus' Mystical Teaching of Henosis

An Interpretation in the Light of the Metaphysics of the One

PETER LANG EDITION

Introduction

This dissertation sets itself the modest task of explaining Plotinus' mystical teaching of henosis as it is presented in the *Enneads*. While my aim is fairly simple and implies an equally straightforward method, the background from which this dissertation emerges does not appear to be so. Therefore, in this introductory part, I will first look into the historical reception of Plotinus' thought (Section 1) and the scholarly approaches to mysticism as a discipline (Section 2), and finally return to specify the subject, method and structure of the dissertation accordingly (Section 3).

Section 1 The Historical Reception of Plotinus' Thought

The task of discussing the historical reception of Plotinus (205–270 C.E.) needs not strike us as overly ambitious, because Plotinus' only extant work, the *Enneads*, remains more or less underappreciated due to several historical factors. For this reason, in this section I shall only attempt to identify certain factors that hinder Plotinus' work from being understood properly in its own term.

1.1 The Extent of Plotinus' Influence

The first noteworthy issue concerns the extent of Plotinus' influence. According to the entry *Plotinus* from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

> Porphyry's edition of Plotinus' *Enneads* preserved for posterity the works of the leading Platonic interpreter of antiquity. Through these works as well as through the writings of Porphyry himself (234–c. 305 C.E.) and Iamblichus (c. 245–325 C.E.), Plotinus shaped the entire subsequent history of philosophy. Until well into the 19th century, Platonism was in large part understood, appropriated or rejected based on its Platonic expression and in adumbrations of this. The theological traditions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism all, in their formative periods, looked to ancient Greek philosophy for the language and arguments with which to articulate their religious visions. For all of these, Platonism expresses the philosophy that seemed closest to their own theologies. Plotinus was the principal source for their understanding of Platonism.[1]

1 Gerson, Lloyd, "Plotinus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/plotinus/>.

This account overlooks one critical detail: Porphyry's edition did preserve Plotinus' works in material format, but it did not preserve them for the posterity to *understand* them. In my opinion, we can point out at least three factors behind this phenomenon.

First, the most influential Christian Platonist (and arguably also *the* most influential Christian theologian) who helped to shape the understanding of Platonism in the Middle Ages is Augustine of Hippo (354–430 C.E.). But Augustine came under the influence of Platonism not through Porphyry's complete Greek edition of the *Enneads*, but through Marius Victorinus' Latin translations of it which Augustine called "the books by the Platonists". These books have been long lost, so we have no strong evidence as to what Augustine might have read. But recent researches identify them as Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles*, "containing *ex hypothesi* extracts from the *Enneads* and identified with Porphyry's *Kata christianōn*."[2] Furthermore, as A. H. Armstrong observes in his English translation of the *Enneads*, Augustine might have made adoptions of a few phrases from the *Enneads*, I.6.8[3] and V.1.2[4] in *Confessions* I.18, IX 10 and VIII 8. So it seems

2 Cooper, Stephen A., 'Marius Victorinus', *Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Late Antiquity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, 539. See also Courcelle, Pierre, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustine*, de Boccard, Paris, 1950, 7 and Beatrice, P. F., 'Quosdam Platonicorum libros. The Platonic Readings of Augustine in Milan', *Vigilae Christianae* 43, 1989, 248–281.

3 Cf. The *Ennead* I.6.8.21–24: "Our country from which we came is there, our Father is there. How shall we travel to it, where is our way of escape? *We cannot get there on foot*; for our feet only carry us everywhere in this world, from one country to another. *You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat*." See also *Confessions* I.18: "That younger son of yours in the gospel *did not hire horses or carriages, nor did he board ships, nor take wing in any visible sense nor put one foot before the other* when he journeyed to that far country where he could squander at will the wealth you, his gentle father, had given him at his departure;" and *Confessions* VIII.8: "I was groaning in spirit and shaken by violent anger because I could form no resolve to enter into a covenant with you, though in my bones I knew that this was what I ought to do, and everything in me lauded such a course to the skies. *It was a journey not to be undertaken by ship or carriage or on foot*, nor need it take me even that short distance I had walked from the house to the place where we were sitting;…"

4 Cf. The *Ennead* V.1.2.10–17: "This is how soul should reason about the manner in which she grants life in the whole universe and in individual things. Let she look at the great soul, being herself another soul which is no small one, which has become worthy to look by being freed from deceit and the things that have bewitched the other souls, and is established in quietude. *Let not only her encompassing body and the body's raging sea be quiet, but all her environment: the earth quiet, and the sea and*

that Plotinus' thought in the *Enneads* is not handed down to Augustine through Marius' translations, and, more important, does not influence Augustine in any substantial way. This observation can be directly confirmed by Augustine's own words:

> In them [the books by the Platonists] I read […] that *in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; he was God. He* [the Word] *was with God in the beginning. Everything was made through him; nothing came to be without him. What was made is alive with his life, and that life was the light of human kind. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never been able to master it* […][5]

What Augustine read—or rather *read into* or *proclaimed* to understand—from Marius' translations is the Christian theology of John 1, 1–12. Consequently, the Platonism the posterity learnt from him is not Plotinus', either, but Augustine's creative appropriation of Platonism in the context of Christian theology.

Second, when the Arabic-speaking world came under the influence of Plotinus' thought in the 9th century, it is once again not via Porphyry's complete Greek edition. The book that spread Plotinus' thought in the Islam is called *The Theology of Aristotle*, a work whose authorship is wrongly ascribed to Aristotle, and which comprises only a few sections of the treatises from the last three *Enneads* and a commentary by Porphyry.[6] This circumstance makes it inevitable that what Plotinus had written is read and understood in the light of a wrong context. But more important is the fact that this version already contains certain significant modifications of Plotinus' thought. As Peter Adamson points out,

> In Arabic, the One is very clearly conceived as a creating God, frequently given epithets like 'originator' and 'creator.' On the other hand, the Arabic Plotinus acknowledges no tension between this idea of God as creator and the Plotinian metaphor of 'emanation' (Arabic words that mean 'emanation' or 'flowing,' such as *fayd*, are prominent throughout the text). In general the Arabic Plotinus agrees with Plotinus himself that God makes (creates) intellect directly, and then makes all other things 'through the intermediary of intellect' […]. On the other hand, it has been noted that the Arabic version frequently assimilates Plotinian *nous* to the One. The Arabic version embraces the idea that the

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air quiet, and the heaven itself at peace." See also *Confessions* IX.10: "If *the tumult of the flesh fell silent for someone, and silent too were the phantasms of earth, sea and air, silent the heavens, and the very soul silent to itself*, that it might pass beyond itself by not thinking of its own being; […] for if anyone listens, all these things will tell him, 'We did not make ourselves; he made us who abides for ever.'"

5 *Confessions*, VII.9.

6 For a detail study of this work, see Adamson, Peter, *The Arabic Plotinus: a Philosophical Study of the "Theology of Aristotle"*, Duckworth, London, 2002.

> First Cause thinks or is an intellect—an idea either rejected or mentioned only with great circumspection by Plotinus. […] Here we see the Arabic version undoing, to some extent, Plotinus' distinction between Aristotle's self-thinking intellective god and the truly first, highest principle.[7]

In particular, Plotinus' negative theological thesis that the non-personal One is absolutely simple and ineffable is transformed into the monotheistic doctrine (Tawhid) that there is only one true God, Allah. Therefore, not only does the *Enneads* remain largely unknown to the Mediaeval Arabic world, but a small part of this work is received in a misplaced context (first under the authorship of Aristotle, and then interpreted in terms of monotheism).

Thus thirdly, when Porphyry's edition is finally translated into Latin in its entirety and published by Marsilio Ficino in 1492, the consensus about what "Platonism" is supposed to mean has already been established, and indeed in the absence of Plotinus, an important Platonic philosopher. Furthermore, at that time, it did not make sense for theologians and philosophers to deny their culture background to fully embrace the thought of a relatively unknown pagan commentator of Plato. In short, when the entire *Enneads* came into wide circulation, its readers either thought they already knew, or did not care too much to find out, what Plotinus could be really saying.

