

## HEGEL'S SENSE OF IDEALISM IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND PLOTINUS' ECSTASY

Hegel seems to be concerned in his *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*<sup>1</sup> (ILHP) with two major problems that seem to prevent history of philosophy from becoming genuinely scientific. The first is historicism, which makes history of philosophy a mere accumulation of opinions without a systematic view. The second is the anachronism of critical accounts of history that are marked by one-sidedness and bias and classify doctrines and principles as true or false, according to their identity with or difference from their own standards of how philosophy should be conducted.

What is most appealing in this second thesis (critical accounts of history, according to Hegel) is that it presupposes a criterion of truth and falsity, which is typical of genuine science of knowledge, but what is less appealing in it is that we do not treat history of philosophy with historical accuracy since we attribute achievements or failures to philosophers who didn't share the same standards that determine what's an achievement and what's a failure. In other words we attribute to them debates and agendas that they had no idea of. The problem with this strict distinction between truth and falsity is that, with it, we don't really comprehend the subject matter of the history of philosophy. When we have in mind a very fixed standpoint that we consider right, we judge what was true or false according to this standpoint. However, the problem is that we might just be projecting this standard at people who were not pre-occupied with it and hence shouldn't be judged by it<sup>2</sup>.

1. G. W. F. HEGEL, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T. M. Knox and A. M. Miller, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985.

2. Cf. *ibid*, p. 104: «A second inference from what has been said concerns, once again, the manner of treating the ancient philosophers. In them we must work with historical precision; we must ascribe to them only what is directly and historically reported about them. In many, indeed in most, histories of philosophy lots of things are wrong about these philosophers because we often find attributed to one or other of them a mass of metaphysical propositions of which he never knew one word. It is easy enough for us to find a philosophical argument and transform it according to our own level of reflection. But the most important thing in the history of philosophy is precisely to know whether such a proposition was already developed or not, because it is in this development that the progress of philosophy consists».





### Hegel's Sense of a 'Scientific' History of Philosophy

Hegel wished to overcome the problem of projection and anachronism that the strict distinction between truth and falsity poses, with his notion of "development" and his notion of the "concrete". Transitions in history of philosophy are not from false doctrines to true ones or vice versa, but from worse to better articulations of *one* single truth. That's Hegel's sense of development. The older doctrine is worse than the newer in the sense that the newer is conceptually better determined, i.e. less abstract. That's Hegel's sense of what's concrete in the history of philosophy. The interest in the history of philosophy springs out of a desire or a drive, which is a desire to abstain from mere abstraction. It is, therefore, not a transition from falsity to truth but rather a laborious process of elucidation and improvement. Hegel suggests that the diversity found in the history of philosophy is not a drawback but rather proof of philosophical movement towards truth. Different philosophies, thus, constitute different stages of this single process. The philosophical systems of the past can only be understood and ultimately reconciled with each other if we consider them within a "wider picture" according to Hegel. There is a universal truth underlying those systems, which finds its actuality in particular historical forms.

Which idea is it that becomes more concrete? What's this universal truth? Hegel maintains that «the succession of philosophical systems in history is the same as their succession in the logical derivation of the categories of the Idea»<sup>3</sup>. In other words, according to this parallelism thesis, the idea that develops in history of philosophy is the same as the idea or the project that Hegel develops in his *Logic* in *a priori* logical terms, i.e. reason. What is under development is reason and thought. Reason and thought, however, are also the means for this development. If the subject manages to make reason and thought its object, and in that sense 'externalise' it, it becomes as concrete and tangible as the objects of perception. It is, therefore, the process of thinking making itself its own object. This seems roughly to be Hegel's own project in his *Logic*, i.e. to show through concepts how spirit realises that it is its own object. Truth or rather a fully developed Concept is realised fully only at the end of the process. However, while Hegel in the *Logic* shows *a priori* by argument that the ultimate object of thought is thought in itself, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*<sup>4</sup> (LHP) he must give historical evidence that previous philosophy reflects the same overall pro-

3. Cf. *ibid*, p. 22.

4. Cf. IDEM, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 2nd Volume, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1995.



ject. In other words Hegel must demonstrate by resort to historical facts that all previous philosophers developed the same overall project.

