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Plotinus: The First Philosopher of the Unconscious

John Hendrix

Plotinus is sometimes referred to as “the first philosopher of the unconscious.” In his 1960 essay “Consciousness and Unconsciousness in Plotinus,” Hans Rudolph Schwyzer called Plotinus “the discoverer of the unconscious.” What exactly was Plotinus’ unconscious? In the *Enneads*, Plotinus asks about soul and intellect: “Why then...do we not consciously grasp them...? For not everything which is in the soul is immediately perceptible” (V.1.12.1–15).¹ In the *De anima* of Aristotle, “Mind does not think intermittently” (430a10–25).² We cannot remember eternal mind in us, because passive mind is perishable. Is the productive or active intelligence in our mind that of which we are not conscious? Can productive intelligence be compared to unconscious thought? Plotinus suggests that we do not notice the activity of intellect because it is not engaged with objects of sense perception. The intellect must involve an activity prior to awareness. Awareness of intellectual activity only occurs when thinking is reflected as in a mirror, but knowledge in discursive reason, reason transitioning from one object to the next in a temporal sequence, is not self-knowledge. Only in the activity of intellect inaccessible to discursive reason is thinking as the equivalent of being. The intellectual act in mind is only apprehended when it is brought into the image-making power of mind through the logos or linguistic articulation; “we are always intellectually active but do not always apprehend our activity” (IV.3.30.1–17). If the Intellectual is the unconscious, then unconscious reason is superior to conscious reason. The inability of conscious reason to know itself in the illusion of self-consciousness is the premise of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century.

In the *Enneads*, the human mind or soul “sometimes reasons about the right and good and sometimes does not...” (V.1.11.1–15). If this is the case, then there must be an element of thought which knows what the right and good are, not intermittently and indecisively, but permanently and without

question. This must be intellect, which rather than reason discursively about the right and the good, *possesses* the right and the good, based on the principle and cause of Intellect. The principle and cause of Intellect is undivided in discursive reason, and abides in mind but not in place. As such, the principle and cause can remain undivided.

“Why then,” Plotinus asks, “when we have such great possessions, do we not consciously grasp them, but are mostly inactive in these ways, and some of us are never active at all?” (V.1.12. 1–15). Intellect, what comes before Intellect, or the first cause, and what results from Intellect, or soul, which is itself “ever-moving,” are all “always occupied in their own activities,” but those activities are not always perceptible; they are only perceptible when they somehow enter into perception, when their activity is shared. Since we are mostly preoccupied with our activities of perception, it is difficult to be aware of when the activities of Intellect are shared. Nevertheless, when the activities are shared with perception, then “conscious awareness takes place.” Otherwise we are unconscious of the activities of Intellect in discursive or conscious reason; we are not aware of the role that unconscious thought plays in the activities of our conscious thought and perception. In order to become aware of the activities of unconscious thought or Intellect, “we must turn our power of apprehension inwards, and make it attend to what is there.”

First it is necessary to examine one’s soul. The powers of perception in soul are only capable of perceiving external objects. Discursive reason in soul makes judgments based on the mental images which come from sense perception. The mental images come from sensible objects and are organized by reason, in combinations and divisions. It should be kept in mind that the mental images themselves are not entirely dependent on the sensible forms, though, because the mental images play a role in the determination of the sensible forms to begin with, and the result is not just the sensible form imprinted in the mind’s eye, but a combination of the sensible form and the intelligible form. As Plotinus says, “as for the things which come to it from Intellect,” the intelligible forms, “it observes what one might call their imprints, and has the same power also in dealing with these...” (V.3.2.1–26). Understanding in perception on the part of reason is the result of a dialectical process of combinations of sensible and intelligible forms in the mind, which is an unconscious process.

