

## The Good of the Intellect

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*Abstract:* Recent continental philosophy often seeks to retrieve Neoplatonic transcendence, or the Good, while ignoring the place of intellect in classical and medieval Neoplatonism. Instead, it attempts to articulate an encounter with radical transcendence in the immediacy of temporality, individuality, and affectivity. On the assumption that there is no intellectual intuition (Kant), intellectual consciousness is reduced to ratiocination and is taken to be “poor in intuition” (Marion). In this context, the present paper expounds Plotinus’ phenomenology of intellectual experience to show how intellect, for Plotinus, is rather the richest mode of intuition, coinciding with the intelligible content of reality. This content, however, cannot be ultimate, but is the manifestation and apprehension of the transcendent Good as the condition of intelligibility. The Good, therefore, can be encountered only through the ascent to intellectual apprehension, and the vision of the Good is a transcendent moment within the intellectual apprehension of being, not a repudiation of or alternative to it.

A notable feature of recent continental philosophy, especially within the so-called “theological turn in French phenomenology,” has been an attempt to revive or retrieve certain aspects of Neoplatonic thought, above all the Neoplatonic understanding of divine transcendence as a surpassing of any and all definite or conceptually graspable content. This retrieval is largely a response to the Heideggerian critique of “onto-theo-logy,” and more generally, like that critique itself, a reaction against modern “closure” and conceptual totalization. But as Wayne Hankey, the premier historian of this contemporary revival of Neoplatonism,<sup>1</sup> has repeatedly observed, it tends to ignore or bypass the place of intellect in classical and medieval Neoplatonism. Instead, today we find an effort to articulate an encounter with radical, negative transcendence in the immediacy of temporality, individuality, and affectivity. As Hankey says, “[T]he Neoplatonisms of the twentieth century have been characterised by a . . . horizontality. . . . [I]n attempting to overcome modern objectifying rationality, they . . . have endeavoured an immediate relation between an unknowable Absolute, on the one hand, and life, the sensuous, corporeal and material experience, and practical activity, on the

other.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is ironic that Plotinus, once viewed as the exponent of an irrational mysticism that marked the decadence of the Greek spirit of reason, is now charged with excessive rationalism, precisely because he insists on ascending to the One or Good only by way of intellectual contemplation. The Good, we may say, in certain circles today is positively fashionable; intellect most definitely is not.

The attempt to retrieve radical transcendence without intellectual mediation, however, is deeply problematic, for it can easily lead, through the loss of any intelligible content, to mere ontological and existential anarchy. In the words of Karsten Harries, “As all definite content is recognized to be profoundly incompatible with the divine transcendence, the divine comes to be thought of as a nameless wildness. . . . But God, once he has become so indefinite, threatens to evaporate altogether. God becomes undistinguishable from an infinite, empty transcendence. Such an empty transcendence cannot provide human beings with a measure and thus leads to a new experience of freedom. This freedom again, acknowledging no measure, must degenerate into caprice.”<sup>3</sup> This amounts to an elaboration of Claude Bruaire’s famous remark that the truth of negative theology is atheism.<sup>4</sup> On similar lines, and specifically with regard to contemporary attempts to overcome onto-theo-logy, Jean-Marc Narbonne has made an insightful comparison and contrast between the Neoplatonic One and Heidegger’s Being-as-Ereignis.<sup>5</sup> What they have in common is that both are “not something,” avoiding any reduction to representational thinking or conceptuality. But Narbonne points out that whereas the One is, so to speak, “vertically” *beyond* being, reached only through a graded ascent from sense to intellect, Heidegger’s Ereignis is rather, so to speak, “horizontally” *beside* being, and the Neoplatonic gradation is lost. As a result, rather than, like the One, serving as a non-entitative principle for the whole of being in its intelligibility, Ereignis becomes mere an-archic “play,” without rules and “without why.” Narbonne argues that this is more closely comparable, as neither cause nor effect but sheer event, to the Epicurean swerve than to anything else in the history of philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Narbonne’s analysis shows clearly how, when the eternal and universal—in short, the intellectual—is consigned to abstract conceptuality and hence dismissed, the corresponding exaltation of the temporal, the individual, the factual leads to a mere play of phenomena, which, for fear of violating precisely this facticity, must be “without why.” With no intelligible norms, principles, patterns, without what classical philosophy calls “forms,” the phenomenally given collapses into mere chaos.

For Plotinus, on the other hand, the encounter with the Good demands a reaching beyond intellect, but is in no way opposed to or merely alongside intellect as an alternative to it. This encounter, rather, is beyond intellect, not included within the intellectual apprehension of being-as-intelligible, precisely because it is the principle and fulfilment of that apprehension. Hence we need not, and indeed must not, repudiate or side-step rationality in order to accommodate transcendence. As Henry Duméry says, “[Plotinus] seeks salvation only through the mediation of the intellect, and yet he demands that the intellect declare itself dependent and insists that attaining the intelligible is only a stage, although an indispensable one,

on the journey toward the One, toward ecstasy. . . . This is a unique case of an intellectualism that demands the mystical flight of the soul.”<sup>7</sup> Though we may question the claim of uniqueness, since such a view can be found throughout the Greek and medieval intellectualist tradition, this is an apt description of Plotinus that sets him apart from today’s attempts to dispense with intellect and the intelligible. In what follows I propose to show, by working out how Plotinus’ understanding of intellect differs from modern presuppositions, how he achieves this.