1.2 The Role of Proclus in the Reception of Neoplatonism

The second issue concerns Proclus (412–485 C.E.), another pagan Neoplatonist, and indeed on two counts: (a) his greater influence than Plotinus, and (b) his philosophical difference from Plotinus. These points combine to lead to the tendency that what we usually understand by the term Neoplatonism is Proclean for the most part rather than Plotinian. Since what I am offering here is mainly a survey regarding Plotinus' own thought, I shall not go deeply into investigating Proclus' own work; it suffices to point out certain basic facts.

(a) Proclus is more influential than Plotinus mainly for two reasons. First, Proclus' writing style, as can be seen especially in his *Elements of Theology*, is clearer, more systematic, and hence more accessible than Plotinus'. Seeing that both of them are usually classified under the umbrella term "Neoplatonism", it

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7 Adamson, Peter, "The Theology of Aristotle", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/theology-aristotle/>. See also D'Ancona, C. 'Divine and Human Knowledge in the Plotiniana Arabica', *The Perennial Tradition of Neoplatonism*, ed. J.L. Cleary, Leuven University Press, Leuven, 1997, 437–442.

is tempting and indeed helpful to clarify Plotinus' less clear Neoplatonism in terms of Proclus' much clearer Neoplatonism. Although this interpretive strategy has its strength, it sometimes misleads the readers to assuming that there is no significant difference between Plotinus and Proclus, or that this difference, if any, cannot be articulated.

Second, around the 12th century a philosophical work called *Liber de Causis* is widely circulated from the Islamic countries to the Latin West, and then commented by Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. Although its author remains unknown to this day, Aquinas already noticed that its content is mainly derived from Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. Thus, through *Liber de Causis* Proclus' thought—more specifically, the *Proclean* brand of Neoplatonism—became indirectly disseminated throughout the Western world. Unlike *The Theology of Aristotle*, and due to its more systematic character, *Liber de Causis* has the good fortune of being extensively studied and passed down by two of the most revered Christian philosophers in the Middle Age. This also contributes to the predominance of Proclus' Neoplatonism over Plotinus'.

(b) If there is no significant difference between Plotinus' and Plotinus' Neoplatonism, we need not lamenting over the scant historical reception of *the Enneads*. But this is not the case. Although both philosophers understand the One as the metaphysical cause of multiplicity, there are important differences between Plotinus and Proclus. According to Proposition 123 in *Elements of Theology*:

> All that is divine is in itself ineffable and unknowable (ἄρρητόν ἐστι καὶ ἄγνωστον) by any secondary being because of its supra-existential unity (ἕνωσιν), but it may be apprehended and known from the existents which participate it: wherefore only the First Principle is completely unknowable, as being unparticipated (ἅτε ἀμέθεκτον ὄν).[8]

For Proclus, for man to participate in the First Principle or the One *just is* to know It; and since the One is unknowable in itself, It must also be unparticipated. But this rules out the Plotinian approach whereby man unites with the One without knowing and speaking about It.[9] As Proposition 123 indicates, it is not simply the case that Proclus pays less attention to the obscure issue of mysticism in his sober writing; the truth is rather that his conceptions of the First Principle and of participation by knowledge make mystical unification impossible. As a result, what remains possible for him is only the degreed or "hierarchical" knowledge about the First Principle, as we see from Proposition 162:

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8 Cf. Dodds, E. R., *Proclus: The Elements of Theology, A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction and Commentary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1963, 108–111.

9 Cf. V.3.14; for further explanation see Chapter 1 and 4 of this dissertation.

> All those henads [metaphysical principles inferior to the One] (ἑνάδων) which illuminate true Being are secret and intelligible (κρύφιον καὶ νοητόν): secret as conjoined (συνημμένον) with the One, intelligible as participated by Being.[10]

To sum up, from a historical point of view, the factors which shape and limit in one way or another our understanding of Plotinus are authorship misattribution, monotheism, and the predominance of Proclus the fellow Platonist.

Section 2 The Scholarly Approaches to Mysticism

Very roughly, by "mysticism" I mean *man's intimate experience of the ultimate reality*, and in this section I shall use *mysticism* and *mystical experience* interchangeably unless the context indicates otherwise. It should be emphasized right away that this characterization is not so much a definition as a suggestion that we have no ready definition at hand, because the precise meanings of all three components in this characterization, "intimacy", "experience" and "ultimate reality", vary from case to case across different cultural traditions. For this reason, mysticism is a subject which is far more complicated and studied in more varied ways than Plotinus is.

Since the subject of this dissertation only touches Plotinus' mysticism, it seems that there is no need to review the literatures *of* and *about* mysticism in general. But the situation is not as simple as it seems. For it is natural for us to explain an unfamiliar phenomenon in terms of what we are familiar with, and when things do not work out as expected, we tend to regard the unfamiliar phenomenon as abnormal or not interesting and then, instead of revising our old conceptual framework, just leave it at that. That this might be the case not only for Plotinus' philosophical thought, but also for his mysticism, can be expected from the explanations in Section 1.1. Therefore, in order not to read Plotinus' teaching of henosis in the wrong way and take it out of its proper context, it is important to first consider the possibility of refining the pre-conceived conceptual framework in the study of mysticism. To this end, in this section I will focus on meta-theoretical or second-order reflections upon how certain presuppositions or conceptual schemes shape the study of mysticism. The aim, to emphasize, is not to determine *a priori* what mysticism as such or Plotinus' mysticism in specific must be, but simply to prepare for a more humble and cautious attitude before dealing with the subject at hand.

10 Cf. Dodds, 1963, 140–143.

The following analysis relies, for the most part, on Bernard McGinn's account of the theoretical foundations of modern study of mysticism in the first volume of his seminal work, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*.[11] The scope of McGinn's account is unsurpassed, covering the *theological*, *philosophical*, *psychological* and *comparative* studies of mysticism in Europe and America in the past hundred years. Since my analysis aims at meta-theoretical refinement, in what follows I will first summarize McGinn's own summary, and then remark on a few methodological features therein.

2.1 The Theological Approach to Mysticism

In general, twentieth-century German Protestant theologians (Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf Harnack, Emil Brunner, Karl Barth) tend to take a negative attitude toward mysticism, regarding its tendency toward self-deification as a deviation from the Christian faith. By contrast, English authors (Evelyn Underhill and William Inge) maintain that mysticism involves an affirmative attitude toward the world, nature and one's neighbors which is in harmony with the Gospel. The Catholic theologians, on the other hand, tend to avoid the over-simplifying criticism of mysticism as self-deification, for they see the relationship between God and man more subtly than the Protestant theologians do. Their discussions revolve around two basic questions: Whether all men (or all Christians) are called to the mystical union with God, and in what stage of man's life of prayer does the union take place. Catholic theologians from different eras address these issues in different ways. The Neo-Scholastics (Augustin-Francois Poulain, August Saudreau, Albert Farges, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange) draw on the authoritative teachings of Thomas Aquinas, John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila, while, Karl Rahner, the most important Catholic theologian after the Second Vatican Council, draws on Joseph Maréchal's transcendental Thomism.

