

THE NOUS: A GLOBE OF FACES¹

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Abstract: Plotinus inherited the concept of the Nous from the Middle Platonists and ultimately Plato. It was for him both the Demiurge and the abode of the Forms, and his attempts at describing it, often through the use of arresting metaphors, betray substantial eloquence. None of these metaphors is more unusual than that of the globe of faces which is evoked in the sixth *Ennead* and which is found to possess a notable corollary in the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the four living creatures. Plotinus' metaphor reveals that, as in the case of Ezekiel, he was probably granted such a vision, and indeed his encounters with the Nous were not phenomena he considered lightly.

Defining the Nous

Plotinus' Nous was a uniquely living entity of which there is a parallel in the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel. The concept of the Nous originated with Anaxagoras.² Although Empedocles' Sphere was similarly a mind,³ Anaxagoras' idea would win the day, and it would be lavished with much attention by the Middle and Neoplatonists. For Xenocrates the Nous was the supreme God, but for the Middle Platonists it was often the second hypostasis after the One.⁴ Plotinus, who likewise made the Nous his second hypostasis, equated it with the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*.⁵ He followed Antiochus of Ascalon rather than Plato in regarding it as not only the Demiurge but the Paradigm, the abode of the Forms.⁶

¹ I would like to thank Mark Edwards, Eyjólfur Emilsson, and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin for their help with this article.

² E.g., Fr. 12, DK.

³ Φρῆν as opposed to νοῦς. See Fr. 134, DK.

⁴ John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 24, 282, 371.

⁵ As did Numenius. See *Enn.* 3.2.2.

⁶ *Enn.* 5.5; Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 95.

In a way Plato had anticipated this novel way of resolving the problem of unity and plurality, a problem that was repeatedly inquired into by his predecessors as Plotinus himself admits.⁷ In two passages in the *Timaeus* Plato stated that the Demiurge, in fashioning the material world, contemplates the Forms that are its basis but also that the material world is fashioned after his own likeness.⁸ Longinus and Porphyry took issue with Plotinus' interpretation, but Porphyry came to see the error of his ways and wrote a palinode that he read in Plotinus' seminar.⁹ Like Plotinus the Aristotelians had identified the divine Mind with its thoughts, and the concept also appears in Philo;¹⁰ but it was Plotinus who pushed the insight of Antiochus of Ascalon to its logical conclusion and made the Nous an active intelligible world.¹¹

The Nous separates from the primary hypostasis, the One, in a complex process which involves disengagement and then looking back to its source; the first movement is said to be an act of audacity or daring (τόλμα). The Nous's plurality, illustrated by the Forms, is explained by its inability to grasp the overwhelming unitary experience of the One, an experience like the single image of one sky on someone who has had no previous knowledge of anything.¹² The Nous, unable to fully apprehend this encounter, attempts to break the One down into manageable components.¹³ In a similar way Philo had maintained that Abraham, representing the human mind, saw God in tripartite form under the oaks of Mamre because of the weakness of his vision.¹⁴

The noetic world was for Plotinus the ultimate basis of the sensible world. It contained a prefigurement of all its species and characteristics¹⁵ including individual human souls,¹⁶

⁷ *Enn.* 5.1.6.

⁸ *Tim.* 29e, 39e.

⁹ *Vit. Plot.* 18, 20.

¹⁰ As well as in Alcinous and possibly Xenocrates. On the Aristotelians and Philo see Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 110; Seymour Feldman, "Platonic Themes in Gersonides' Doctrine of the Active Intellect," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn E. Goodman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 257.

¹¹ Andrew Smith, *Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2004), 27; cf. Feldman, "Platonic Themes," 258.

¹² Cf. *Enn.* 2.8.2; Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect*, 89.

¹³ *Enn.* 5.3.11; Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect*, 95. The World Soul, in its turn, is unable to comprehend reality simultaneously as the Nous does and arranges it in a progressional pattern.

¹⁴ *Quaest. Gen.* 4.8, commenting on Gen 18.1-2. See A. H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1940), 70-71.