### I. The Denial of Intellectual Intuition

The reasons for the contemporary dismissal of intellect reach far back in the history of modern philosophy. Since at least the time of Kant it has been generally taken for granted that there can be *no intellectual intuition*. We need look no further than the opening lines of the Transcendental Aesthetic:

In whatever manner and by whatever means a mode of knowledge may relate to objects, intuition is that through which it is in immediate relation to them. . . . But intuition takes place only in so far as the object is given to us. This again is only possible, to man at least, in so far as the mind is affected in a certain way. The capacity (receptivity) for receiving representations through the mode in which we are affected by objects, is entitled *sensibility*. Objects are *given* to us by means of sensibility, and it alone yields us *intuitions*. . . . [A]ll thought must, directly or indirectly . . . relate ultimately to intuitions, and therefore, with us, to sensibility, because in no other way can an object be given to us.<sup>8</sup>

“Intuition,” we should note, translates *Anschauung*, and thus invokes the paradigm of “beholding,” “seeing,” to characterize the immediacy of what is thus given to awareness. The assumption, therefore, is that only by way of sense, and hence, as Kant goes on to argue, only in time, is any content immediately present to awareness. For Heidegger, of course, temporality is so fundamental to our awareness that he can assert, “[T]ime is Dasein . . . Dasein is time.”<sup>9</sup> And in our own time Jean-Luc Marion, describing the intrinsic contingency of every phenomenon as a pure given, remarks dismissively, “For the rest—of what importance to us is angelic or divine understanding?”<sup>10</sup> Marion goes on to observe that even if there are principles, e.g., mathematical truths, that are strictly nontemporal in themselves, they are always given to us in time, at a particular point in time: “No doubt, one can speak rigorously of a nontemporality of ideals. . . . The fact remains that none of them has ever been known except by this or that, that is to say, in a time, a place, and precise circumstances. The ideals can indeed, if one sticks just to the ideal, remain for eternity, but in fact their apparition . . . is always inscribed in a time and place. . . . Ideality does not perhaps possess facticity, but its appearance does. For me . . . the ideals impose themselves in precise times and places.”<sup>11</sup> Here again we find the unsupported assumption—unsupported because in the contemporary context it can be taken for granted—that even if there is timeless reality there is no timeless awareness of it,

that there is nothing eternal in us, that we have no share in intellectual, i.e., strictly non-temporal, intuition.

Deprived of all intuition, intellect is thus denied any *vision*, any immediate encounter with or apprehension of reality and is reduced to mere ratiocination, an abstract inferential process. The modern reduction of intellect to ratiocination underlies the anti-intellectualism that mars the profound spiritual insight of figures such as Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky. Thus, to cite Marion again, mathematical phenomena, for example, are characterized “in the empty abstraction of the universal without content or individuation” as being “poor in intuition.” “[M]anifestation here does not give (itself), or only a little, since it conveys neither real nor individual intuition, nor the temporalization of an event, in short, no accomplished phenomenality.”<sup>12</sup> Thus conceived as abstract, as radically deficient in givenness or phenomenality, intellect inevitably comes to be associated with modern subject-object dualism in which being is interpreted as an “object” apart from and extrinsic to consciousness, and consciousness as a “subject,” a self-contained sphere engaging in abstract rationality in isolation from any given content. Intellect, denied intuition and thus reduced to ratiocination, is thereby identified with all the woes of modernity, and the dismissal of intellect becomes necessary for the overcoming of metaphysics-as-ontology. The reaction against modernity in its “rationalism” thus becomes a celebration of temporality, individuality, facticity, “the flesh” as the locus of immediate affectivity.<sup>13</sup> Any encounter with the transcendent Absolute must take place at this level, because anything else is abstracted modern subjectivity that would reduce the transcendent to conceptuality. Any attempt to criticize this celebration is likely to be stigmatized as “rationalism,” “idealism,” “modernity,” or—the ultimate damnation—“Platonism.”

## II. Intellect as Intuition

To appreciate how Plotinus is able to retain radical transcendence without sacrificing intelligibility, then, we must reject the modern assumption that intellect is necessarily non-intuitive and recover instead the classical understanding of intellectual intuition. Let us imagine how Plato, Plotinus, or Augustine would react to the claim that mathematical knowledge, for example, is “poor in intuition.” For them, such knowledge is nothing “abstract,” nor is it merely the result of an inferential process leading from premises to conclusions. Such a process is only the extended, articulated reflection of an immediate, non-discursive, intellectual “vision,” or intuition (*Anschauung*), of intelligible, divine reality, of the formal principles that underlie, permeate, show up in, and lend a degree of intelligibility to the world. And the possibility of such knowledge implies that we have a share in timeless, intellectual intuition, in what Marion calls “divine or angelic understanding,” which is always already at work in all our thinking. This is variously represented by Plato’s myth of recollection, Aristotle’s agent intellect, Plotinus’ doctrine of the unfallen part of the soul, and Augustine’s image of divine illumination. Thus it is not the case that only according to time and individuality is anything immediately given to our awareness.