### Hegel's Overall View of Plotinus' Philosophy

I shall now take the ancient Greek philosopher Plotinus as my case study, in order to examine whether Hegel provides sufficient evidence to show that Plotinus' philosophy anticipates his project as well. If the textual evidence disconfirm Hegel's account of Plotinus, then it would be fair to conclude that Hegel's history of philosophy is not genuinely experiential and scientific but Hegel's own projection, at least as far as the last major Greek philosopher and father of medieval philosophy is concerned. Hegel maintains that «the principle of the philosophy of Plotinus is therefore [the] Reason which is in and for itself»<sup>5</sup> or according to the text of the critical edition of the *Vorlesungen ueber die Geschichte der Philosophie*<sup>6</sup> (VGP): «Das Charakteristische an Plotin ist die hohe Begeisterung für die Erhebung des Geistes zu dem Guten und Wahren –zu dem, was an und für sich ist»<sup>7</sup>. As far as Hegel is concerned then Plotinus' philosophical project was intended to be an elaboration on the limits of reason and thought on the model of Hegel's own philosophy. According to Hegel, his system is organised around one main idea. This main idea of Plotinus' system is «an intellectualism or a higher idealism, which indeed from the side of the Notion is not yet a perfect idealism»<sup>8</sup>. Only a philosopher who has developed the critical faculty that passes beyond mere presuppositions would be able to reach the concept of Reason in-and-for-itself. Hegel maintained that Plotinus' attempt to describe the primary explanatory principle of his system, the One, was fully graspable by reason and implicitly an elaboration of reason. Here's, however, a part of the very same Ennead<sup>9</sup> (VI. 9.) that Hegel had mainly focused on, which directly contradicts the above claims: «...our awareness of that One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with other intelligible things, but by a way of a presence superior to knowledge. The soul experiences its falling away from being one and is not altogether one when it has reasoned knowledge of anything; for reasoned knowledge is a rational process, and a rational process is many. The soul, therefore, goes past the

5. Cf. *ibid*, p. 412.

6. Cf. IDEM, *Vorlesungen ueber die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Teil 3, Herausgegeben von P. Garniron und W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1996.

7. Cf. *ibid*, p. 178.

8. Cf. IDEM, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, *op.cit.*, p. 412.

9. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, Cambridge Massachusetts, Loeb Classical Library, 1966-1988.





One and falls into number and multiplicity. One must therefore run up above knowledge and in no way depart from being one, but one must depart from knowledge and things known, and from every other, even beautiful, object of vision»<sup>10</sup>.

Plotinus' point here is that 'intelligible things', i.e. the Forms *only*, can be known by reason and conceptual knowledge. On the other hand, Plotinus' God or Absolute, the 'One', requires a different approach, which is superior to that. Given that throughout Plotinus' system unity is always metaphysically prior and hence superior to multiplicity<sup>11</sup>, there must also be a kind of knowledge that works its way through its object preserving a sense of unity and avoids grasping its object through many different concepts. Reason, thus, according to Plotinus, introduces divisions and multiplicity that do not match the nature of the One or in other terms contradict the concept of unity that it stands for.

Let's examine now Hegel's account in more detail. Hegel's view of Plotinus' One could be captured by the following four theses: (1) the One is a *thinking* entity with an indefinite essence that stands (2) in need of *determination* by (3) a special kind of logical *necessity*. In order to grasp the One (4) a special process takes place, which is called 'ecstasy'. Ecstasy, according to Hegel, shouldn't be taken as a mystical doctrine because, through the ecstasy, Plotinus expresses a particular philosophical position that contains the above three theses (indefinite essence, need of determination, logical necessity). In other words, Hegel's argument is that Plotinus by his doctrine of ecstasy is not suggesting intuition and immediacy, in order to grasp his infinite (the 'One') but rather exactly the opposite, i.e. the mediation of concepts. In what follows I intend to examine whether there is evidence confirming Hegel's view on Plotinus' ecstasy. My thesis is that Plotinus did not intend a conceptual approach by his ecstasy, contrary to Hegel's understanding of the process.

