

1993

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Wilhelmsen, Elizabeth, "Plotinus and St. John of the Cross: Concurrences and Divergencies" (1993). *Spanish Language and Literature*. 133.

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Plotinus and St. John of the Cross: Concurrences and Divergencies

We propose to examine here two renowned champions of mysticism, Plotinus and St. John of the Cross. The former, the third-century Greek philosopher from Alexandria in northern Egypt, is the father of Neoplatonism. The latter, the sixteenth-century Castilian Carmelite, is known as reformer of his order, as theologian, as mystic, and as sublime poet of divine love.

Both figures can be described, above all and specifically, as mystics: that is, as practitioners of mysticism and, at the same time, as theoreticians of mysticism. There is shared by both one dominating concern and objective: personal, experiential union with the transcendent Other, with the Absolute. For both, furthermore, this concern is positively central to their writings, as it was central to their historical lives. We propose to compare their respective understandings of mysticism, beginning with their striking points in common and continuing with their more subtle and more profound divergencies.

To begin with the most fundamental notions, both thinkers postulate or believe in a Transcendent Other, an Absolute: for Plotinus, the One, *to hen*; for John of the Cross, the God of Christian Revelation. It is this that is the supreme reality, the cause of the universe, and the goal to which all things aspire. Both mystics stress certain characteristics of this ultimate reality: that it is one, simple, absolute, other, and, perhaps most importantly, transcendent. The postulation of these qualities as divine attributes is to be expected in St. John of the Cross, who falls squarely within the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the case of Plotinus, however, the notion of the transcendence of the One represents a surpassing of previous Greek ontology;¹ at the same time, it separates him from a number of schools of Eastern mysticism and from any doctrine based upon purely pantheistic foundations. Thus this notion of the transcendence of the supreme reality joins Plotinus and John of the Cross in somewhat of a common tradition, while at the same time it separates them sharply from a host of other forms of mysticism.

The next key notion on which these two thinkers should be compared is that of the visible universe. In both it is conceived as derived from the transcendent Absolute in some way, whether by emanation or by creation, and as such it is a reflection, however remote, of the perfections of the Absolute. In Plotinus' view, all things in the visible universe, the *kosmos aisthetos*, are formed according to archetypes which belong to the Intelligible Universe, the *Nous*, the sphere or dimension of the forms.² Material beings are only images of their immensely more perfect archetypes, or *logoi*. However, the beauty of the physical cosmos, as well as that of art, can serve as a starting point for the uplifting and awakening of the soul, that it may gradually ascend, by moving

from image to archetype, to the contemplation of intelligible forms and their beauty. Though there are a number of differences to be found, an exemplarist understanding of creation, derived in part from Platonic and Neoplatonic sources, came to be the common property of most medieval Christian theologians. Exemplarist motifs thus make their appearance in a chain of thinkers, being transmitted through such mystics as St. Augustine and Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, continuing to Sts. Francis and Bonaventure, arriving at last to post-Renaissance John of the Cross. Not unlike his predecessors in the medieval mystical tradition, John exclaims that creatures may be looked upon "as a trace of the passing of God, whereby one can discern His grandeur, power, and wisdom."³ And again, like both Plotinus and his more proximate Christian predecessors, John of the Cross turns towards the wonder and beauty of creatures as a means of being uplifted to the contemplation of higher realities. The soul that wishes to advance in knowledge of God, he tells us, must begin "by knowing and reflecting upon creatures, moving from these to the knowledge of its Beloved, their Creator. For . . . His grandeur and excellence are known through them."⁴

It is also appropriate that we compare the concept of the human soul in both thinkers. Following Aristotle, the one as well as the other understands it as the form of the body, as the vivifier of human matter. At the same time, both consider it to be, as in Plato, immaterial and immortal. There are still further points of commonality: both have been influenced by the Aristotelian doctrine that the human mind becomes what it knows, which is the basis for the conclusion that it has the capacity to assimilate any and all things.⁵ In Plotinus, this notion combines with the Stoic doctrine that the soul has the ability to stretch itself boundlessly over the All, giving rise to the theory of the "infinite self," according to which the individual soul can ascend to and assimilate the infinite contents of the *Nous*, the Intelligible World, or second *hypostasis*, and even achieve union with the One.⁶ The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, for his part, stresses that the human soul is characterized by a certain elasticity by which different levels of interiority and spiritual receptivity may be progressively actualized. In both thinkers the soul has unequivocally one destiny, which is also its salvation: union with the transcendent Other, or God. In Plotinus, in the words of one of his analysts, "the soul is an amphibian, a traveller [that] re-ascends through the power of dialectic to Intellect and then by a process of purification, of utter simplification, arrives at the point of contact with the pure and simple absolute, the One."⁷ In language not totally foreign to this, the Spanish Carmelite describes the soul as a pilgrim in the night: "[In] order that the soul may reach the state of perfection," he writes, "it must ordinarily undergo first two types of nights, which spiritual writers call purgations or purifications of the soul. And here we call them nights, because the soul, in the one as well as in the other, walks along in darkness, as at night. The first night or purgation is that of the sensitive part of the soul . . . and the second is of the spiritual part. . . ."⁸ In some of his texts, the metaphorical night is extended to include a third part, which is the term of the ascent: "These three parts of the night all constitute one night; but it has three parts

like the night, because the first, *which is the night of sense*, is compared to the evening twilight . . . and the second, *which is [the virtue of] faith*, is compared to midnight, which is totally dark; and the third, *which is [the experience of] God*, is compared to dawn. . . ."⁹