Indeed, for Plotinus, not only is intellection a mode of intuition, it is the supreme and paradigmatic mode. As such, intellect represents not a self-enclosed subjectivity abstracted from all actually given content, but rather, on the contrary, the purest form of “openness,” of active receptivity. It is the very nature of intellect to have always already “received” all being, and indeed intellect is nothing but this having-received. Pierre Rousselot remarked long ago that intellect in Aquinas should be understood as the faculty not of abstraction but of “intussusception,” of taking up into oneself;<sup>14</sup> and this is no less true for Plotinus and for the entire classical tradition. Intellect, therefore, is not “poor” but, on the contrary, most rich in intuition, in immediacy, in givenness.

This understanding of intellect as intuition has an extensive background in both Plato and Aristotle. Plato is often accused of setting western philosophy on the path toward abstract, objectifying rationalism. We are told that by adopting the “ocular model” for knowledge and identifying being with *eidos* or *idea*, the “look” for the mind, Plato reduces thought to a “gaze” directed toward “objects” extrinsic to itself. But this is not, of course, what Plato means. Rather, in adopting the analogy of vision to describe intellectual knowledge, he is expressing precisely what in modern phenomenological language is called intuition, *Anschauung*. “Vision” here implies not extrinsic objectification, but on the contrary, the immediate togetherness of the seeing and the seen. What I see is not outside me, but is immediately given as the very content of my awareness. Plato frequently articulates this togetherness of the knower with the known by describing intellection not only through the analogy of seeing, but also through those of touching, sexual union, and eating. “It is the nature of the real lover of learning to strive toward that which is, and not to remain with the many things that are opined to be, but going forward and not losing or lessening his love, until he grasps the nature of each thing which is with the part of the soul which is fitted to touch such a thing—fitted, as akin—and drawing near to and coupling with that which really is, having begotten intellect and truth, he knows, truly lives, and is nourished” (*Republic* VI, 490a8–b6). Many other passages to similar effect could be cited from the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, and elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> *Eidos*, form, then, is not merely what is “seen” by intellect, but what is given to it as its very content, and intellect is not an abstract, objectifying gaze, but an immediate, intuitive communion with being.

Aristotle, though less graphic, is even more explicit on this point. Knowledge, he repeatedly insists, is identical with that which is known. The latter is often called “the object,” but the term “object” has recently become so objectionable that it should not be used here. Indeed, if “object,” like German *Gegenstand*, means “that which stands over against,” then it means precisely the opposite of what Aristotle intends. The reality which is known does *not* stand over against the knowing, but is rather the same as it. The intellect, Aristotle argues, “is potentially the intelligibles, but is actually nothing before it thinks” (*On the Soul* III.4, 429b31–31), and when it is actualized, it becomes that which is thought (*On the Soul* III.4, 430a20). The paradigmatic case of this identity is, of course, the divine intellect or Unmoved Mover, who, precisely as purely actual intellect, is the intelligible reality that he

knows: “Thought thinks itself according to participation in the intelligible; for it becomes intelligible in touching and thinking, so that intellect and the intelligible are the same; for intellect is what is receptive of the intelligible, of reality. And it is in act in possessing” (*Metaphysics* XII. 7, 1072b20–23; cf. XII.9, 1075a1–4). We humans, as not purely but only to a limited degree intellectual, achieve this possession, this identity with intelligible reality, only sporadically and to a limited extent. Intellect in general, then, is a touching, a possession, indeed a being that which it apprehends, that is, intelligible reality.

It is this Platonic and Aristotelian idea of intellect, as an immediate, intuitive communion with intelligible being, that Plotinus adopts and develops. Plotinus’ doctrine that the intelligibles are not outside of, but are one with, the intellect, which was distinctive and controversial even within the Platonic school in his own time, is well known, but its significance for an understanding of what he means by intellect is not always appreciated. His fundamental point is that the realities which intellect apprehends are not “objects” (in the modern sense) for it, but rather are within and indeed one with it. He argues, echoing Aristotle, that if they were extrinsic to intellect, then intellect would be potential in relation to them and would be actualized by them, and thus would not be *per se* intellect. “But if it does not have its thinking from outside, then if it thinks anything it thinks it from itself and if it has anything it has it from itself. But if it thinks from itself and derives the content of its thought from itself, it is itself what it thinks. For if its substance were other [than its thinking] and the things which it thought were other than itself, its substance would itself be unintellectual: and, again, potential, not actual. Therefore one must not be separated from the other” (V.9.5.2–10).<sup>16</sup> The implication here is that if the realities were extrinsic, then intellect would not be purely receptive, pure openness-to-being, but would be something else prior to its receiving. Such a view, rejected by Plotinus, would move intellect in the direction of the modern “ego” or “subject,” and would thereby do away with truth as the unity-in-duality of thought and being (V.5.2). Plotinus’ conclusion, contrary to this, is that “intellect is the beings, possessing them all not as in place, but as possessing itself and being one with them” (V.9.6.1–3), and he cites Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle as witnesses for this position (V.9.5.29–32).