What ties these three theological strands together, in my opinion, is the basic intuition that the Christian way of life is fundamental, or that mysticism must be based upon a Christian "life process" (Underhill's term) in order to be acknowledged at all. Christianity provides the concrete cultural, social and historical context in which the mystical writings can be understood and the true mystics can be distinguished from the false ones. In this sense, Christian

11 McGinn, Bernard, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Vol. 1 of The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Crossroad, New York, 1991, 265–343.

mysticism could be understood as a further development of Christian spirituality, "the lived experience of Christian faith and discipleship".[12]

But this theological approach has difficulties from both the outside and the inside. From the outside, it has the problem of coming to term with those non-Christian mystics who claim to have intimate experiences of the ultimate reality. In our ecumenical age when inter-religious dialogue becomes an urgent task, this difficulty surfaces as one of the greatest challenges this theological approach to mysticism has to deal with.[13] And from the inside, things become even more complicated when we note that not a few Christian mystics who regarded themselves as devoted believers were treated with suspicion at their time (Evagrius Ponticus, Gregory of Palamas, Meister Eckhart, Miguel de Molinos, to name a few). The theological approach does help us to judge and evaluate them, but it seems that a more sympathetic and impartial understanding is needed.

2.2 The Psychological and Comparative Approach to Mysticism

The methodological shift from the theological to the psychological-comparative approach to mysticism is related to the *semantic change* of the term *mystical*, as Michel de Certeau observes:

> In the sixteenth or seventeenth century one no longer designates as mystical the kind of "wisdom" elevated to the recognition of a mystery already lived and proclaimed in common beliefs, but an experimental knowledge which has slowly detached itself from traditional theology or Church institutions and which characterizes itself through the consciousness, acquired or received, of a gratified passivity where the self is lost in God.[14]

This change paves the way for the psychological and comparative studies of mysticism. It is due to external factors as well, including socio-political impetus (first New Imperialism, the two World Wars, and then globalization) and scientific progress (first experimental psychology, then cognitive science), that these new studies become a growing and lasting enterprise. For this reason, in this sub-section I will not aim at an orderly run-down or a detached evaluation,

12 Cf. Perrin, David B., 'Mysticism', *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, 2005, 442–458. See also Schneiders, Sandra M., 'Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality', ibid., 15–33.

13 Cf. Knitter, Paul, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2002, 112–113, 125–126.

14 de Certeau, Michel, 'Mystique', *Encyclopaedia universalis*, 11, Encyclopaedia universalis de France, Paris, 1968, 522, cited from McGinn, 1991, 311–312.

but restrict myself to what I regard as the most influential works in this field of research.

Arguably, *the* most influential work for the psychological and comparative studies of mysticism is William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). According to James, mysticism or mystical experiences are *mystical states of consciousness* which are ineffable, noetic, transient and passive. Although not all psychologists and comparativists of mysticism stick to this characterization *verbatim*, they all benefit greatly from the underlying approach of James' characterization, namely the methodological *reduction* to *psychological* experience. This can be explained on two counts.

First, regarding the object of study, it strips mystical experience from the mystic's entire personal history down to a depersonalized episode of psychological experience, thereby giving the researchers something definite to focus on. It does not matter *who* has this experience or *how* this experience takes place, for it suffices for the objective-minded researchers to have before them a specimen of state of consciousness that is ineffable, noetic, transient and passive.

Second, regarding the researcher himself, James' new idea reduces personal religious experience to mystical states of consciousness, thereby freeing researchers of mysticism from any pre-theoretical commitment to a given religion. With this move, the "door" (to borrow Aldous Huxley's term) to perceiving mystical states of consciousness opens up to a wider public: not only to non-religious psychologists, but more importantly also to comparativists interested in different religions.

The second point is especially noteworthy for two reasons. First, it provides the comparativists a more reliable source, material and method to work on. Compare the Traditionalist René Guenon (1886–1951) and his contemporary Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) for example. For Guenon, all religions are based on the same sacred science which can be transmitted through spiritual or mystical initiation; Huxley, on the other hand, suggests to the effect that under the influence of psychedelic drug the Beatific Vision, Sat-Chit-Ananda and the Dharma-Body of the Buddha all become "as evident as Euclid".[15] Their basic tenets are similar—all major religions have mysticism as their inner core—but their approaches are not. Guenon's prophetic tone and proof-texting method manifest his anti-modernist position, and this is in turn based on his diagnosis of *the entire human history* based on the Hindu doctrine of Manvantara.[16] Since

15 Huxley, Aldous, *The Door of Perception*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1954, 12–13.

16 Cf. Guenon, René, *The Crisis of Modern World* (4th, revised edition), tr. Marco Pallis, Arthur Osborne, Richard C. Nicholson, Sophia Perennis, Hillsdale, 2001, 7: "The Hindu doctrine teaches that a human cycle, to which it gives the name *Manvantara*,

anti-modernism underlies not only Guenon's theory but also his premise, it is impossible to understand his works without pre-theoretically committing oneself to his interpretation of certain Hindu doctrines. By contrast, Huxley cites his experiment with psychedelic drugs as evidence that all mystical experiences are essentially the same because they have the same psychological features. Everyone is welcomed to take drugs so as to examine whether Huxley' claim is true; and indeed his fiercest detractor, R. C. Zaehner, experimented with mescaline and came to the opposing conclusion that such experience is "hilariously funny" and "anti-religious".[17] Leaving aside the issue whether hallucinatory experience counts as mystical experience, we still have to applaud Huxley and Zaehner for their joint attempt to secure an objective evidence for mystical experience. The study of comparative mysticism cannot make progress without first standing on a firm ground on which the basic data of mysticism can be objectively examined.

The Jamesean approach not only provides the comparativists a more reliable source, material and method to work on, but also enables them to investigate the nature of mysticism from an inter-religious point of view. In comparison with the theological approach, this new way shows a greater sensitivity and tolerance of the diversity of mystical experiences. Aldous Huxley and W. T. Stace count as two of the earliest proponents of the idea that all mystical experiences, no matter to what tradition they belong and how they are attained, have a "common core" and hence are essentially the same.[18] The most important work to criticize this view is R. C. Zaehner's *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (1957), in which the author seeks to refute Huxley's essentialism by distinguishing three different types of mysticism (nature mysticism, monistic mysticism and theistic mysticism). Zaehner's contribution is especially noteworthy, for he is the first to

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is divided into four periods marking so many stages during which the primordial spirituality becomes gradually more and more obscured […] We are now in the fourth age, the *Kali-Yuga* or 'dark age', and have been so already, it is said, for more than six thousand years." Ibid., 107: "Our chief purpose in this work has been to show how it is possible, by the application of traditional data, to find the most direct solution to the questions that are being asked nowadays, to explain the present state of mankind, and at the same time to judge everything that constitutes modern civilization in accordance with truth, instead of by conventional rules or sentimental preferences."

17 Zaehner, R. C., *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1960, 212–226. Clarendon University Press, Oxford, 1957, 212–226.

18 Cf. Huxley, 1954 and Stace, W. T., *Mysticism and Philosophy*, Macmillan, London, 1960.

attempt to draw a typology of mysticism based on the Jamesean, reduced conception. Later on the debate between Huxley and Zaehner will be picked up by the Anglo-American philosophers, and this also testifies to the lasting influence of James and Zaehner on the study of mysticism.

Unsurprisingly, scholars working with the theological approach will find this approach unacceptable, because their thick conception of mystical experience as a *way of life* is far richer than the thin psychological conception of mystical experience as *states of consciousness*. In their eyes, the problem of the Jamesean model is not just that it overemphasizes the mystic's transient and ineffable experience to the indifference of its historical, social and reflective dimensions. More pointedly, in focusing on the mystic's states of consciousness, the turn to psychological experience in fact misses the important *psychological* facts that the consciousness is intentional and open to the transcendent world.

This point also leads us to wonder whether the Jamesean methodological reduction to state of consciousness is too radical to accommodate the intrinsic relation among the *reality*, the *thought* and the *language* constitutive of mystical experience.[19] This problem can be seen in James' following remark:

> One may say truly, I think, that personal religious experience has its root in mystical states of consciousness; so for us, who in these lectures are treating personal experience as the exclusive subject of our study, such states of consciousness ought to form the vital chapter from which other chapters get their light. *Whether my treatment of mystical states will shed more light or darkness, I do not know, for my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand.* But though forced to look upon the subject so externally, I will be as *objective and receptive* as I can…[20]

As James admits, his own constitution shuts him out from the enjoyment of mystical experience almost entirely, and all he can do is to resort to second hand interpretations. In spite of this essential limitation (if not obstruction), he also claims that it is still possible to study mystical states of consciousness both objectively and receptively. The basic reason for James' methodological shortcut, I suppose, is this: since mystics are allegedly gifted human beings, and since the reality of mysticism is assumed to be otherworldly, the best a

19 The relation among reality, thought and language serves as an implicit framework in Bernard McGinn's analysis of the emergence of a new form of Christian mysticism around 1200 C.E.; cf. McGinn, Bernard, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)*, Crossroads, New York, 1998, 12–30.