### Hegel's Interpretation of Plotinus' 'Ecstasy'

The issue of the ecstasy is mainly why Hegel thinks that Plotinus is vulnerable to the accusation of being a mystic. Hegel's opinion, however, is that behind Plotinus' ecstasy we shall find proper philosophical thought, instead of the mysticism that mere intuition suggests. In this section I will investigate by reference to the text of the *Enneads* whether Plotinus intended a

10. Cf. *ibid.*, *Enneads*, VI. 9. 4.

11. Cf. *ibid.*, *Enneads*, VI. 9. 2. 15: «if something loses its one it will not exist anymore».



conceptual approach by his ecstasy. My thesis is that Plotinus did not intend a conceptual approach by his ecstasy but, rather, after having considered such an approach, he argued explicitly against it. Hopefully this will finally show that Hegel actually projected this thesis onto Plotinus out of his own philosophical agenda and that he didn't manage to avoid the onesidedness that he accused the Kantian historians of, after all.

Here's how Hegel expresses himself concerning Plotinus' ecstasy according to the critical edition of the *Lectures*: «Ekstase nennt er es [=die Begeisterung], aber es ist nicht Ekstase der Empfindung, der Phantasie; es ist vielmehr reines Denken, das bei sich selbst ist, sich zum Gegenstand macht»<sup>12</sup>. In Plotinus' defence from the accusation of mysticism Hegel's strategy is to argue that ecstasy is (1) a 'unification of the soul'<sup>13</sup> and also a (2) 'withdrawal from sensuous consciousness', which is in other words the rejection of the categories that apply to our knowledge of the appearances in nature. As Hegel put it in the *Lectures*: «ecstasy is not a mere rapturous condition of the senses and fancy, but rather a passing beyond the content of sensuous consciousness»<sup>14</sup>. This is the first step in Hegel's own project in order to develop later a different set of concepts set out in detail in his *Logic*, but it is not true of Plotinus' project. Let's start with Hegel's second point first.

### Withdrawal from Sensuous Consciousness

Plotinus as a loyal Platonist did indeed maintain a similar withdrawal from the body, along the lines suggested in classic Platonic texts such as the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. This, however, is a process clearly and distinctively different from the ascent to the One that happens (partly) by ecstasy. In mainstream Platonism it is indeed suggested that we cannot have proper knowledge of the sensible world, because the items of this world are just

12. Cf. G. W. F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen ueber die Geschichte der Philosophie*, op.cit., pp. 179-180.

13. Cf. IDEM, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, op.cit., p. 408: «If we now go on to consider the philosophy of Plotinus in detail, we find that there is no longer any talk of the criterion –as with the Stoics and the Epicureans– that is all settled; but a strenuous effort is made to take up a position in the centre of things, in pure contemplation, in pure thought. Thus what with the Stoics and the Epicureans is the aim, *the unity of the soul* with itself in untroubled peace, is here *the point of departure*; Plotinus takes up the position of bringing this to pass in himself as a condition of ecstasy, as he calls it, or as an inspiration. Partly in this name and partly in the facts themselves, a reason has been found for calling Plotinus a fanatic and visionary, and this is the cry universally raised against this philosophy; to this assertion the fact that for the Alexandrian school all truth lies in reason and comprehension alone, presents a very marked antithesis and contradiction». (My emphasis)

14. Cf. *ibid.*, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, op.cit., p. 412.





copies of other entities that exist independently, i.e. the Forms. Hence, in order to achieve proper knowledge as well as virtue, one needs to withdraw from the sensibles and ascend to the domain of pure concepts (the Forms). This move is found in Plotinus as well and is roughly equivalent to the conceptual ascent to the second principle of his system that encompasses the Forms, i.e. the Intellect/*nous*. This process, indeed, seems to be compatible with the Hegelian project, because it rejects a restriction of knowledge to the domain of appearances or phenomena. Appearances are deceiving for Platonists. Ecstasy, however, is rather a move beyond the Intellect and its concepts towards the One and it is not conceptual at all but purely immediate/mystical. Plotinus confirms this when, wondering how the soul can grasp the One conceptually, he gives the following answer: «There is nothing surprising in its being difficult to say, when it is not even easy to say what Being or Form is; but we do have a knowledge based upon the Forms. But in proportion as the soul goes towards *the formless*, since it is utterly unable to comprehend it because *it is not delimited*...it slides away... But when the soul wants to see by itself...*it does not think it*...»<sup>15</sup>.