Plotinus thus argues that if the intelligibles were “outside” of intellect, then what intellect actually knows, has as its content, would be not the realities themselves but rather images, impressions, or representations of them, and hence “must be deceived in everything it contemplates. For they would be the true realities; and on this supposition it will contemplate them without possessing them, but will only get images (*eidōla*) of them in a knowledge of this sort. If then it does not possess the true reality, but only receives in itself images of the truth, it will have falsities and nothing true” (V.5.1.51–58).<sup>17</sup> Such representational cognition would not truly be intellect at all, for it would not be an intuition or apprehension of reality itself. “So if there is not truth in intellect, then an intellect of this sort will not be truth, or truly intellect, or intellect at all” (V.5.1.66–68). Here again Plotinus is emphasizing the openness, the receptivity-to-being that characterizes or indeed is intellect, as

opposed to an extrinsic subject-object relation. His conclusion is that being “must be given” to intellect (V.5.2.9), or, as he says elsewhere, intellect “must therefore move to all things, or rather have moved” (VI.7.13). Intellect is constituted as intellect only in and by having “moved to,” having received, being “filled” with intelligible being: “So then intellect came to be by being filled, and when it was filled it was, and simultaneously it was completed and saw” (VI.7.16). This is one of the many passages in which Plotinus describes intellect as a “seeing” which is not over against but is rather filled with the seen. Even more than Plato, perhaps, Plotinus thinks of intellect as analogous to vision. But, like Plato, he does this not in order to stress a separation between intellect and what it knows, but, on the contrary, to express the intuitive, “intussusceptive” nature of intellect. Indeed, Plotinus is aware of the danger of misinterpretation to which this analogy is exposed, for in one place he remarks with regard to intellectual vision, “But one must transport what one sees into oneself” (V.8.10.40–41, and then adds, “If therefore sight is of something external we must not have sight, or only that which is identical with the seen” (V.8.11.22–23). Clearly, then, what Plotinus means by intellect is not an objectifying “gaze” but a receptivity to and union with intelligible being, that is, the forms.

These “forms,” which are the content of and one with intellect, are not, as they are so often said to be, “another world,” apart from and additional to the world of sensible things. This is a misunderstanding of Plato’s and Plotinus’ spatial imagery, which in fact serves to express different modes of intuition, of apprehension and givenness. When Plotinus uses “here” and “there” to refer to the sensible and the intelligible respectively, as he very frequently does, “here” means “given to sensuous apprehension,” and “there” means “given to intellectual apprehension.” The ascent from sensibles to forms, therefore, is not a passage from one world, one set of objects, to another, but is rather an ascent of modes of apprehension, from sense to intellect as our way of taking in reality. As Stanley Rosen says of Plato’s forms, “The world of ideas is not another, separate world, but the whatness of this world,”<sup>18</sup> and this is no less true for Plotinus. ‘Whatness,’ here, translates *ousia*, and means, in effect, ‘intelligible content.’ The forms are the intelligible structures, the identities, the modes of unity that sensible things have and display, and in virtue of which sensible things are what they are. Plotinus’ point is that the same content can be given and intuited in different ways. An intelligible nature, a form, e.g., Fire, can be apprehended by way of sense, together with differentiating factors that do not belong to that intelligible content as such, and thus apprehended in a divided manner, as the fieriness of this or that particular blaze; or it can be apprehended intellectually, “itself by itself” (as Plato is fond of saying; cf. Plotinus, VI.4.8.37, “itself with itself”), just as the one formal, intelligible content that informs all sensible fires, which in itself is unconditioned by place and time. Hence the universality that characterizes intellect as distinct from sense must be understood not as abstraction but as concentration (see e.g., V.3.16.6–14).<sup>19</sup> It is for this reason that intellectual consciousness is not less but far more rich, intense, and concrete than sense-awareness. It is the unified apprehension of the intelligible natures that characterize, or appear in, a multiplicity of sensible instances. Thus when Plotinus refers to particularized, sensible forms as



“images” of intelligible forms, this means that they are differentiated appearances of the unitary intelligible identity. The intelligible and the sensible, then, are not “two worlds,” but are the same content, the same reality, given and apprehended in higher and lower, more concentrated and more diffuse, ways.<sup>20</sup>

Plotinus frequently emphasizes this sameness of content between the sensible and the intelligible: “All that is here below [i.e., given to sense] comes from there [i.e., intellect], and exists in greater beauty there; for here it is diluted, but there it is pure. All this universe is held fast by forms from beginning to end. . . . Then matter, too, is a certain last form; so this universe is all form, and all the things in it are forms; for its archetype is form” (V.8.7.17–24). The difference is that at the intellectual level this content is given in concentration, all together, without the “dilution” of spatial and temporal extension. “For insofar as it is extended in going toward matter, so far is it weaker than that which remains in unity” (V.8.1.26–27). To ascend from sense to intellect is to apprehend this same content without extension: “Let us then apprehend in our thought this visible universe, with each of its parts remaining what it is without confusion, gathering all of them together into one as far as we can. . . . Let there be, then, in the soul a shining imagination of a sphere, having everything within it. . . . Keep this, and apprehend in your mind another, taking away the mass: take away also the places” (V.8.9.1–12). Thus Plotinus describes the extreme richness of being as intellectually intuited: “And certainly the sky there must be a living being, and so a sky not bare of stars, as we call them here below, and this is what being sky is. But obviously there is earth there also, not barren, but much more full of life, and all animals are in it . . . and . . . plants rooted in life; and sea is there, and all water in abiding flow and life, and all the living beings in water” (VI.7.12.4–11). He then summarizes this by saying, “There is no poverty or lack of resource there, but all things are filled full of life . . . as if there was one quality which held and kept intact all the qualities in itself, of sweetness along with fragrance, and was at once the quality of wine and the characters of all tastes, the sights of colours and all the awarenesses of touch, and all that hearing hear, all tunes and every rhythm” (VI.7.12.22–30). We should note the radical sensuousness of this account of intellectual apprehension. For Plotinus, there is no opposition between sense in its temporal, particularized facticity, as immediate, “rich in intuition,” and intellect in its eternity and universality as abstract, thin, “poor in intuition.” On the contrary, it is sense that is relatively “poor in intuition” in comparison with the concentrated richness of intellect’s intuitive union with reality. As Plotinus says, “Sensations ‘here’ are dim intellections, but intellections ‘there’ are clear sensations” (VI.7.7.30–32). Sense and intellect are lower and higher, or weaker and stronger, versions of the same activity, which is the intuition, the intussusception, of being.