20 James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Pennsylvania State University, 2002, 279–280.

psychologist can do is to appeal to second-hand interpretations. I am in no position to evaluate these presuppositions, but it is noteworthy and somewhat ironic that a psychologist like James should subscribe to presuppositions which *mystify* mystical experience, whereas a theologian like Karl Rahner maintains to the contrary that all human beings have an unthematic awareness of God in their daily experiences.

We have noted previously that the Jamesean approach enables the scholars to investigate the nature of mysticism from a more liberal, inter-religious point of view. But here we see that James wants to take this approach much further and to avail himself, paradoxically, to study mystical experience without really undergoing such experience. Perhaps his intuition is that, just as the psychiatrist can treat mental illness without suffering mental illness himself, so the scholar of mysticism can study mystical experience without enjoying it. But this analogy is too coarse. Even if the psychiatrist does not really have to suffer mental illness, he must have sufficient medical training and clinical practice in order to treat mental illness. A similar contact or acquaintance with the *reality* of mystical experience, however, is absent in James' account, for all he resorts to is the *interpretation* thereof. At all events, it suffices for James to lay down a *working hypothesis* of mystical experience for scientific investigations; the question is not brought up whether this working hypothesis can be true to the reality of mystical experience. As a result, there is no direct way to tell if a thesis advanced in such a psychological study of mysticism *corresponds* to the reality of mystical experience. I do not wish to suggest that such an approach is making unverifiable or meaningless claims about mystical experience, but it seems to me that it does overlook an essential dimension, namely the reality, of mystical experience.

A similar problem emerges in Zaehner's critique of Huxley. As we have explained, Huxley claims that the same mystical state of consciousness underlies different mystical experiences. The simplest way to refute Huxley is to offer counter-evidence, namely to show that under an experience similar to his drug-induced one, the Beatific Vision, Sat-Chit-Ananda and the Dharma-Body *do not* become "as evident as Euclid". In other words, we have to show that the Beatific Vision, Sat-Chit-Ananda and the Dharma-Body are different mystical realities, just as Jerusalem and India are different geographical realities. Now Zaehner seeks to refute him by showing that there is more than one kind of mysticism, and he does this not by *experiencing different kinds of mystical realities*, but by classifying a selection of mystical *writings*. Accordingly, the mystical experiences described in the Upanishads differ from those described by Meister Eckhart, because they are built into different systems of doctrinal beliefs. Zaehner's strategy

rests on the presuppositions that different mystical writings express different mystical experiences, and that the two sets of descriptions refer to two different things. But this is wrong, for one and the same thing can have different names, and different names do not necessarily refer to different things.[21]

2.3 The Philosophical Approach to Mysticism

In inquiring into the *nature* of mysticism, philosophers of mysticism usually turn to either theology or psychology for the basic determination of their own object of inquiry. Thus, strictly speaking, what they study is not mysticism as such, but the mysticism as the theologians or the psychologists conceive it. In the first four decades of the last century, the majority of French and other continental

21 Cf. Stace, 1960, 35–36: "Professor R. C. Zaehner, in his book *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* shows that he is in some sense conscious of there being a difference between the experience and the interpretation, but he is in my opinion gravely misled by his failure to hold the distinction clearly in mind, to grasp its implications, and to make effective use of it. For instance, in the records of introvertive mysticism one finds frequent descriptions of the experience of an absolute undifferentiated and distinctionless unity in which all multiplicity has been obliterated. This, as we shall see later, is described by Christian mystics such as Eckhart and Ruysbroeck on the one hand, and by the ancient Hindu mystics who composed the Upanishads on the other. The language of the Hindus on the one hand and the Christians on the other is so astonishingly similar that they give every appearance of describing identically the same experience. They were of course wholly unknown to, and independent of, one another. Yet Professor Zaehner, who is a Roman Catholic, insists that *their experiences must have been different because Eckhart and Ruysbroeck built their accounts of the experience into the orthodox Trinitarian theology which they accepted from the Church, whereas the Hindus understood it pantheistically* — pantheism being, according to Catholic theologians, a serious "heresy." We may leave the question open (for the present) whether Professor Zaehner is right in thinking that the Christian and the Indian experiences are quite different from one another in spite of the almost identical words in which they are often expressed. He may be right. We have admitted, or rather asserted, that there are two alternative hypotheses for explaining the facts. Professor Zaehner chooses one of them. We have not yet ourselves investigated the question of which is right. But the point is that *Professor Zaehner's conclusion simply does not follow from the mere fact that the beliefs which Christian mystics based upon their experiences are different from the beliefs which the Indians based on theirs.* And the difference of beliefs is really the only evidence which he offers for his view. A genuine grasp of the distinction between experience and interpretation, and especially of the difficulties involved in applying it, might have resulted in a fuller, fairer, and more impartial examination and treatment of the two possible hypotheses."

philosophers of mysticism (Friedrich von Hügel, Joseph Maréchal, Henri Bergson, Maurice Blondel, Jacques Maritain) draw inspirations from Christian (especially Catholic) theology, but the way they build personal insights about mysticism into their metaphysical systems makes it difficult to understand their premises and theses from a rationally neutral perspective.[22] As the direct impact of religion on the secularized academy decreases, such a way of doing philosophy of mysticism is on the wane.

The Anglo-American philosophers, on the other hand, mostly worked under the Jamesean conception of mystical experience as an ineffable and noetic state of consciousness.[23] Its most central issues concern the relation between mystical experience and the interpretation thereof, and, relatedly, the ineffability of mystical experience. Notably, it is the logical positivist A. J. Ayer's critical remark in 1936 that first sparked the debate surrounding these issues.

> If a mystic admits that the object of his vision is something which cannot be described, then he must also admit that he is bound to talk nonsense when he describes it […] [In] describing his vision the mystic does not give us any information about the external world; he merely gives us indirect information about the condition of his own mind.[24]

In short, the ineffability of mystical experience contradicts its noetic quality. Following Ayer's critique, there have been several different attempts to salvage mystical experience from logical contradiction.[25] For W. T. Stace, mystical experience

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22 Cf. McGinn's critical remark on Bergson: "The increasing religious dimension of [Bergson's] thought is evident in *The Two Sources* where Bergson's fundamental conviction about the centrality of *dureé* […] was applied to religion and morality. From this perspective, Bergson came to see mysticism as the direct expression of the evolutionary force at the heart of all reality, the force that he described as the *élan vital*. […] If mysticism is virtually the same thing as Bergsonianism, it would seem difficult to make use of his insights on the former without also signing on for the latter." (McGinn, 1991, 304)

23 A more sophisticated contemporary version can be found in the entry *mysticism* from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which defines mystical experience as "A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual unitive experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection." (Gellman, Jerome, "Mysticism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/mysticism/>.)