Any knowledge or awareness of this process can only come from Intellect, and not discursive reason in soul. But a part of Intellect has to be in

soul, just as a part of the Aristotelian active intellect has to be in potential intellect. The part of Intellect which is in soul, though, does not have the capacity of pure Intellect to be aware of itself—self-awareness in soul can only come from Intellect higher than soul, intellect not connect to the body or sense perception. In other words, conscious reason cannot know itself. Discursive reason in soul cannot know itself or have self-awareness, but it can know where it is: somewhere between Intellect and sense perception. Discursive or conscious reason “has understanding of the impressions which it receives from both sides,” from Intellect and sense perception. It can be aware of what it receives from perception, and it can be aware of what it receives from Intellect, the higher forms to which it has access. How does conscious reason have such understanding?

In *Enneads* V.3.3, impressions are received by discursive reason from sense perception, but discursive reason can only respond to them with the help of memory. With the help of memory, discursive reason then performs analytical operations on the impressions from sense perception, “taking to pieces what the image-making power gave it...”. Any judgments that discursive reason makes about what it receives from sense perception can only be the result of what is already in discursive reason. In order for discursive reason to make any particular judgment about something perceived, discursive reason has to contain the quality that it judges. The only way that discursive reason can contain a quality is if it is illuminated by Intellect, as the sun would illuminate an object in vision. Discursive reason is not conscious of the illumination of Intellect, of the reception of the reflection of Intellect, as in a mirror, because again it is too engaged in perceiving and judging external objects. Only Intellect is capable of observing and knowing itself, which is a kind of reason inaccessible to discursive or conscious reason. Discursive reason makes use of Intellect, unknowingly, in perception and logical thought, when discursive reason is in accord with Intellect, and can be affected by it. Discursive reason is only in accord with Intellect to the extent that discursive reason has knowledge of such accord; in other words, unconscious thought can only be known in conscious thought.

While impressions are received through sense perception, “it is not we ourselves who are the perceivers...,” because the mechanisms that allow perception to take place, from Intellect, are not accessible by conscious thought. We can define ourselves and have self-identity only in our conscious, discursive reason, not in the unconscious mechanisms behind perception, and not in the unconscious mechanisms of Intellect. Thus “we are this,

the principal part of soul, in the middle between two powers...,” neither of which is accessible to our knowledge or awareness. Thus our self-knowledge and identity can be described as being caught between two mirrors; we can perceive the reflections of sense perception and Intellect, but we cannot see beyond the source of the reflections.

We do not notice the activity of Intellect because “it is not concerned with any object of sense,” as Plotinus says in *Enneads* I.4.10. We are generally only aware of our mind’s activity when it is connected to sense perception and thinking about the objects of sense, the *nous hylikos*. If Intellect, and soul, are understood to come before sense perception and discursive reason, as necessary ground for those activities, then it must be considered that the activities of Intellect and soul are continually active, in making sense perception and discursive reason possible, although we do not have immediate awareness of or access to those activities. “There must be an activity prior to awareness,” says Plotinus, if ‘thinking and being are the same’,” that is, if being is given by thought. When awareness of the activity of Intellect exists, or is produced, intellectual activity is reflected back to conscious thought as in a mirror reflection, since the activity of Intellect itself is not present to the dianoetic self, in front of the mirror as it were. Or the activity of Intellect is reflected back to dianoetic thought as logos, since the lower soul can only perceive it as such. In order for that to happen, the surface of the mirror has to be clear, or, in other words, the power of soul has to be clear of disturbances or distractions from sense perceptions. It is necessary for the individual to not be distracted by or focused on the objects of sense perception, in order to disconnect the mind’s activities from them, and concentrated on the premises for the possibilities of those sense perceptions. It is in self-consciousness that the mind is able to perceive the unconscious activity which makes conscious activity possible.

What is reflected as a mirror image, which is a function of the image-making power or imagination in soul, is the activity of Intellect, which must always be there, whether the mirror reflects it or not. The reflective power of the mirror needs to be turned on, through the will of thinking, and the mirror needs to function correctly. It is not possible to have direct access to the activities of Intellect or unconscious thought, but only to their reflections in soul or conscious thought. In the same way, it is not possible to have direct access to dreams, but only to their images as preserved by memory in waking, conscious life. Memory serves the image-making power to preserve images and translate them into words, so that the images which are the product

of sense perception can play a role as the vocabulary elements of thinking activity in discursive reason.