Thus, instead of opposing the intellectual, as universal and eternal, to the phenomenal as factual, as individual and temporal, Plotinus offers what can only be called a phenomenology of intellectual experience, as a genuine possibility for us. Again and again he provides rich, descriptive accounts of what it is, or would be, to intuit reality intellectually. Intellect, therefore, is not the antithesis or absence of flesh, embodiment, and temporality, but rather their paradigm. For if “flesh” is



understood in the phenomenological sense, as that in which activity and passivity meet, that for which to touch is to be touched, so that the experiencing is one with what is experienced,<sup>21</sup> then Plotinus' intellect *is* flesh in the most pure and paradigmatic sense, at once the thinking and that which is thought: "Because it thinks it is two and because it thinks itself, one" (V.6.1.25–26). Flesh at the sensuous level is a lesser image of this, for here there is a weakening of "immanence," a partial externality or distancing between awareness and that of which it is aware (see e.g., IV.6.2.18–22). Likewise, if "body" is understood phenomenologically, not as *Körper* but as *Leib*, the "lived body" as the interface between self and world or the entry-point of self into the world, then Plotinus' intellect, as intussusception, as the perfect union of awareness and reality, is body analogously, paradigmatically, most fully and purely. "Its nature," says Plotinus, "is to become other in every way" (VI.7.13.26).<sup>22</sup> Nothing could be farther from the conception of intellect as self-contained subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> And if time is understood as, in Plotinus' phrase, the "life of soul" (III.7.11.44–45), the unification of a multiplicity of contents into the continuity of a single consciousness, then eternity, as the life of intellect (III.7.3.37–39), is not a frozen point but is rather paradigmatic time, intellect's always already having moved to all things (VI.7.13.15–16): "But behold intellect, pure intellect, and look upon it with concentrated gaze. . . . You see the hearth of reality . . . beings all together and abiding life and intellection not in activity towards what is coming but towards the already, or rather 'already and always already.' . . . In its thinking, then, there is activity and motion" (VI.2.8.6–13; cf. VI.7.13).<sup>24</sup> As Plotinus says, intellect is not the negation of time, space, body, and sense, but rather is all of these archetypally: "There indeed are qualities and harmonies and quantities, numbers and magnitudes and relations, actions and affections which are according to nature, universal motion and rest. . . . But instead of time, eternity; and place is there, intellectually, one thing in another" (V.9.10.7–10). And insofar as we are capable of intellectual experience, which indeed underlies and informs all our thinking, we have, contrary to the assumptions of Kant, Heidegger, and Marion, direct access to eternity. As Plotinus remarks after giving his account of what eternity is, "Are we, then, saying these things as bearing witness for others and talking about what is not our own? How indeed? For what awareness could there be for those who have not touched? But how could we touch what is not our own? There must be, then, even for us, a sharing in eternity" (III.7.7.1–5). Intellect, therefore, understood in the classical sense not as abstraction but as the intuition of being, not only fulfils, but paradigmatically fulfils, the contemporary demand for givenness, immediacy, embodiment, the flesh.

### III. Intellect and the Good

If intellect is the paradigmatic intuition of being as intelligible, the One or Good, beyond being and intellect, is radically transcendent, not given as the content of any sensible or intellectual intuition, just in that it is the condition and principle of all vision, all intuition, and hence at once of being and of intellect. "That Good is said [i.e., by Plato] to be the cause not only of reality, but of its being seen. And