¹⁵ *Enn.* 6.7.8, 12; 6.9.5; Dillon in Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, abridged John Dillon (London: Penguin, 1991), xcvi; Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005), 147.

¹⁶ *Enn.* 5.7.

but not ugly or artificial things.¹⁷ In this he was following Aristotle who disliked the concept of Forms of mud and filth since this would have made them ineradicable.¹⁸ For Plotinus even the phenomenological aspects of a physical object are anticipated in its Form.¹⁹ The Form of a horse, for instance, would have something resembling hooves and pointed ears. It is therefore possible to envision the incorporeal Form based on a particular horse.²⁰ As for such phenomena as wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice, they are only faint reflections of their paradigms. Time is an inadequate representation of eternity²¹ and action a distorted version of contemplation.²² The music of the sensible world is nothing like the music of the noetic world, and the earthly fire is less beautiful than the noetic fire.²³

Plotinus, emerging from a Middle Platonic and more specifically Neopythagorean background, identified the Forms with intelligible Numbers and at one point defined the entire hypostasis as Number.²⁴ The Forms are preoccupied with one thought each, but each Form contains within itself the entire hypostasis.²⁵ He here strikingly anticipates modern biology: A cell is preoccupied with one “thought,” namely its precise role in the system of which it is a part, but at the same time its DNA has all the information necessary to replicate the entire system.

Since all the Forms contain the Nous it is to be expected that they would reflect one another.²⁶ They also think intuitively and nondiscursively,²⁷ even as their ultimate source,

¹⁷ *Enn.* 1.8.9; 5.9.10, 14; William Ralph Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus: The Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews, 1917-1918* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1929), 2:56.

¹⁸ Cf. *Parm.* 130c-d.

¹⁹ *Enn.* 4.4.13; 6.7.10.

²⁰ Cf. Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 58. Plotinus would have agreed with the stricture of the Nag Hammadi writings that everything visible is a copy of what is invisible. See *Teach. Silv.* 99.67-68; cf. *Enn.* 5.9.13.

²¹ *Enn.* 3.7.11; 5.1.4; cf. *Tim.* 37d.

²² John Dillon, *The Great Tradition: Further Studies in the Development of Platonism and Early Christianity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 10:343.

²³ *Enn.* 2.9.4; cf. 6.7.6. See Theodore Sabo, *Christians, Gnostics, and Platonists: An Overview of the Ethos of Late Antiquity* (MA dissertation, North-West University, 2010), 22.

²⁴ *Enn.* 6.6.9; Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, *Plotinus on Number* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 103.

²⁵ *Enn.* 3.8.8; 5.8.9.

²⁶ Cf. Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect*, 14-15. A comparison could be made with the Vairocana tower and Indra’s jewel net in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, a basis for Hua-yen Buddhism. See Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, Practices* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 146-147.

²⁷ *Enn.* 5.1.4; 5.3.6; Émile Bréhier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, trans. Joseph Thomas (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 84; cf. Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 146. In the Eastern Orthodox *Philokalia* the *voûç*, the highest aspect of a person, also thinks intuitively. See *The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St.*

the One, is pre-intellectual.²⁸ Souls in the Nous learn from each other through consciousness, not discourse.²⁹ Plotinus gives as examples the gods who, gazing at the ὑπερουράνιος τόπος, do not see inscriptions but existence, and the sages of Egypt who communicated with images rather than words.³⁰ His attraction to such knowledge without language may have been prompted by Plato's *Cratylus*.³¹ Vision and even smell are better analogies than language in understanding how the Nous thinks, just as touch is a better way than sight of explaining how the soul unites with the One.³² Emilsson gives, as an example of the Nous's mode of cognition, walking into a room and seeing everything whole: tables, chairs, carpet, and walls.³³ In the sixth *Ennead* Plotinus speaks of using sight and smell simultaneously in order to grasp the essence of something.³⁴

Plotinus associated infinity with the Nous,³⁵ and though he made the number of the Forms finite³⁶ one of his disciples would postulate an infinity of Forms.³⁷ He was the first Western philosopher, if we do not count the biblically-influenced Philo, to extensively use the concept of infinity in relation to God, a concept which did not appreciably manifest itself until the thirteenth century.³⁸ When one recalls that he joined Gordian's Persian expedition in order to study Eastern mysticism one wonders if he picked up this idea from Indian philosophy. Hinduism avers that the supreme being is infinite,³⁹ and a recent paper

Makarios of Corinth, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979-95), 1:362.