When the mirror imaging power of imagination is functioning correctly, the activity and images of Intellect, what is prior to sense perception, can be perceived by soul in the same way that objects of sense perception are perceived by sight, although the light by which they are illuminated is not the light of the sun, but rather an inner light, the light of Intellect itself. In order for the activities and images of Intellect to be perceived in the same way as sense objects, they have to mimic or take the form of sense objects and activities. Unconscious thought can only be known by conscious thought to the extent that it mimics conscious thought, and conforms to its boundaries and limitations. The full extent of unconscious thought cannot be known by conscious thought because of the limitations of conscious thought, just like the full extent of the sensible world cannot be known by sense perception, because of the limitations of sense perception.

The operation of the mirror of self-reflection, or self-consciousness of intellectual activity, depends on the smooth functioning, harmony and balance of the body in relation to the sensible world. The mirror is a property of *nous hylikos*, the physical functioning of mind in relation to body. If the body does not function properly, the self-reflexive powers of mind cannot function properly. If the mirror is broken because the body is not functioning properly, there is no image for thought and intellect to operate with; the image-making power or imagination is also a property of *nous hylikos* and bodily function in the sensible, although it is also a property of Intellect, and in fact is seen by Plotinus as occupying the midpoint between Intellect and sense perception. But for these purposes, the mirror in the mind, as a property of the body, is necessary for the mind to perceive the activities of Intellect in connection with images, the images reflected in the well-functioning mirror of the soul. The activity of Intellect itself does not necessarily involve a connection with images, but its connection with images is necessary in order to be perceived.

According to Plotinus, there are “a great many valuable activities, theoretical and practical, which we carry on both in our contemplative and active life even when we are fully conscious, which do not make us aware of them” (I.4.10.20–34). This is an explicit recognition of the existence of the modern concept of the unconscious. It is possible to be involved in an activity or an act of contemplation, virtuous action or reading, for example, without being aware of such activity or thought. In fact, conscious awareness, according to

Plotinus, “is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness...”. Plotinus seems to be suggesting that there is something stronger and superior in mind to conscious thought, which is Intellect. Conscious thought and activity, and consciousness itself, are weak forms of thought and activity. Nowhere in the *Enneads* does Plotinus suggest the possibility or concept of a “higher consciousness,” contrary to the opinion of some commentators. Instead, Plotinus says that “only when they are alone,” referring to the activities of thought of which there is consciousness, “are they pure and more genuinely active and living.” Thoughts are stronger and purer when they are “alone,” when they are unperceived by conscious thought and perception, when they are what we call “unconscious.”

Thoughts are purer before they have been connected to the images which allow them to be perceptible to consciousness; they are closer to their source in Intellect. They are purer as the prior ground for consciousness and experience in sense perception. The unconscious is the pure ground for conscious thought and activity, and unconscious thoughts are necessarily corrupted when they become conscious thoughts, if just in their connection to the image in imagination. The power of imagination is the great facilitator for Plotinus, but also the great corruptor. The value of life is increased, and the quality of the soul is increased, when mind is less fragmented and dispersed in the acts of sense perception and discursive reason, but rather “gathered together in one in itself.”

Plotinus also calls the reflections of the images of Intellect “imprints” or “impressions,” so they are seen as the *eidōs* or form which is not connected to a material form or *morphe*, in the same way that the images of sense perception themselves are the *eidōs* and not the *morphe*, imprints or impressions of forms that are received in connection to the material objects, as if there are two lights, or a double light, shining on the material object: the light of the intelligible which illuminates the *eidōs*, and the light of the sensible or the sun which illuminates matter. Judgment in discursive reason is based on the perception of the *eidōs* of the sensible object, as it is subjected to the mechanisms of combination and division in apperception, which are the same mechanisms which Sigmund Freud attributes to the image-making power of unconscious thought in the formation of dream images from dream thoughts, what he calls condensation and displacement. The judgment in discursive reason is also based on the perception of the image connected to thoughts from Intellect, as the objects of sense perception are processed through the unconscious mechanisms of imagination and memory which

make the sense perception possible in the first place, then translate the objects of sense perception into a totality, even through the combinations and divisions, which makes being possible, and which makes thinking equivalent to being.