24 Ayer, A. J., *Language, Truth and Logic*, Dover Publications, New York, 1946, 118–119.

25 For a survey of more recent accounts see Gellman, Jerome, "Mysticism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford. edu/archives/sum2011/entries/mysticism/>.

is essentially non-logical, and when the mystic says that it is ineffable, this account is only a remembrance of what has happened to him. For Ninian Smart, the mystic's intention to speak the ineffable is precisely to show *performatively* the limit of language and the transcendence of mystical experience. On top of this, the 60s and the 70s saw several other articles by Richard Gale, J. N. Findlay, Galen Pletcher, Bruce Garside, Terence Penulhum, John Hick and Ninian Smart debating over this issue.[26]

Instead of looking into this debate in detail, I shall point out an implicit metatheoretical issue. As the above quotation of Ayer and the majority of the subsequent scholarly discussions indicate, what is debated is in fact the very *idea* that mystical experience is both ineffable and noetic, rather than an individual *case* of a certain mystic with his writings coming from a concrete historical background. No one is discussing, for instance, whether Thomas Aquinas is a mystic, whether he claims to the effect that mystical experience (or *henosis*, for that matter) is ineffable, and whether he is contradicting himself with these claims. Furthermore, supposed that a preliminary conclusion about Aquinas can be reached, no one bothers to ask to what extent this conclusion can be applied to other countless mystics. Therefore, the more precise formulation of their debate is not *Is mystical experience itself self-contradicting?*, but should be *Is the idea that mystical experience is ineffable and noetic self-contradicting?*

In this questioning, the more fundamental issue *Does the idea that mystical experience is ineffable and noetic correspond to the reality of mystical experience?* is passed over in silence most of the time. As McGinn points out, "the most recent contributions to the Anglo-American philosophical views of mysticism have been largely critical studies of the inner consistency of *theories of mysticism*

26 Cf. Gale, Richard M., 'Mysticism and Philosophy', *Journal of Philosophy* 57, 1960, 471–481; Findlay, J. N., 'The Logic of Mysticism', *Ascent to the Absolute: Metaphysical Papers and Letters*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1970, 162–183; Pletcher, Galen K., 'Mysticism, Contradiction, and Ineffability', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10, 1973, 201–211; Garside, Bruce, 'Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experience', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 3, 1972, 93–102; Penulhum, Terence, 'Unity and Diversity in the Interpretation of Mysticism', *Mystics and Scholars: The Calgary Conference on Mysticism 1976*, ed. Harold Coward and Terence Penulhum, *Sciences Reilgieuses: Supplements* 3, 1977, 71–81; Hick, John, 'Mystical Experience as Cognition', *Mystics and Scholars*, 41–56 and Smart, Ninian, 'Mystical Experience', *Sophia* 1, 1962, 19–26; idem. 'Interpretation and Mystical Experence', *Religious Studies* 1, 1965, 75–87; idem. 'Understanding Religious Experience', *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven Katz, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978, 10–21.

whose treatment of mystical texts evidences a form of '*proof-texting*' that pays little attention to context, original language and other textual issues which any form of sound hermeneutics demands."[27] Steven Katz rightly criticizes the tendency to downplay the specificity, diversity and context-dependency of mystical experience, and argues that all mystical experiences are shaped by their respective religious tradition and other factors. There is no unmediated, "pure" experience; every experience is filtered through interpretation.

> […] in order to understand mysticism it is not just a question of studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event but of acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience. To flesh this out, straightforwardly, what is being argued is that, for example, the Hindu mystic does not have an experience of *x* which he then describes in the, to him, familiar language and symbols of Hinduism, but rather he has a Hindu experience, i.e. his experience is not an unmediated experience of *x* but is itself the, at least partially, pre-formed anticipated Hindu experience of Brahman. Again, the Christian mystic does not experience some unidentified reality, which he then conveniently labels God, but rather has the at least partially prefigured Christian experiences of God, or Jesus, or the like. Moreover, as one might have anticipated, it is my view based on what evidence there is, that the Hindu experience of Brahman and the Christian experience of God are not the same.[28]

While Katz reminds us to look more closely into the concrete historical reality of the mystic, he tends to head to the other extremity in claiming to the effect that just because mystical experiences are all mediated by interpretations across different contexts, they cannot have any "common core" behind them. However, the fact that there are two names, say Morning Star and Evening Star, does not mean that they *must* refer to two different things. They can refer to two different things, say a cruise ship and a race car respectively. But they can *also* refer to one and the same thing, for instance to the planet Venus. We are unable to know what the case is, unless we are *both* within the linguistic context wherein these names are being used *and* in contact with the *things* they are supposed to refer to (star, ship, car). It is impossible to know what a thing really

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27 McGinn, 1991, 319; as an indication of this tendency to over-theorization, McGinn mentions two monographs from the 80s: Wainwright, William J., *Mysticism: A Study of Its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1981; and Almond, Philip C., *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine: An Investigation of the Study of Mysticism in World Religions*, Mouton, Berlin and New York, 1982.

28 Katz, Steven, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism', *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven Katz, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978, 26.

is just by knowing its name. To restate this point in the context of comparative study of mysticism: In order to be able to tell whether or not the Hindu experience of Brahman and the Christian experience of God are the same, the scholar of mysticism should first become *both* a Hindu mystic and a Christian mystic. Textual study of a Hindu and a Christian mystical writing is important, but far from sufficient. That this condition should appear exceedingly demanding gives us no reason to take the easy way out; it is rather a warning sign and a helpful reminder that modesty, openness and caution are essential for the comparative study of mysticism.

2.4 Reflections on the Approaches to the Study of Mysticism

Let us first sum up the strength and weakness of the previous approaches. Mysticism is originally a religious and ethical phenomenon, and the theological approach correctly highlights this basic fact. But in the worst case, when a thick conception of religious way of life is carved out of this phenomenon and imposed upon an individual mystic, it tends to judge him from either a dogmatic perspective or a wrong context, thereby suffocating his originality and uniqueness.

It is this danger, I think, which makes the psychological approach appear attractive and refreshing. For its thin conception of experience not only allows the researchers something definite to concentrate on, but also welcomes non-theologians to approach mysticism from a more liberal perspective. But meta-theoretical parsimony has its negative side-effects too, for when reduction is pushed to extreme, it is no longer possible to speak anything sensible about mystical experience. To wit, it is one thing that certain mystical experiences are ineffable and mystical writings paradoxical, but quite another for researchers to *conceive* them as ineffable and paradoxical. Ineffable experiences and paradoxical writings, if any, might arouse scholarly interest to study them; but to posit ineffability and paradox as the measure of knowledge of mysticism is self-defeating for any serious intellectual inquiry.

Philosophers of mysticism, in reflecting upon the theoretical issues such as the ineffability of mystical experience and the distinction between mystical experience and interpretation, have the advantage of refining the conceptual framework of the articulation of mystical experiences. But this reflective power is surrendered when the theological and psychological conceptions of mystical experience are taken for granted and identified with mysticism as such.

The lessons we learn from these different approaches can be summarized as follows:

(1) In order both to treat fairly the mystic's concrete way of life and to focus on a definite object from an unprejudiced perspective, I suggest that we refrain from using sweeping generalizations such as "mysticism", "monistic mysticism" or "Christian mysticism", and to simply focus on the case studies of individual mystics.

(2) While we are primarily concerned with the mystical experience or experiential reality of mysticism in the case of a particular mystic, most of the time it is neither the reality itself nor the person in flesh and blood, but rather his or her *texts*, which we are directly investigating. From this it immediately follows that, as long as the texts are the direct objects of investigation, the researchers are in no position to decide whether or not the different texts describe the same experience. Even if a gifted scholar is, say, both a Hindu mystic and a Christian mystic, he is still unable to tell whether *moksha* is identical to *unio mystica*, because he cannot represent the deities (Brahman and God) involved in his experiences. Thus the question concerning the unity and diversity of mysticism is suspended.

(3) A further important consequence is that, when it comes to the textual study of mysticism, we should avoid any thick or thin preconception of mystical experience, and attend instead to how the specific text configures the relation between experience and interpretation, or reality and language. In other words, the proper method in the case study of mystical text lies in articulating the interdependency-relation among reality, thought and language as is arranged by a specific mystical text.