²⁸ Cf. *Enn.* 6.8.16. Plotinus only seems to contradict this at 5.4.2.

²⁹ *Enn.* 4.3.18. Plotinus' thought is radical. Even the telepathy in Tolkien's "Many Partings" was likely effected through unspoken words though there, as in Plotinus, the eyes are understood as capable of communication.

³⁰ *Enn.* 5.8.5-6; cf. *Phaedr.* 247a-248a.

³¹ 438a-439b; cf. *Ep.* 2.314c; 7.341c-e. See A. C. Lloyd, "Non-Propositional Thought in Plotinus," *Phronesis* 31, no. 3 (1986): 264.

³² *Enn.* 6.9.11; Henry in Plotinus, *The Enneads*, lxxx-lxxxi.

³³ Emilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect*, 194.

³⁴ *Enn.* 6.4.11.

³⁵ *Enn.* 5.1.4; 5.7.1, 3; 5.8.9; 5.9.10; 6.5.4, 12; 6.6.18; 6.7.17.

³⁶ *Enn.* 6.6.18; Dmitri Nikulin, "The One and the Many in Plotinus," *Hermes* 126, no. 3 (1998): 333.

³⁷ Amelius, anticipating Bonaventure and Aquinas. See A. H. Armstrong, ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1967), 265; Atsushi Sumi, "The Psyche, the Forms, and the Creative One: Toward Reconstruction of Neoplatonic Metaphysics," in *Neoplatonism and Contemporary Thought: Part One*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 242; Lydia Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine's Theory of Knowledge* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 121.

³⁸ Leo Sweeney, "Infinity in Plotinus," *Gregorianum* 38, no. 3 (1957): 515-517; W. Norris Clarke, "Infinity in Plotinus: A Reply," *Gregorianum* 40, no. 1 (1959): 76-78. Clarke's discussion takes into account the ἀπειρῶν of the Pre-Socratics.

³⁹ Arvind Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 56.

has shown clear parallels between Plotinus' philosophy and the twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata*.⁴⁰

Describing the Nous

The Nous can be classified as a supercelestial creature whose thoughts are the Platonic Forms. All the more perplexing, then, that Plotinus refers to it by theomorphic and anthropomorphic terms, but this only serves to underscore the elusive nature of religious and philosophical metaphors.⁴¹ Life was key to his thinking on the Nous,⁴² and he can be said to have propounded a zoology of the intelligible world.⁴³ He linked life with the intellection (νόησις) that is the Nous's primary activity.⁴⁴ All life for him had thought, and five kinds of thought can be distinguished or inferred in his writings: mineral, vegetative, sensible, psychic, and divine.⁴⁵ This attitude ultimately went back to Plato whose *Autozōon* was living and who ascribed life to Being as Aristotle ascribed life to the Unmoved Mover.⁴⁶

Plotinus wrote about the Nous as though he had actually seen it.⁴⁷ In some ways he visualized noetic experience even more clearly than he did sensible experience. For instance he claimed that fire, a phenomenon he was always a little naïve about, shines and glitters as if it were a Form.⁴⁸ His accounts of the Nous are certainly undertaken with great

⁴⁰ Vishwa Adluri, "Plotinus and the Orient: *Aoristos Dyas*," in *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism*, ed. Pauliina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin (London: Routledge, 2014), 77-99. He could of course have just as easily reached this insight on his own, or perhaps he had some inkling of Philo's thought. See David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), 9-11.