just as the sun, which is cause for sensibles both of their being seen and their coming into being, is also in some way cause of sight—and therefore is neither sight nor the things which have come to be—in this way also the nature of the Good, which is cause of reality and intellect, and is light, according to our analogy, to the things seen there and to the seer, is neither the beings nor intellect but cause of these, giving by its light both thinking and being thought to the beings and to intellect” (VI.7.16.23–32). This is why the Good is not merely an entitative cause, a first, “supreme” being which produces all other beings. Such a reading is excluded both by Plotinus’ insistence that the Good is not any being and by his explanation that the Good’s “causality” is not in fact an attribute of the Good but only an expression of the dependent status of being: “For even to say ‘cause’ is not to predicate something accidental of it [i.e., the One] but of us, because we have something from that, which is in itself; but one who speaks precisely should not say ‘that’ or ‘is’ . . .” (VI.9.3.49–53). Plotinus’ point, then, is not that the Good “causes” being in an entitative sense, but rather that being, as intelligible, is conditioned. “For this reason that One is none of the things in intellect, but all things are from him. This is why they are realities (*ousiai*); for they are already defined and each has a kind of shape. That which is (*to . . . on*) must not fluctuate, so to speak, in the indefinite, but must be fixed by limit and stability; and stability among intelligibles is definition and shape, and by these it receives existence” (V.1.7.22–27). It is precisely *qua* intelligible that being reveals itself as subject to the condition of determinacy and therefore as not first but dependent.<sup>25</sup> And as the condition in virtue of which anything can be given to awareness, the Good is at once the condition for being and the condition for awareness itself, “greater than reason and intellect and sense, providing these, but not himself being these” (V.3.14.19–20). The Good is therefore, as Plotinus says, the “king of truth” (V.5.3.19), the principle of the togetherness of being and thought outside of which neither can exist.

Plotinus frequently uses the analogy of light to express this understanding of the Good as not anything intelligible, any being, but the condition at once of being and intelligibility. The Good, he says, is “light” to intellect and the intelligibles and as such gives “both thinking and being thought to the beings and to intellect.” Here, of course, Plotinus is both borrowing and transforming Plato’s account of the sun as the image of the Good. Plato points out that light “yokes together the sense of sight and the ability to be seen” (*Republic* VI, 507e6–508a1) and that therefore the sun, as the provider of light, “causes” both seeing and being seen (508a4, b9–10). The sun, for Plato, is thus analogous to the idea of the Good, which “provides truth [i.e., intelligibility] to the things known and renders the ability to know to the knower” (508e1–2). And since to be is to be intelligible, the Good thus provides being to the intelligibles (509b7–8). Plotinus modifies Plato’s analogy by comparing the Good not to the sun, as a source of light, but rather to pure light itself (V.5.7.11–15; V.6.4.14–16). The sun is not just light but a body, a determinate thing, that gives off light, and for that reason is itself a visible thing (V.5.7.11–13). The image of the sun therefore risks representing the Good as an entitative cause. By comparing the Good rather just to light, Plotinus removes this danger. In relation to sight and

visible things, light itself is none of those things, nothing but that by which seeing can occur and things can be seen. As such, light, which is necessarily present and at work in all seeing and being seen, cannot itself be seen, is not any visible thing. It is thus closely analogous to the Good, which is not anything intelligible, and so not any being, but the condition of intelligibility which is present and at work in all awareness and being. To turn from beings to the Good, therefore, is like turning our attention, within the act of seeing, from the visible things to the light by which they are visible: "Such, then, is the seeing of intellect; this also sees by another light the things illuminated by that first nature . . . ; inclining toward the nature of the illuminated things, it sees that less; but if it dismisses the things seen and looks toward that by which it sees, it looks at light and the source of light" (V.5.7.16–21).<sup>26</sup> Again and again Plotinus uses this expression, "by which," to articulate the difference between that which can be known and the Good as the condition of knowing and knowability. The ascent from beings to the Good is thus an ascent beyond all that is intelligible to the condition of intelligibility, which is not itself anything intelligible, not given to thought as any definite content.

But for this very reason, the Good can be encountered only in the intellectual vision of forms, the intelligible order that is manifest in the world. No form is itself the Good or One, but every form, every intelligible nature, is a mode of goodness and unity, a way of being one and good, and therefore a mode of being. "The form, then, approaches and composes that which is to come into being from many parts into a single ordered whole; it brings it into a completed unity . . . for since it is one itself, that which is shaped by it must also be one as far as a thing can be which is composed of many parts" (I.6.2.18–23). To be this or that, to be a stone, a tree, an animal, is to be one and good in some specified way. Every form is thus a differentiated presentation of the Good as the condition of all intelligibility and being, just as everything that can be seen is an articulated presentation of light. The forms, taken together as one complex whole, which is what Plotinus means by "intelligible being," are the intelligible articulation of the Good. "Therefore this multiple intellect, when it wishes to think that which is beyond, thinks that itself which is one, but in wishing to intend it in its simplicity, comes out continually apprehending something else made many in itself. . . . So this intellect intended that, but by grasping became intellect, perpetually in need and having become at once intellect and being and intellection when it thought" (V.3.11.1–4, 13–15). The forms, or being, are so to speak the Good as "refracted" in intellectual reception into a multiplicity of distinct intelligible contents. To turn from beings to the Good, therefore, is analogous to turning our attention, within the act of seeing, from the visible things to the light by which they are visible, from refracted, articulated modes of light to pure light itself. The multiplicity of forms, the intelligible order that is manifest in the world, is the presence of the absent Good to all things.