To see this point, compare *Life of Moses* of Gregory of Nyssa, John Climacus' *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, *Revelations of Divine Love* of Julian of Norwich, *On the Vision of God* of Nicholas of Cusa, and *Dark Night of the Soul* of John of the Cross. All of them are classic mystical writings, so there is no reason why scholars of mysticism should overlook them. But these authors do not represent mystical experience in the same way. *Life of Moses* is a work of biblical commentary; *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is an ascetical handbook; *On the Vision of God* is a theological treatise on beatific vision; *Revelations of Divine Love* accounts for Julian's visionary experiences, appended with her theological interpretations; and *Dark Night of the Soul* comprises stanzas and John's own explanations. Correspondingly, the *reality* of mystical experience is represented differently: as the content of wisdom teaching, as intellectual reflection, as private experience, as the goal of ascetic exercise, or as a work of art. The study of mystical writings does not focus solely on the linguistic factor, but rather on how it relates to the content of thought (via philosophical arguments, literary devices, spiritual counsel, etc.) on

the one hand, and the reality of mystical experience (as lived tradition, personal experience, etc.), on the other hand.

Section 3 Subject, Method and Structure of the Present Study

For our present study of Plotinus, the gist of Section 1 and 2 boils down to three simple reminders. First, a careful study of Plotinus' own writings is needed to do justice to his thought. Second, so far as Plotinus' *mysticism* is concerned, we are not studying Plotinus' own mystical experience which he reportedly attained four times in his life, as Porphyry told us. For the direct object of our investigation should be Plotinus' more systematic account of henosis found in the *Enneads*, rather than Porphyry's cursory remarks. Third and more important, before looking into *what* Plotinus' account of henosis is, we have to explain *how* he accounts for it. In other words, we have first to attend to the genre and style of the *Enneads* as a work on mysticism.[29]

Regarding this point, major Plotinian scholars including A. H. Armstrong, Werner Beierwaltes, Émile Bréhier, John Bussanich, Pierre Hadot and John Rist are in agreement that mysticism is compatible with the philosophical thoughts presented in the *Enneads*.[30] However, John Deck and Lloyd Gerson maintain that we need not resort to mystical experience to understand Plotinus' philo-

29 I do not suggest that Plotinus intends to compose a work on mysticism. The *Enneads* is in fact a posthumous compilation of writings on various issues, including philosophy of nature, moral philosophy, and so on. My point is simply that in order to study Plotinus' mysticism, first we need to know how his thought is represented in and through his writings.

30 Cf. Armstrong, A. H., 'Tradition, Reason and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus', *Plotino e il Neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente*, 171–194, reprinted in Armstrong, A. H., *Plotinian and Christian Studies*, Variorum, London, 1979, XVII; Beierwaltes, Werner, *Denken des Einen*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1985; idem., *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit: Plotins Ennead V 3, Text, übersetzung, Interpretation, Erlaüterungen*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1991; idem., *Das wahre Selbst: Studien zu Plotins Begriff des Einen und des Geistes*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 2001; Bréhier, Émile, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, tr. Joseph Thomas, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958; Bussanich, John, 'Plotinian Mysticism in Theoretical and Comparative Perspective', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXI, No.3, 1997, 339–365; Hadot, Pierre, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, tr. Michael Chase, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993; and Rist, John, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1967, 213–230.

sophical argumentations.[31] In this dissertation, I side with the majority of the Plotinian scholars and hold that for Plotinus, mystical experience is irreducible to philosophical argumentations (λογισμόι). As he emphasizes twice in the *Enneads*, "whoever has already seen (εἶδεν) [the One], will know (οἶδεν) what I'm saying."[32] The tenses of εἶδεν and οἶδεν indicate that the real experience of henosis precedes and grounds the reasoning about it, and arguments abstracted from their experiential context cannot be properly understood. What concerns Plotinus primarily, therefore, is the real experience itself, and a proper discourse (λόγος) thereof must be composed accordingly.

However, the *Enneads* is not a literary work on Plotinus' *personal* contact with the One, either. To be sure, we can find metaphorical descriptions and what looks like an autobiographical account of visionary experiences scattered here and there throughout his writings,[33] but their seriousness and aesthetic value do not measure up to, say, *Scivias* of Hildegard of Bingen and Jalal ad-Din Rumi's *Masnavi*. Rather, as A.H. Armstrong points out, "the primary object of all Plotinus' philosophical activity is to bring his own soul and *the souls of others* by way of Intellect to union with the One. His last words 'Try to bring back the god *in you* to the divine in the All' are a summing up of his whole life and work."[34] Thus, in terms of style and genre, the *Enneads* is neither a treatise nor an autobiography nor a poem, but stands more closely to the spiritual counsel or ascetic teaching such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The didactic element of Plotinus' mysticism is clearly seen in the majority of his most important treatises, such as *On Beauty* (the *Ennead*, I.6), *On the Three Primary Hypostases* (V.1), *On the Knowing Hypostases and That which is Beyond* (V.3), *On the Presence of Being* (VI.4–5), *How the Multitude of Forms Come into Being, and on the Good* (VI.7) and *On the Good or the One* (VI.9). As Armstrong remarks in his introductory note of V.1:

> It [treatise V.1] is a fine example of the way in which metaphysical reflection and personal spiritual life are always indissolubly united in Plotinus. The treatise does indeed, as its title indicates, give an account of the "three primary hypostases" […] But it is not a textbook exposition of an abstract metaphysical system which does not involve or commit

31 Cf. Deck, John, *Nature, Contemplation and the One: A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (2nd edition), Larson Publications, Burdett, 1991, 23–26ff. and Gerson, Lloyd, *Plotinus*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, 218–224.

32 VI.9.9.47–48; see also I.6.7.2–3.

33 See e.g. I.6.9, IV.8.1, V.5.12, VI.7.36.10–27, VI.9.8–9 and VI.9.11.

34 Armstrong, 1966, ix-xxvi.

writer or reader, but an "ascent of the mind to God" which recalls man to an understanding of his true nature and dignity and guides him on his way to his ultimate goal.[35]

Seeing that spiritual guidance is the leitmotif behind Plotinus' writings, when he claims that "whoever has already seen [the One], will know what I'm saying," the real experience in question bears not upon *what Plotinus has already seen* in the past, but upon *what the students will have seen* when they carry out his instructions. To use his own term, Plotinus' aim is to let the students themselves "go up" (ἀναβαίνειν)[36] or "ascend" (ἀνάγειν)[37] to the One by following the methods given in his mystical teaching; and what the students will have seen is to be found in the experiential learning of the "ascent". (In this dissertation I use the technical terms "ascent to the One" and "to ascend to the One" to refer to the gist of Plotinus' mystical teaching; just what this means is the focus of my investigation.)

This point helps to specify the subject and method of our present study. The precise subject should be Plotinus' guidance, instruction or teaching concerning henosis as it is laid down in the *Enneads*, rather than the report of his personal experience, or the metaphorical descriptions about mystical vision, or (if any) the analyses and argumentations about henosis. And seeing that the kernel of Plotinus' writings lies in the methods whereby man "ascends" to the One, our method of inquiry is simply to examine the methods prescribed therein. In order to locate topics for more thorough investigations in the chapters below, I will present in what follows an exegetical survey on Plotinus' methodical teaching. What I aim at is not detailed expositions, but only a concise overview of how Plotinus guides the students along their ascent to the One. The *locus* for our exegesis is *On Dialectic* (I.3).

(i) What art is there, what method or practice, which will take us up there where we must go? Where that is, that it is to the Good, the First Principle, we can take as agreed and established by many demonstrations; and the demonstrations themselves were a kind of leading up on our way.