⁴¹ Although there is a difference between metaphor and character I do not believe the Nous can be said to be divested of all anthropological attributes. Cf. Inge, *Philosophy of Plotinus*, 2:82.

⁴² *Enn.* 5.9.9-10; 6.7.12, 16. Armstrong designates the Nous as "furiously alive." See his "Elements in the Thought of Plotinus at Variance with Classical Intellectualism," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93 (1973): 16.

⁴³ Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus*, 147.

⁴⁴ *Enn.* 3.8.8; cf. 5.3.5.

⁴⁵ Anthony Preus, "Plotinus and Biology," in *Neoplatonism and Nature*, ed. Michael F. Wagner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 51-52. Recent studies suggest that plants can think to a degree. See Kat McGowan, "The Secret Language of Plants," *Quanta Magazine*, December 16, 2013 <<http://www.quantamagazine.org/20131216-the-secret-language-of-plants>>.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Tim.* 30c; *Soph.* 248c-249d. He was also indebted to Numenius. See Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus*, 147.

⁴⁷ E.g., *Enn.* 5.8.10; 6.7.15.

⁴⁸ *Enn.* 1.6.3. He viewed fire as the most beautiful element because it was the brightest and least material. See *Tim.* 40a; Paul Kalligas, *The Enneads of Plotinus: A Commentary*, trans. Elizabeth Key Fowden and Nicolas Pilavachi (Princeton University Press, 2014), 1:201; cf. Pablo Argarate, "The Semantic Domain of

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ability and eloquence.⁴⁹ It was when he thought of it as the Paradigm, the world of the Forms, that he rose to the heights of rapture. His description of the Forms was more living and mobile than Plato's statuesque imagery⁵⁰ and recalls Bergson's way of writing about the *élan vital*. Scholars have especially noted his expressions of moving, striking, breaking, throwing, running, and leaping.⁵¹ Plotinus pictured the Nous as containing, in a more intensely living way than any we know in our world, the sky, stars, earth, plants, sea, air, and birds. More than that he found in it fragrance, wine quality, taste, color, touch—"everything the ear hears, all melodies and all rhythms."⁵² Next to this ecstatic passage Plato, in the closing myth of the *Phaedo*, seems like a commissioned landscape painter.⁵³

Plotinus sometimes calls the Nous God,⁵⁴ Kronos,⁵⁵ Zeus,⁵⁶ father,⁵⁷ and king.⁵⁸ It is Kronos when the World Soul is equated with Zeus or, via his mutilation of Ouranos,⁵⁹ the heavenly Aphrodite. It is a father to its imperfect child the Soul, and it is king and God to mankind. When we consider that for Plotinus the Nous was alike king, father, and creature it is exasperating to discover that he also calls it the Beautiful (*καλόν*), in distinction to the One which is either Beauty (*καλλονή*) or beyond beauty.⁶⁰

Plotinus' plethora of ways to describe the Nous can be overwhelming; it is as though he was putting everything he could find into it. He likened it to the corona or brightness around the sun⁶¹ or to the light which emanates from the sun.⁶² He also likened it to heat, cold, fragrance, and footprints in their relationships to fire, snow, perfume, and walking.⁶³

Fire in the Writings of Joseph Hazzāyā," in *Eastern Crossroads: Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy*, ed. Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2007), 97, 107.

⁴⁹ His language was for Bréhier and Armstrong "sensuous." See Bréhier, *Philosophy of Plotinus*, 95; Armstrong, "Elements in the Thought of Plotinus," 19.

⁵⁰ Armstrong, *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 247; cf. Smith, *Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 27.

⁵¹ Armstrong, *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 220.

⁵² *Enn.* 6.7.12.

⁵³ 110b-111c. Yet Jowett's paraphrase is beautiful: "The heavenly earth is of divers colours, sparkling with jewels brighter than gold and whiter than any snow." See *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford University Press, 1892), 2:168.

⁵⁴ *Enn.* 5.1.3-5; 5.8.1. See Inge, *Philosophy of Plotinus*, 2:82.