For Plotinus, therefore, to remain merely at the level of individual, temporal, "factual" experience, and thus to fail to see, to intuit intellectually, this universal, eternal, intelligible order, is to fail to encounter the Good. Only through the ascent to intellectual vision can one be "carried out of this by the surge of the wave of intellect

itself and lifted on high by a kind of swell and see suddenly, not seeing how, but the vision fills his eyes with light and does not make him see something else by it, but the light itself is what he sees" (VI.7.36.18–22). Because it is being-*qua*-intelligible that is the manifestation of the Good, it is only by way of intellect that we encounter absolute transcendence. And since being as intelligible is never the Good itself but always intellect's refracted apprehension of it, intellect, as the intuition of being, is the desire or striving for the Good: "And this is what thinking is, movement toward the Good desiring it" (V.6.5.9). Since the Good is at once never given as a being to be grasped by intellect, and wholly given as the condition of all being, intellect is "always desiring and always attaining" (III.8.11.23). Such an understanding of intellect is radically different from the conceptualization and closure which, by rendering intellect simply complete and satisfied in itself, would cut it off from any access to genuine transcendence. Thus Plotinus explains that the activity of intellect is always twofold: "Intellect . . . then, has a power for thinking by which it looks at the things in itself, and one by which it looks at what is beyond itself by an intention and reception. . . . And that first one is the sight of intellect in its right mind, and the other is intellect in love, when it goes out of its mind 'drunk with the nectar'" (VI.7.35.20–25). "The sight of intellect in its right mind" is the intellectual apprehension of forms, of the intelligible content of the world. "Intellect in love" is the "vision" of and union with the Good which is not any intelligible content. But these two modes of activity are not alternative to or separate from each other, as if intellect had to cease apprehending the intelligible in order to see the Good. Rather, they are always both together: "But does that intellect see in part, at one time some things and at another others? No . . . but intellect always has its thinking and always its not thinking, but looking at That [i.e., the Good] in another way" (VI.8.35.38–31). To return to the analogy of light, the eye can see light itself only *in* seeing illuminated, visible things. So here, apart from the intellectual intuition of being as intelligible, the intellect does not "see" the Good as the condition of intelligibility. Although the Good itself is not another intelligible, the encounter with the Good is a transcendent moment within the intellectual act, not a repudiation of or alternative to that act. Intellect out of its mind, drunk, and in love is still intellect.<sup>27</sup>

The Good, as the condition for intelligibility, thus escapes any conceptual grasp in an utterly different way from the Epicurean swerve or the Heideggerian "play without why." Plotinus himself is aware that his doctrine of the Good as beyond intelligibility could be misread in such an irrationalist way. Since the Good accounts for all things and nothing in turn accounts for the Good, the Good itself is "without why." The Good might seem, therefore, to be similar to the Epicurean swerve, and it may be partly with the Epicureans in mind that Plotinus labors, in *Ennead* VI.8, to dissociate his doctrine of the Good beyond intelligibility from any irrationalism, any notion of "chance," of arbitrariness, of the event or what "just happened," which would in effect identify the first principle as randomness in order to avoid undermining its absolute primacy by including it within an explanatory structure. Plotinus expressly opposes any such interpretation of transcendence as "whylessness" and the attendant loss of intelligible normativity. If the first principle were chance, he argues,

the result would be sheer anarchic chaos: “For if [one] attributes to chance the nature which takes away the ‘happened to be’ from the others, wherever will the being which is not by chance come to be?” (VI.8.10.5–7). The Good, as unconditioned condition, invisible as pure light rather than as darkness, “takes away” whylessness from all things. The Good itself is “without why” just because it is the “why” for all things: “And the question ‘why?’ seeks another principle; but of the principle of all there is no principle,” (VI.8.11.8–9), and again, “It is the source therefore of being and the why of being” (VI.8.14.32). The Good beyond intelligibility is thus not a denial of or alternative to rationality, but rather “the principle of all reason and order and limit” (VI.8.10.12–13). Being as intelligible, therefore, is not over against or apart from an unintelligible Good. Rather, it is precisely as intelligible that being is the articulated manifestation of the Good, and hence only in the intellectual apprehension of being can the transcendent Good be encountered.

The Good, then, is indeed, in Dante’s phrase, “the good of the intellect,” the abiding principle and end of the intellectual apprehension of reality. Any attempt to deploy Neoplatonic transcendence without or apart from intellect—or worse, in opposition to it—is thus not only historically but philosophically mistaken. To do this is to risk shutting out the timeless and universal and so, for fear of the modern conceptual domestication of transcendence, to leave us with, on one side, an unintelligible chaos of “factual” experience, and, on the other, an empty transcendence that reduces to “a nameless wildness.” Without intellect, negative theology does indeed threaten to coincide with atheism. In Plotinus, on the other hand, we find the full integration of a classical, intellectualist metaphysics of being-as-form with the recognition that this very ontology demands a ground that is not included within itself. As Reiner Schürmann remarks, “To pass beyond the hypostatic Intelligence thus is to work through the scaffolding of reasons and causes, the scaffolding of etiologies which makes up metaphysics. Beyond the scaffolding, reason loses its wits. Then for once, one may speak peacefully of *delimited* metaphysics.”<sup>28</sup> In the intellectual phenomenology of Plotinus we have metaphysics without closure, metaphysics without totalization, and thus without the self-destructive consequences that have been attributed to modern conceptual rationality. The overcoming of “modern objectifying rationalism,” then, calls not merely for a retrieval of the Good beyond being, but for a recovery of full-blown classical intellectualism, which understands intellect as an intuitive togetherness with being and thus does not set intellect and transcendence in mutual opposition, but attains radical transcendence in and through the intellectual apprehension of being.