### Unification of the Soul

Hegel also mentions that Plotinus' ecstasy is about bringing «the soul in a unity with itself in peace» or «a simplification/unification of the soul». Indeed, according to the text of the *Enneads*<sup>16</sup>, the soul is multiple by being divided into different faculties (reasoning, desiring, apprehending). Each of these faculties, however, drags the soul towards the fulfilment of its own goals. The soul strives to harmonise those tendencies and bring this conflicting multiplicity into an ordered unity. It is like sorting out its priorities, as we would put it nowadays in ordinary language. There has to be a hierarchy of needs starting from the highest, which will be the ruling faculty or the principle under which the soul will come to harmony and unity. This faculty, therefore, is the principle of the existence of the soul, i.e. that principle which unifies its many faculties under its rule.

In most classical philosophers the utmost priority for a human being is intellectual life and Plotinus is no exception to this rule. This principle however is not the One or at least not directly the One. The unifying principle

15. Cf. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, VI. 9. 3.

16. Cf. *ibid.*, VI. 9. 1: «the soul is many, even the soul which is one, even if it is not composed from parts; for there are many powers in it, reasoning, desiring, apprehending, which are held together by the one as by a bond. So the soul brings the one to other things being also itself one by something else: it too experiences this unity by the act of another».



of the soul is its highest and least material faculty, the Intellect. As Plotinus puts it in the *Enneads*<sup>17</sup>: «and then again you will enquire whether the soul is one of the simple entities, or whether there is something in it like matter and something like form, the intellect in it»; and he adds a bit later on that «Intellect provides it (i.e. the soul) with the forming principles, as in the souls of artists the forming principles for their activities come from their arts». As K. Corrigan put it<sup>18</sup>: «the soul's composition, then, is a function of its causal dependence upon a principle, which operates within it but which is nonetheless distinct from it, namely, intellect».

The crucial thing here is that ecstasy is not that mental state that leads the soul to the unity with itself, i.e. the recognition of the intellect as its unifying principle. In order to reach the intellect, what needs practically to be done is to develop our intellectual capacity, in order to discover all the typical platonic moral concepts. This is a conceptual and discursive process. Plotinus also suggests elsewhere in the same *Ennead*<sup>19</sup> that the ecstasy to the One takes place by our *likeness* to it and not by discursive philosophical reasoning. In other words, Plotinus employs the most famous Platonic notion of likeness or participation (μέθεξις) to indicate that those who wish to grasp the One by ecstasy and not by the way of reasoned knowledge, should first transcend the unity or simplification of the soul with itself –that we mentioned before– in order to be united to the One and fathom the kind of unity and simplicity that characterises the One.

In other words the unification of the soul is a unity of the soul with itself, i.e. an “internal” unity and identity, while the ecstasy is a unification of the soul with the One, i.e. an “external” unity or rather the loss of its own unity and identity. The simplification of the soul is merely a prerequisite for the ecstasy but not identified with it. In order to achieve the ecstasy and grasp the One, we must go beyond all concepts contrary to Hegel's aspirations for conceptualisation. Indeed, Plotinus confirms this in the one and only place where he provides his one and only definition of ecstasy: «He [=the seer/visionary] had no thought of beauties, but had already run up beyond beauty and gone beyond the choir of virtues ... they are secondary objects of contemplation. But that other, perhaps, was not a contemplation but another kind of seeing, *a being out of oneself* [=ἑκστασις/ecstasy] and simplifying and giving oneself over and pressing towards contact and rest»<sup>20</sup>.

17. Cf. *ibid.*, *Enneads*, V. 9. 3.

18. K. CORRIGAN, *Essence and Existence in the Enneads*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. L. Gerson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 114.