⁵⁵ *Enn.* 3.5.2; 5.1.4; 5.8.12-13.

⁵⁶ *Enn.* 3.5.8.

⁵⁷ *Enn.* 5.1.3; 6.9.5.

⁵⁸ *Enn.* 5.3.3.

⁵⁹ Hesiod, *Theog.* 188-195.

⁶⁰ *Enn.* 1.6.6; Kalligas, *Enneads of Plotinus*, 1:206.

⁶¹ *Enn.* 5.1.6; 5.3.15. See John Peter Kennedy, *The Mysticism of Saint Augustine: Rereading the Confessions* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 42.

⁶² *Enn.* 6.7.16.

⁶³ *Enn.* 2.6.3; 5.1.6; 6.1.22.

In the fifth *Ennead* he even compared it to the effects of drugs.⁶⁴ The most visual and concrete of these metaphors are arguably those of the corona and footprints.

But Plotinus' most compelling metaphor of the Nous was of "a living richly varied sphere, a globe of faces⁶⁵ radiant with living faces, all the pure souls running together into the same place, not the deficient but the whole, and universal Intellect seated on their summits so that the region is illuminated by intellectual light."⁶⁶ One immediately thinks of Ezekiel's vision of the four living creatures which he received while he stood on the banks of the Kebar River: their entire bodies, including their backs, hands, and wings, were completely full of eyes.⁶⁷ The Nous is of course a much greater entity than Ezekiel's cherubim,⁶⁸ one approaching infinity, but the similarity is startling.

Ezekiel was a mystic who has been thought to have had an abnormal personality;⁶⁹ Plotinus was a mystic with a basically normal personality.⁷⁰ The introversion of both men is clear,⁷¹ and both of them, I believe, experienced what they described. Ezekiel sees the cherubim's eyes, but they also look at him. Plotinus sees the noetic faces, but they also gaze at him. Their visions see back.⁷² As with souls in the Nous the mystics know even as they are known.⁷³ It is almost too easy to draw a parallel between Ezekiel's vertical vision, with the deity above the four living creatures, and Plotinus' first two hypostases.

One of the main differences between the visions is that in Plotinus' situation we are dealing with faces rather than eyes, although he elsewhere imagines souls in the Nous to be eyes.⁷⁴ The noetic faces are described as radiant, covering the whole of a sphere, and probably looking out from it. The faces need not be pictured as joyful since the Nous is

⁶⁴ *Enn.* 5.4.1; cf. 6.1.22.

⁶⁵ Literally, an all-faced thing (παμπρόσωπὸν τι χρῆμα).

⁶⁶ *Enn.* 6.7.15 (Armstrong, slightly altered).

⁶⁷ Ezek 10.12; cf. 1.18; Rev 4.6-8. I rely for some of what follows on my unpublished article "All Eye: A Metaphor from Ezekiel in the Desert Fathers, the School of Gaza, and Gregory Palamas." For a visual aid see Janet Woolley's illustration for Decca's 2000 recording of Hindemith's *Symphonia Serena*.

⁶⁸ Ezekiel identifies the living creatures as cherubim at 10.20.

⁶⁹ Edwin C. Broome, Jr., "Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 65, no. 3 (September 1946): 277-292.

⁷⁰ Overemphasized by Hadot in *Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 23-25.

⁷¹ *Vit. Plot.* 13-14; Broome, "Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality," 288.

⁷² Michael Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of End Time* (Durham: Duke University, 1998), 231.

⁷³ *Enn.* 4.3.18; 1 Cor 13.12.