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## Notes

1. See above all Wayne J. Hankey, *Cent ans de néoplatonisme en France: Une brève histoire philosophique* (Paris and Quebec: Vrin and Laval, 2004).

2. Wayne J. Hankey, "Neoplatonism and French Philosophy," *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 161–189, at 183.
3. Karsten Harries, "Art and the Sacred: Postscript to a Seminar," in *Christian Spirituality and the Culture of Modernity*, ed. Peter J. Casarella and George P. Schner, S.J. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 200.
4. Claude Bruaire, *Le droit de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1974), 21; cf. Harries, "Art," 193–194: "The dynamism of religious transcendence, especially when one adds the attribute 'infinite,' carries with it the danger of a radicalization of transcendence that threatens to so empty it and therefore also God of all meaning that mysticism and atheism come to coincide."
5. Jean-Marc Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie, et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2001).
6. Narbonne, *Hénologie*, 250–271.
7. Henry Duméry, *Phenomenology and Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 99–100.
8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), A19/B33.
9. Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, trans. William McNeill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 20.
10. Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 134.
11. *Ibid.*, 222.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Cf. Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1969), 86: "Contemporary philosophers are in general irresistibly attracted toward a monistic interpretation of man and an affiliated bias toward the body. . . . To speak, for example, of 'the lived body' is to take one's bearings by what Hegel would have called the finite and empirical fact of the unity within life of body and mind. . . . From a Hegelian perspective (to say nothing of others), there is on this crucial point no difference between contemporary phenomenology and positivism. Both are dominated by facticity." And again, 92: "Suffice it to say here that the many have always disliked philosophy; the new historical phenomenon after Hegel is the acceptance of the tastes of the many by the few, in however esoteric a manner this acceptance might be phrased."
14. Pierre Rousselot, S.J., *The Intellectualism of St. Thomas*, trans. James E. O'Mahony (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), 31–32.
15. E.g., *Republic* IX, 585b6–586b4; *Phaedo* 79d6; *Phaedrus* 247e2; *Symposium* 212a2–5.
16. Quotations from Plotinus are from *Plotinus*, ed. and trans. A. H. Armstrong, 7 vols. (Cambridge and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1966–1988), with emendations to the translation as needed for clarity or precision.
17. Plotinus makes the same argument again at V.3.5.19–24.
18. Rosen, *Nihilism*, 196.

19. Cf. Rousselot, *Intellectualism*, 30: “[E]xtent of knowledge and understanding, instead of being in inverse ratio to one another, really go hand in hand, where intuitive intellects are concerned. The universality of the ideal forms by which the higher angels obtain their knowledge makes rather for a deeper penetration of the unique and ineffable character of things than for indistinctness and vagueness. It would correspond rather to a process of condensation than of generalisation.”

20. Cf. J. N. Deck, *Nature, Contemplation, and the One*, 2nd ed. (Burdett, NY: Larson, 1991), 110: “Plotinus does not have two worlds, but only one. His world of true being is not, except metaphorically, a world above the everyday world. It *is* the everyday world, not as experienced by sense, by opinion, or by discursive reasoning, but as known by intellect, the Nous, the Knower.” See also Armstrong, “Introductory Note” to VI.7, 79: “In the end we are left with the very strong impression that for Plotinus there are not two worlds but one real world apprehended in different ways on different levels.”

21. See Marion, *Being Given*, 231.

22. See also VI.5 7.1–9, 14–17.

23. Cf. Rousselot’s remarks on intellect in Aquinas, *Intellectualism*, 20: “In opposition to those who see in intellect something necessarily egocentric, he makes of it the faculty which emancipates men from mere subjectivity; it may aptly be called ‘the faculty of otherness’ . . . In a wider sense it is for him . . . the ‘faculty of being,’ the faculty which most truly grasps, and attains, and holds being. It unites in the highest degree subjective intensity and objective extension, because if it grasps reality it does so by *becoming* reality in a certain manner: and in that precisely consists its nature.”

24. On eternity as paradigmatic time in Plotinus, see Peter Manchester, “Time and the Soul in Plotinus, III 7 [45], 11,” *Dionysius* 2 (1978): 136; Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2003), 153–156.

25. Schürmann, 332: “Le caractère dérivé de l’étant résulte de sa qualité principale, l’intelligibilité.”

26. Cf. V.3.17.27–38.

27. Here we must differ from Rousselot’s judgment that St. Thomas “is also seen to reject the vague and metaphorical anti-rationalism of a Plotinus for whom this union with God and the simplification that it brings is not properly due to an act of intellect” (*Intellectualism*, 47). Rousselot goes on to oppose Aquinas to those scholastics who “like the voluntarists of all ages, attributed to the ‘heart’ all that was simple, direct and profound in the activities of intellect. As against these ‘Augustinians’ St. Thomas, in this nearer to St. Augustine than they, maintained with the whole Greek tradition that in intellect as such all that is of highest value is to be found and that it is the noblest faculty *simpliciter*” (ibid., 47–48). Rather, Plotinus belongs with Aquinas and “the whole Greek tradition” as thus described and in opposition to “the voluntarists of all ages”—including today’s proponents of “facticity” against rationality.

28. Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, 158.