19. Cf. PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, VI. 9. 4.

20. Cf. *ibid.*, *Enneads*, VI. 9. 11.

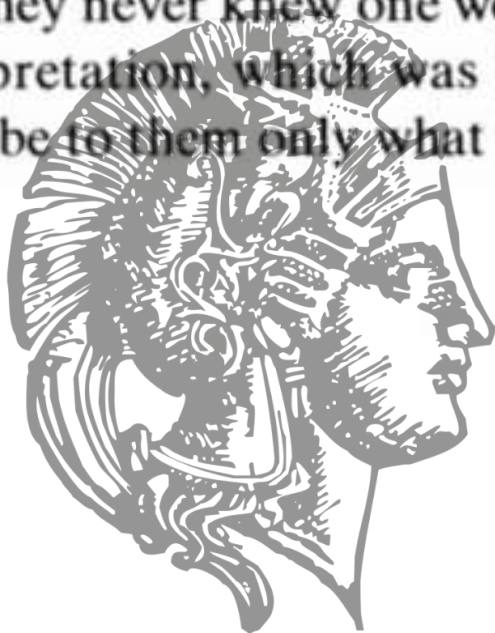




Therefore Hegel's disallowance of intuition and mysticism is not deduced from the text, which on the contrary allows it<sup>21</sup>, but is rather a hermeneutical intention (i.e. Hegel's own conception of Reason in-and-for itself) that is given in advance before the engagement with Plotinus' text. Hegel's strategy is to show that Plotinus goes beyond finitude philosophically and dialectically all the way along. The texts, however, show that Plotinus went up to a certain point philosophically and dialectically and then resorted, indeed, to intuition as his final step of approach to the One.

The choice of extracts from the *Enneads* shows Hegel's biased consideration of the material that he has actually studied. I think he was just very strongly convinced that he would find in Plotinus a minimal version of his own philosophical theses, his *idealism*. At the end of the day he is guilty of the same mistake of which he accuses his contemporary scholars of history of philosophy in his introduction to the *Lectures*, i.e. that «in many histories of philosophy lots of things are wrong about these philosophers, because we often find attributed to one or another of them a mass of metaphysical propositions of which they never knew one word»<sup>22</sup>. He himself violated his own principle of interpretation, which was that «to work with historical precision we must ascribe to them only what is directly and historically reported about them»<sup>23</sup>.

ΑΚΑΔΗΜΙΑ



ΑΘΗΝΑΝ  
S. TH. TAVOULARIS  
(Athens)

21. Evangelos Moutsopoulos develops an interpretation of Plotinus' theory of imagination, which doesn't rely on discursive reasoning and conceptualisation only, but rather emphasises on the unconscious dimensions of imagination. See E. MOUTSOPOULOS, *Le problème de l'imaginaire chez Plotin*, Athens, Grigoris, 1980.

22. Cf. G. W. F. HEGEL, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, op.cit., p. 104.

23. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 104.





Η ΑΙΣΘΗΣΗ ΤΟΥ ΙΔΕΑΛΙΣΜΟΥ ΤΟΥ HEGEL  
ΣΤΗΝ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ Η ΕΚΣΤΑΣΗ ΤΟΥ ΠΛΩΤΙΝΟΥ

Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Ο Hegel υποστηρίζει ότι υπάρχει μία βασική ιδέα που εξελίσσεται σε όλη την ιστορία της φιλοσοφίας, και ότι αυτή ή ιδέα ταυτίζεται με την βασική ιδέα που διακρίνεται στο δικό του φιλοσοφικό πρόγραμμα. Η ιδέα αυτή είναι ο Λόγος και αναπτύσσεται με *a priori* λογικό τρόπο στη Λογική του. Ο Hegel όμως έπρεπε να τεκμηριώσει και με άναγωγή στην ιστορική έμπειρία ότι όλοι οι προγενέστεροι φιλόσοφοι προσπάθησαν πράγματι να διαμορφώσουν το ίδιο γενικό φιλοσοφικό πρόγραμμα και, έπομένως, ότι όλοι τους διαμόρφωσαν κατά κάποιον τρόπο τον *ιδεαλισμό* του Hegel και υπό αυτή την έννοια τον προσοικονομούν. Η έρμηνεία του Hegel επί της φιλοσοφίας του Πλωτίνου εξετάζεται ως ένα δείγμα της γενικότερης έρμηνευτικής στρατηγικής του Hegel σε σχέση με την προγενέστερη φιλοσοφία, με σκοπό να διαπιστώσω αν ο Hegel παρέχει έπαρκη ιστορικά και φιλοσοφικά τεκμήρια για να θεμελιώσει τη στρατηγική αυτή.

Σταυριανός Θ. ΤΑΒΟΥΛΑΡΗΣ

ΑΚΑΔΗΜΙΑ



ΑΘΗΝΩΝ