⁷⁴ *Enn.* 4.3.18. In view of the foregoing discussion it is noteworthy that the Phoenician Kronos had many eyes, as did the Egyptian god Bes. See Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 55, 58, 182.

not a particularly benevolent entity.⁷⁵ The overall metaphor is an apt illustration in that the Forms are not only objects of intellection but themselves intellects and even personalities,⁷⁶ as is the Nous itself.⁷⁷ This has a corollary in the *Apocryphon of John* whose twelve aeons have names like the Platonic Forms though they are also living beings.⁷⁸ The *Apocryphon* was not insignificantly Sethian Gnostic, the same milieu as the treatises which were read by Plotinus and his circle or, as Kalligas well puts it, circulated on the fringes of his school.⁷⁹

The cherubim of Ezekiel's vision have been classified as outlandish,⁸⁰ and they have continually attracted further outlandishness to themselves in subsequent interpretation.⁸¹ Like Ezekiel's depiction of the cherubim Plotinus' metaphor of a globe of faces is peculiar. It does not correspond to anything in the world we know but provides evidence of an actual mystical experience. Armstrong⁸² is somewhat misleading to compare it to the many-faced representations of the Hindu gods which, for all their eeriness, are much more in keeping with sublunary reality than it is. It is possible that he may have seen such an image in Alexandria, but it would have only confirmed his original impressions of noetic reality, as a perusal of the *Mahābhārata*⁸³ would have only corroborated his metaphysics.

An additional parallel can be made between Plotinus' image of the Nous as a thing or globe of faces and modern views, a logical deduction of the Gaia hypothesis, that not only

⁷⁵ Cf. John Dillon, "Signs and Tokens: Do the Gods of Neoplatonism Really Care?" in *Fate, Providence, and Moral Responsibility in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Studies in Honour of Carlos Steel*, ed. Pieter d'Hoine, Gerd Van Riel (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 227.

⁷⁶ *Enn.* 5.9.8; John Dillon, "Pleroma and Noetic Cosmos: A Comparative Study," in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, ed. Richard T. Wallis and Jay Bregman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 100-101.

⁷⁷ Cf. Henry J. Blumenthal, "On Soul and Intellect," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 93.

⁷⁸ *Ap. John* 7.35-8.38; Donald L. Ross, "Thomizing Plotinus: A Critique of Professor Gerson," *Phronesis* 41, no. 2 (1996): 202.

⁷⁹ Kalligas, *Enneads of Plotinus*, 1:65. See also Dillon in Plotinus, *Enneads*, cxiv; David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 50-51; Dylan M. Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 33. Burns, *pace* Turner, believes these documents had little in common with Neoplatonism.

⁸⁰ R. C. Sproul and Robert Wolgemuth, *Sproul's Guide to the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 139; cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 58; William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 518.

⁸¹ Migene González-Wippler, *The Kabbalah and Magic of Angels* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2013), 68-69; Lieb, *Children of Ezekiel*, 53-54.

⁸² In Plotinus, *Ennead VI.6-9 with an English Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 137; cf. Armstrong, *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 221.

⁸³ Cf. Adluri, "Plotinus and the Orient," 92.

sentient beings but the galaxy itself is living and intelligent.⁸⁴ Plotinus in fact saw life not only in the Nous and the biological world but in earth, stones, and mountains and thought that cutting a stone from a rock was like chopping a branch off a tree.⁸⁵ With the image of an intelligent, pulsating galaxy in mind we may note another Ezekelian resemblance in the *Enneads*, namely Plotinus' very natural identification of the Nous with the *Autozōon* (Intelligible Living Creature) of the *Timaeus*.⁸⁶ The *Autozōon* was a system of Forms, subordinate Forms, and the archetypes of the four elements,⁸⁷ in other words the immaterial matrix of the physical world.⁸⁸ His description of the Form-personalities that inhabit the *Autozōon* would not be out of place in a discussion of Ezekiel's cherubim. When one perceives their wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, he writes, he can only smile at the pretense to reality proffered by everything that lies beneath them.⁸⁹

Intellectual Union

Plotinus' reverence for the divine hypostases led to his self-effacement and his attempt to reduce his metaphysical footprint. This he did by postponing writing, preventing his portrait from being drawn, and refusing to celebrate his birthday.⁹⁰ He attained unity with his ultimate hypostasis, the One, four times when Porphyry knew him, that is in a six year period.⁹¹ Union with the One was imperative,⁹² but union with the Nous was nothing to look down on. In the passage where he likens the Nous to a globe of faces he alleges, "This would be like seeing someone from outside, but one must become Intellect and make

⁸⁴ David Fideler, "Neoplatonism and the Cosmological Revolution: Holism, Fractal Geometry, and Mind-in-Nature," in *Neoplatonism and Contemporary Thought*, 115; Patrick Glynn, *God: The Evidence* (Roseville: Prima Publishing, 1999), Kindle.