Τίς τέχνη ἢ μέθοδος ἢ ἐπιτήδευσις ἡμᾶς οἷ δεῖ πορευθῆναι ἀνάγει; Ὅπου μὲν οὖν δεῖ ἐλθεῖν, ὡς ἐπὶ τἀγαθὸν καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν τὴν πρώτην, κείσθω διωμολογημένον καὶ διὰ πολλῶν δεδειγμένον· καὶ δὴ καὶ δι᾽ ὧν τοῦτο ἐδείκνυτο, ἀναγωγή τις ἦν.[38]

35 Armstrong, 1984, 8.
36 Cf. I.3.1.13 and V.1.3.1–3.
37 Cf. I.3.1.2 and V.1.1.24.
38 I.3.1.1–5.

The goal is to ascend to the Good, and what the Good is and how man ascends to It are shown (δεδειγμένον) in many ways. Armstrong translates διὰ πολλῶν δεδειγμένον into *established by many demonstration*, which suggests that the Good or the One is to be shown or derived *from something else*, such as arguments (λογισμοί). This reading is incorrect because the One, qua first principle and ultimate reality, cannot be derived from anything else. In fact, δεδειγμένον is a cognate of δείκνυσθαι, which means *to show* or *to present itself*. The first principle is said to "show itself" in the sense that it is immanent in all beings which are its diverse manifestations. So when Plotinus says that the first principle is shown in many ways, he does not mean that we have many arguments for the existence of the One; the point is rather that Its manifestations or traces can be found in all beings. And since these manifestations are not man-made distortions of the One, but rather that in which the One shows *Itself*, so the ways how they are shown already lead back to the One. This is why Plotinus says that "how it is shown is a kind of ascent to the Good." For the ultimate reality to show itself and for man to "ascend" to it, consequently, boil down to one and the same thing. Such is the basic principle behind the methods laid down in Plotinus' mystical teaching, which rests upon the intuition that the ultimate reality is ultimate for everything including man, and everything is ultimately real according to its own mode of being. Plotinus' metaphysics of the One which grounds his teaching of henosis will be examined in greater detail in the opening chapter.

Within a didactic context, the most crucial implication of the One's immanence is that the One is accessible to the *students themselves*, such that they can "ascend" to It by following the "art, method or practice" (τέχνη ἢ μέθοδος ἢ ἐπιτήδευσις) given in Plotinus' mystical teaching. Thus Plotinus goes on to characterize his target students and then introduces the practices that befit them:

(ii) But what sort of person should the man be who is to be led on this upward path? Surely one who has seen all or, as Plato says, "who has seen most things, and in the first birth enters into a human child who is going to be a philosopher, a musician or a lover."

Τίνα δὲ δεῖ εἶναι τὸν ἀναχθησόμενον; Ἆρά γε τὸν πάντα ἢ τὸν πλεῖστά φησιν ἰδόντα, ὃς ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ γενέσει εἰς γονὴν ἀνδρὸς ἐσομένου φιλοσόφου μουσικοῦ τινος ἢ ἐρωτικοῦ;[39]

The One manifests Itself in different *lovers*: lover of sensual pleasure, lover of fine art, and philosopher, i.e. lover of wisdom (φιλο-σόφος). So the target students

39 I.3.1.5–9.

are those who are driven by the desire for material and immaterial beauties, and gratify themselves in the attainment thereof. Stated differently, the starting point of Plotinus' teaching of henosis lies in man's *ordinary experience of desire* through which the One is accessible to him. How man should ascend from his experience of desire to the One, is explained in Plotinus' description of the philosopher, the noblest of all the lovers:

(iii) But the philosopher—he is the one who is by nature ready to respond and "winged", we may say, and in no need of separation like the others. He has begun to move to the higher world, and is only at a loss for someone to show him the way.

Ὁ δὲ φιλόσοφος τὴν φύσιν ἕτοιμος οὗτος καὶ οἷον ἐπτερωμένος καὶ οὐ δεόμενος χωρίσεως, ὥσπερ οἱ ἄλλοι οὗτοι, κεκινημένος τὸ ἄνω, ἀπορῶν δὲ τοῦ δεικνύντος δεῖται μόνον.[40]

Propelled by the desire for knowledge, the philosopher inquires with his intellect into the intelligible beings, and aims ultimately at knowing just what it *is* that he really desires. Accordingly, one of the basic ideas behind Plotinus' mystical teaching is that man should know about his own desire and what he desires, and indeed by means of the practice of philosophy, namely *the intellectual inquiry into intelligible beings*.[41]

But as Plotinus immediately warns us in the same passage, philosophy is only an underdeveloped stage in the mystical ascent to the One, for the philosopher would be "at a loss for someone to show him the way". Why is the philosopher at a loss, and who would show him the way? These questions are explained as follows:

(iv) So he must be shown and set free, with his own good will, he who has long been free by nature. He must be given mathematical studies to train him in philosophical thought and accustom him to firm confidence in the existence of the immaterial—he will take to them easily, being naturally disposed to learning; he is by nature virtuous, and must be brought to perfect

40 I.3.3.1–4.

41 For brevity's sake, in this dissertation "philosophy" and "Plotinus' philosophy" refer specifically to the *method* or *practice* of philosophical activity instructed in his mystical teaching. The same applies to the technical terms "negative theology" and "Plotinus' negative theology". All these terms should not be confused with the *content* of Plotinus' own thought, the bulk of which I shall discuss under the heading "Plotinus' metaphysics of the One".

his virtues, and after his mathematical studies instructed in *dialectic*, and made a complete dialectician.

Δεικτέον οὖν καὶ λυτέον βουλόμενον καὶ αὐτὸν τῇ φύσει καὶ πάλαι λελυμένον. Τὰ μὲν δὴ μαθήματα δοτέον πρὸς συνεθισμὸν κατανοήσεως καὶ πίστεως ἀσωμάτου—καὶ γὰρ ῥᾴδιον δέξεται φιλομαθὴς ὢν—καὶ φύσει ἐνάρετον πρὸς τελείωσιν ἀρετῶν ἀκτέον καὶ μετὰ τὰ μαθήματα λόγους διαλεκτικῆς δοτέον καὶ ὅλως διαλεκτικὸν ποιητέον.[42]

Λυτέον βουλόμενον καὶ αὐτὸν τῇ φύσει καὶ πάλαι λελυμένον literally means "one must set him free who is willing and has long been free by nature". That is to say, the philosopher is by nature free from the "will", namely desire for knowledge, in which he appears to be occupied. To be freed from the loss or confusion (ἀπορίας), therefore, is just to be freed from this illusory desire. To this end, Plotinus tells us, the philosopher should learn the art of *dialectic*. But what is the art of dialectic, and why is the philosopher by nature always free from the desire for knowledge? As Plotinus goes on to clarify:

(v) It *[dialectic]* stops wandering about the world of sense and settles down in the world of intellect, and there it occupies itself, casting off falsehood and feeding the soul in what Plato calls "the plain of truth," using his method of division to distinguish the Forms, and to determine the essential nature of each thing, and to find the primary kinds, and weaving together by the intellect all that issues from these primary kinds, till it has traversed the whole intelligible world; then it resolves again the structure of that world into its parts, and comes back to its starting-point; …

Παύσασα δὲ τῆς περὶ τὸ αἰσθητὸν πλάνης ἐνιδρύει τῷ νοητῷ κἀκεῖ τὴν πραγματείαν ἔχει τὸ ψεῦδος ἀφεῖσα ἐν τῷ λεγομένῳ ἀληθείας πεδίῳ τὴν ψυχὴν τρέφουσα, τῇ διαιρέσει τῇ Πλάτωνος χρωμένη μὲν καὶ εἰς διάκρισιν τῶν εἰδῶν, χρωμένη δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ πρῶτα γένη, καὶ τὰ ἐκ τούτων νοερῶς πλέκουσα, ἕως ἂν διέλθῃ πᾶν τὸ νοητόν, καὶ ἀνάπαλιν ἀναλύουσα, εἰς ὃ ἂν ἐπ᾽ ἀρχὴν ἔλθῃ, …[43]

Plotinus' so-called "dialectic" is not the same as the original Platonic one. The Platonic dialectic is concerned with investigating the world of intelligible beings, which is tantamount to Plotinus' practice of philosophy explained in passage (iii). But as is emphasized repeatedly in the *Enneads*, the world of intelligible

42 I.3.3.5–10.

43 I.3.4.9–16.

beings is not the "starting-point" or the first principle (ἀρχὴ) mentioned in (v).[44] For this reason, in striving to truly know the object of his desire, the philosopher must go *beyond* the intelligible beings to find out the ultimate reality. Plotinus' dialectics, entitled "the second stage of the ascent to the One"[45] and "the nobler part of philosophy",[46] is designed precisely for this task. It proceeds by "resolving" or reducing the world of intelligible beings so radically that the ultimate reality resulting from this operation turns out to be beyond all of them. In this sense, what Plotinus means by "dialectic" is actually a version of *negative theology* which inquires into the ultimate reality which is beyond all beings by removing all beings from It.