Thinking is a dialectical process which is facilitated by imagination, which is suspended between Intellect, the source of thinking, and sense perception, the object of thinking. The dialectical process involves the imprint of the sense object or sensible form in perception, the imprint of the idea of the object or intelligible form in the imagination or image-making power, the memory or recollection of past thoughts and perceptions in relation to the present thought, the “recollections” of the soul, the transformation of the image, both sensible and intelligible, into the word in language, both the spoken word and the word prior to speech in Intellect, the *logos endiathetos*, and the fitting together of sensible image, intelligible image, recollected sensible image, recollected intelligible image, sensible word, and intelligible word, in a process which requires the anticipation of the perception of the image or word in relation to the recollection of the intelligible image or word in Intellect, as it is perceived as a reflection or imprint in mind. When the soul is “in the intelligible world it has itself too the characteristic of unchangeability” (IV.4.2), but “if it comes out of the intelligible world, and cannot endure unity, but embraces its own individuality and wants to be different” (IV.4.3) it then acquires memory, in discursive reason and temporal succession. Memory helps keep the soul partly in the intelligible world, the rational soul, but it also brings soul down to the sensible world, the irrational soul.

As the perception of a sensible object entails both the *eidos* of the object and the *eidos* of the intelligible idea of the object in unconscious thought, “actual seeing is double” (V.5.7). The eye “has one object of sight which is the form of the object perceived by the sense, and one which is the medium through which the form of its object is perceived...”. The medium, the intelligible idea of the object which comes from Intellect and is connected to the imprint that is reflected in the mirror of the mind’s eye, precedes the perception of the sensible form, and is the cause of the perception of the sensible form. In normal conscious thought and perception, the form and the medium cannot be separated, and the form of the sensible object is unknowingly perceived as a sensible object, without its sensible or intelligible form. While vision in sense perception is distracted in the act of perception of an object, it is not capable of self-reflection in its outer act.

In V.3.8, Plotinus explains that intelligibles exist prior to bodies, and

cannot be thought of in terms of color or form until they are connected to such in imagination. Intelligibles themselves are “naturally invisible,” invisible even to the soul which possesses them. In the physical world, something is seen when it is illuminated by enough light. In the intelligible world, something can only be seen by itself, because seeing is only through itself, and not through a medium. Seeing something through itself in the intelligible is like light seeing itself, seeing itself as the source of itself, which is inaccessible even to Intellect. Once the intelligible light is seen, sensible light in perception is no longer necessary for understanding. Soul is an image, a reflection or likeness of Intellect; conscious thought is an image, a reflection or likeness of unconscious thought. The illumination of a sensible object by light is a reflection or likeness of the illumination of Intellect by intelligible light. Knowledge of Intellect depends on the separation of the soul from the body.

Conscious thought and sense perception involve a fragmentation, dispersal, and diminution of the powers of thought. In order to avoid this fragmentation and diminution of thought, it is necessary to will oneself into self-reflection, and to will one’s intellect away from the objects of sense perception toward the images of Intellect reflected in soul, then away from those images to the prior source of the images in Intellect. It is necessary to will oneself towards one’s unconscious; the more access there is to the unconscious activities of one’s mind, the stronger and purer are the conscious activities. Plotinus’ interest in the unconscious, as we call it, is for the benefit of the growth and development of the individual. With the science of psychoanalysis in the twentieth-century, the concept of the unconscious has taken on a different meaning, as the source of conflict and discord in conscious thought and activity, and as the source of cures and solutions for that conflict and discord. Psychoanalysts have turned the unconscious into an instrument for therapeutic practices, and the unconscious is no longer seen as a purer form of thought that can be accessed by each individual in order to grow and develop in thought and action, as Plotinus clearly intended it to be. Perhaps a return to the concept of the unconscious in Plotinus could add a great deal to the practice of psychoanalysis.

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, The Loeb Classical Library, 1966).

² Aristotle, *On the Soul (De anima)*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, The Loeb Classical Library, 1964).