⁸⁵ *Enn.* 6.7.11. This is even more extreme than the doctrine of the Manichaeans for whom a fruit wept when it was plucked and the tree that bore it shed tears of milk. See Augustine, *Conf.* 3.10; cf. Virgil, *Aen.* 3.22-48.

⁸⁶ *Tim.* 30c. See D. Gregory MacIsaac, "Projection and Time in Proclus," in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. John Inglis (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 100; Algis Uždavinys, *The Golden Chain* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004), 292.

⁸⁷ *Tim.* 30b, 37d, 39e; Uždavinys, *Golden Chain*, 67; *Ascent to Heaven in Islamic and Jewish Mysticism* (London: Matheson Trust, 2011), 2.

⁸⁸ Dillon, "Pleroma and Noetic Cosmos," 100.

⁸⁹ *Enn.* 6.6.18.

⁹⁰ *Vit. Plot.* 1-3.

⁹¹ *Vit. Plot.* 5, 23.

⁹² *Enn.* 6.7.16.

oneself the object of contemplation.”⁹³ His most personal account of union with the divine, and the only autobiographical passage in the *Enneads*,⁹⁴ was of union with the Nous:⁹⁵

Often I have woken out of the body to myself and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identify with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect.⁹⁶

This intellectual union was the only path to the ultimate contemplation of the One.⁹⁷

The above quotation reveals that Plotinus sometimes pictured his hypostases in a concentric rather than a vertical relationship.⁹⁸ We can thus think of the soul moving not only upwards but inwards to the Nous, especially if we reflect that for Plotinus man is a microcosm of the universe.⁹⁹ As with the medieval mystics the supreme part of the soul is the same as the innermost part; the divine ground is that which is inward; the conversation with God takes place in the center of the interior castle.¹⁰⁰ This makes the image of a stepping stone, frequently employed by Neoplatonist scholars,¹⁰¹ as accurate as the image of a stair.¹⁰² The Nous is a stepping stone inward to the One. It is a resting place where the philosopher, and eventually the lover and the musician, await henotic union.¹⁰³

Intellectual union must be distinguished from both the continual presence of the higher soul in the Nous¹⁰⁴ and from the presence of the individual soul in the Nous as a Form, unless the two are one and the same thing.¹⁰⁵ As to the former we have an example from the *Vita Plotini* of the philosopher’s ability to mediate between the realms of Nous and the

⁹³ *Enn.* 6.7.15; cf. 5.8.10-11; 6.6.18.

⁹⁴ Mark Edwards in *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students* (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 5.

⁹⁵ Following Schroeder, O’Meara, and Blumenthal rather than Rist, Corrigan, and the early Hadot.

⁹⁶ *Enn.* 4.8.1 (Armstrong, slightly altered).

⁹⁷ *Enn.* 5.8.1; 6.9.3.

⁹⁸ Cf. *Enn.* 6.5.5; 6.9.8; Dillon, *Great Tradition*, 10:351; Slaveva-Griffin, *Plotinus on Number*, 20-21.

⁹⁹ *Enn.* 4.4.36.

¹⁰⁰ Richard of St. Victor, *Arc. Myst.* 4.23; Johannes Tauler, *Serm.* 44; Teresa of Avila, *Cast. Int.* 1.1.

¹⁰¹ E.g., Robert Arp, “Plotinus, Mysticism, and Mediation,” *Religious Studies* 40, no. 2 (June 2004): 157.

¹⁰² Robert Imperato, *Early and Medieval Christian Spirituality* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002), 27, 29.