Now, considering that the ultimate reality of the intelligible beings is beyond all of them, the philosopher must be said to be "by nature always free from the desire for knowledge" (cf. (iv)) for two reasons. First, the desire for knowledge is an inferior one and therefore should be overcome, insofar as it is directed not toward the ultimate reality but toward the *intelligible beings*. Second, the desire for knowledge is illusory and must be overcome just as well, insofar as it is directed toward *the ultimate reality* which is in fact beyond intelligible beings. In the last analysis, then, the basic idea behind Plotinus' mystical teaching is not simply that man should know what his desire and his desired object really are (cf. (iii)). What man should know, rather, is that his desire is an illusion because the things he desires do not measure up to the ultimate reality. In view of this, the second basic idea behind Plotinus' mystical teaching is to work against this desire for knowledge, and to have man *put to rest his desire for knowledge* altogether. As Plotinus goes on to explain:

(vi) […] and then, keeping quiet (for it is quiet in so far as it is present There) it busies itself no more, but contemplates, having arrived at unity.

[…] τότε δὲ ἡσυχίαν ἄγουσα, ὡς μέχρι γε τοῦ ἐκεῖ εἶναι ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ οὐδὲν ἔτι πολυπραγμονοῦσα εἰς ἓν γενομένη βλέπει, …[47]

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44 For Plotinus *principle* (ἀρχή) refers primarily to the first metaphysical cause of reality. In this sense, the term *ultimate reality* would be more appropriate than *first principle*, which might suggest that that of which it is a principle of bears upon man's explanations of certain phenomena and problems, or that the principle serves explanatory function. Cf. Gerson, Lloyd, *Plotinus*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, 3–4.

45 I.3.1.14–18.

46 I.3.5.9.

47 I.3.4.16–18.

Since the practice of "dialectics" or negative theology leads to the cessation of all inquiries into henosis, beyond which there is nothing else for the students to do, it is properly speaking the last stage of Plotinus' teaching of henosis.

On the whole, then, Plotinus' mystical teaching is made up of two practices only, namely philosophy and negative theology, and leads to the cessation of any active doing on the students' part. The majority of the most important treatises in the *Enneads* can be understood as exercises or demonstrations of these two methods. Consider for example the so-called *Großschrift*, consisting of *On Nature, and Contemplation and the One*, *On the Intelligible Beauty*, *That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect and on the Good*, and *Against the Gnostics* (the *Enneads* III.8, V.8, V.5 and II.9; No. 30, 31, 32, 33 in chronological order). In treatises III.8 and V.8, the subject of which is the contemplation of the sensible world and the intelligible beauty, we see Plotinus' philosophical inquiry into intelligible beings. Starting with V.5.3, Plotinus shifts the focus to the One. The arguments that the intelligible beings depend on the One (V.5.3–5) and that the One is beyond the intelligible beings (V.5.6) belong to the stage of negative theology, in which rational inquiry is applied to that which is beyond all beings. In V.5.7–8 Plotinus takes another turn and concludes that the intellect will be at a loss (ἀπελθόντος) when it tries to know and speak about the One. The One, for example, "was within, and was not within (ἔνδον ἄρα ἦν καὶ οὐκ ἔνδον αὖ);"[48] and "came as one who did not come (ἦλθεν ὡς οὐκ ἐλθών)."[49] These startling theses bring the inquiry of negative theology to an abrupt end, only to see Plotinus claim that "one must not chase after It [the One], but wait quietly till It appears […] as the eye awaits the rising sun,"[50] that "men have forgotten that which from the beginning until now they want and long for",[51] and that "We […] must not add any of the things which are later and lesser."[52]

Similarly, in the treatise *On the Knowing Hypostasis and That Which is Beyond* (the *Enneads* V.3) Plotinus starts by explaining the nature of intellect and its proper activity, namely apprehending the intelligible objects, which is ultimately actualized in the intellect's self-thinking (V.3.1–9). This part can be understood as Plotinus' further explanation of his practice of philosophy introduced in I.3.3. The resolution or reduction of philosophy to negative theology is the subject of V.3.10–13, in which Plotinus demonstrates that the One must be beyond

48 V.5.7.36.
49 V.5.8.15.
50 V.5.8.3–6.
51 V.5.12.6–7.
52 V.5.13.17–18.

intelligible beings and truly ineffable. Then in V.3.14, the total silence to which negative theology is further reduced is highlighted by the claim that "we are not prevented from having It [the One] even if we do not speak."[53] The treatise ends with Plotinus' famous dictum in which he appeals for the suspension of all intellectual inquiry, whether into intelligible beings or that which is beyond them: "Take away everything (ἄφελε πάντα)!"[54]

Plotinus' teaching of henosis, so far as we have seen, can be characterized as follows: First, its spiritual message is open to all human beings and addresses their everyday concerns and pursuits, for it takes their experiences of desire as the starting point of the ascent to the One. Second, its method of ascent is rational and accommodates ordinary intuition, for all it demands is that man should know what he really desires. Third, it owes its spiritual profundity not to any mythical fabrication of the ultimate reality, but to man's radicalization of reason which resolves the knowledge about his desire into that which is beyond it and which, in the last analysis, nullifies his own inquiries into henosis.

As investigators of Plotinus' mystical writing, we have to remind ourselves at this point that the texts under examination, such as those surveyed above, are the specific configurations of the relation between what henosis is and how Plotinus the author represents them. Now it is our main methodological premise (cf. p.20–21 ff.) that Plotinus neither intends to describe his personal experience nor submits a certain instance of mystical experience under discursive analyses and argumentations, but seeks to offer his students the *methods* by which they can "ascend to the One" on their own. Thus, in addition to examining the methods themselves, we also have to examine the specific way in which these methods relate to the desired goal, i.e. the reality of henosis. To wit, not all methods relate to their respective desired goal in the same way. In some cases such as cookery, the method is *constitutive* of the goal: whether frozen food is deep-fried, baked or heated by microwave makes a difference to its taste and color. But in some other, the method is *abolished* when the goal is reached: for instance, a vehicle is no longer needed when the destination is reached. Seeing that Plotinus' teaching ends up with the cessation of all inquiries, we should try to explain, in the light of Plotinus' metaphysics of the One, whether and in what sense this seemingly undesirable result has anything to do with henosis.

Accordingly, in the following chapters I shall first investigate the methods or practices given in Plotinus' teaching of henosis, as well as their methodological

53 V.3.14.8.

54 V.3.17.38.

presuppositions. Chapter 1 deals with Plotinus' metaphysics of the One, in which I attend specifically to Its simplicity, transcendence and ineffability. The subject of Chapter 2 is the practice of philosophy or intellectual inquiry into intelligible beings, and my focus will be on the *constitutive* role of desire for knowledge therein. In Chapter 3 I investigate the practice of negative theology, namely the intellectual inquiry into that which is beyond all beings, and especially the *dissolution* of the intellect resulting from it. Finally, in Chapter 4 I attempt to explain how Plotinus understands the relation between his teaching of henosis and henosis itself, and the focus is on how the practice of negative theology relates to its desired goal.