¹⁰³ *Enn.* 1.3.1-3.

¹⁰⁴ *Enn.* 2.9.2; 4.8.8; 5.8.10.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Kalligas, “Forms of Individuals in Plotinus: A Reexamination,” *Phronesis* 42, no. 2 (1997): 214-215.

lower soul when he was interrupted in his writing to carry on a mundane conversation with someone and would continue his work without having to go back and read what he had written before.¹⁰⁶ As to the latter Plotinus clearly imagines Socrates as being in the Nous as a Form and at the same time as living on the earth.¹⁰⁷ There are two striking illustrations of this, both from the subsequent tradition and therefore relevant. Mechthild of Magdeburg portrays the living as in some ways in heaven, visible to the spirits of departed saints, or in purgatory, visible to the spirits of its suffering inhabitants.¹⁰⁸ And Symeon the New Theologian was once vouchsafed a vision in which he was lifted into heaven where he saw a surpassingly great light and near it his spiritual master who had given him “the commandment and the book” and who was still in his body on the earth.¹⁰⁹

Ultimately the path to union with the Nous begins with the practice of the civic virtues, the purificatory virtues acting as an intermediary between them and a direct knowledge of the Forms.¹¹⁰ There is understandably more intellection in the purificatory virtues than in the civic.¹¹¹ Participation in the purificatory virtues consists of two stages: purification and the state of being purified.¹¹² Proximately, however, union with the Nous begins with a meditation that has been compared to the *maṇḍala* exercises of Tantra.¹¹³ At *Ennead* 5.8.9 Plotinus instructs the adept to imagine a picture of the universe exhibited on a transparent globe and then, in order to envision the Nous, divest it of its spatial and material qualities. This is followed by a prayer that the Nous will come to him, bringing with it its own universe and the divine Forms. The Nous is thus experienced “almost as if it were an object of sense.”¹¹⁴ The final vision of the hypostasis is of a quiet, unwavering motion¹¹⁵ much out of keeping with Plotinus’ usual lively descriptions, but we should keep in mind the

¹⁰⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 8; cf. Andrew Smith, *Porphyry’s Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition: A Study in Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 26-27.

¹⁰⁷ *Enn.* 5.7.1.

¹⁰⁸ *Fliess. Licht* 4.25.

¹⁰⁹ *Disc.* 22.4; Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, trans. C. J. de Catanzaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 246. Symeon was significantly a proto-Hesychast. The Hesychasts, with their Neoplatonic mysticism and philosophical asceticism, could almost be viewed as Plotinus’ ultimate inheritors. Cf. Vladimir Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole: The Concept of Theosis in the Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 87; Alyssa DeBlasio, *The End of Russian Philosophy: Tradition and Transition at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2014), 110.

¹¹⁰ *Enn.* 1.2.

¹¹¹ Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 298.

¹¹² Porphyry, *Sent.* 32.

¹¹³ Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophy* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), 589.

¹¹⁴ *Enn.* 6.9.5.

¹¹⁵ Cf. *Enn.* 5.1.4; 5.3.7; 5.8.9.

phrase “vital repose” in thinking of the life of the Nous.¹¹⁶ It is this reposeful vision which prepares the philosopher for the ultimate union he experienced four times when Porphyry was with him and that Porphyry claimed to experience once.¹¹⁷

Plotinus, taking from the Old Academicians and the Middle Platonists their concept of the Nous, tended to grab hold of everything he could think of in his attempt to convey the reality of the hypostasis to his readers. His ways of describing the Nous are eloquent and arresting and none of them more so than that of the globe of faces he evokes in his sixth *Ennead* and which has been shown to bear some resemblance to Ezekiel’s vision of the four living creatures. This analogy, together with his own accounts of intellectual union, reveals that he was a mystic prone to what we can only call supernormal experiences.

¹¹⁶ Jerome P. Schiller, “Plotinus and Greek Rationalism,” *Apeiron* 12, no. 1 (June 1978): 43.

¹¹⁷ *Vit. Plot.* 23.