In both of the eminent mystics the objective is to bring the soul to union with its transcendent source; and in both, likewise, the means to this end is an arduous process of purification. Such a purification, which is central to any doctrine of mysticism, is the next notion we must compare. Both of them conceive of it as an *ascent*, a spiritual and mental movement from below upwards, and from the contemplation of multiplicity to that of unity. The ascent, at least in one of its dimensions, consists in a purification of the intellectual operations by progressive negations, in order that the perfections and the utter simplicity of the source of being may be revealed. Interestingly, though, both the pagan sage and the Christian saint insist that the ascent cannot be exclusively intellectual but must be moral as well, that it requires virtues and the achievement of moral perfections. Both thinkers acknowledge the four cardinal virtues as foundational, to be supplemented or crowned by a set of higher ones: in Plotinus, the same four cardinal virtues, no longer at the "civic" but rather at the "purificative" level, the practice of which brings about detachment from bodily illusions; in John of the Cross, the supernatural and infused virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Again, in both mystics the element of love is considered indispensable. Some force must impel the soul; something must move it forward on this rigorous ascent. In Plotinus the love in question is termed *eros*, often translated as either "yearning" or "desire"; the soul receives this love from the One and is in turn transformed, elevated, and brought by the One to a similarity with it. The Christian mystic John of the Cross, on the other hand, distinguishes between a natural passion for communion with God, which may be cultivated by choice and which would probably correspond to the Plotinian *eros*, and the supernatural love of charity derived from the theological virtue of the same name. While the first form of love plays a preparatory role, it is the second love that effects the actual union of the soul with God. Both these mystics, moreover, divide the ascent or process of purification into various stages. Some striking parallels can be discerned in their respective schema. In that of Plotinus, the ascent comprises three stages: 1) the overcoming of bodily sensations and desires, by which the state of impassibility, or *apatheia*, is achieved; 2) the suppression of discursive reasoning—that is, of all ratiocination and any cognitive operations involving the imagination; and 3) the surpassing of intelligible form, or the intuitive leap from the Ideas in their diversity to the One in its unity. Plotinus' first stage would correspond very clearly to John of the Cross' "active night of sense," in which fundamentally the same goals are achieved. The last two stages in Plotinus' development would both fall within what the Spanish mystic calls the "active night of spirit," in which the three powers of the soul—intellect, memory, and will—are purified simultaneously and in stages by negation of their objects.

There are also some striking coincidences to be remarked in the matter of the mystical union itself. In both expositors, the soul and the Absolute "become one"; not, however, by any ontological fusion of the two subjects, nor by absorption of the human into the divine, such as two ethereal bodies might be united. Rather, mystical communion is explained far more subtly as a oneness achieved in the intentional order by means of acts of knowing and loving, and in particular through a cognitive act of intuition. Thus, if in this experience the soul "becomes" God or the Absolute, it is in the sense that the object known determines the knowing subject intentionally by permeation of the faculties. Both thinkers are indebted in their formulation of this phenomenon to Aristotelian psychology, in which the mind has the capacity to become what it knows.¹⁰ Another central characteristic in both articulations, the Plotinian and the Sanjuanist, is that mystical union does not entail the loss of the soul's self as a knowing and willing subject. It is particularly important to point this out concerning Plotinus, who, not being a Christian, might be associated with pantheistic forms of mysticism in which the highest level of achievement brings about an annihilation or loss of self. In Plotinus, however, a metaphysical identification of being and knowledge allows for the retention of the individual knowing substance and the simultaneous intentional presence to it of differing entities. In John of the Cross, similarly, to be human is to have a soul endowed with the rational faculties of intellect, memory, and will. These powers are never absorbed by any other subject nor eradicated in their operations; in mystical rapture, far to the contrary, they are elevated to unprecedented operative heights. It is also an interesting coincidence that both commentators consider the mystical experience to have two dimensions, a cognitive one and an affective one. As Plotinus says in the *Enneads* (VI, 7, 35), in that divine trance the soul is at once sober and inebriated. Or, in Juan de la Cruz's formulation, the ray of infused contemplation "is like a warm light . . . for it is an illumination that enamors jointly. . . . For, since God is divine light and love, in the communication that He makes of Himself to the soul, He equally informs the two powers, intellect and will, with knowledge and love."¹¹

The two outstanding mystics should be compared on one last fundamental issue: the use of metaphors. It is commonplace among mystics of all cultures to insist upon the otherness and ineffability of their peculiar experience. Seeing, however, that things of beauty from the physical cosmos are images or reflections of the more perfect beyond, they find that metaphors can convey adequately, though obliquely, something of their unfathomable venture. Both Plotinus and John of the Cross are masters of the use of metaphors, and they both employ them in passages overflowing with lyrical intensity. Plotinus resorts to them especially to convey the strength and splendor of spiritual realities: an example would be his statement that "the material universe floats in Soul like a net in the sea."¹² Juan de la Cruz, on the other hand, who is recognized as the most sublime and excellent poet of the Spanish language, builds his lyrics around a cluster of essential symbols: the hunt, the nuptials, the night, the dawn, the flame, the fountain in the garden. Each one of these archetypal realities he utilizes to represent the union of the soul with God, or

the presence of God within the soul. Interestingly, there is no lack of metaphors shared by the two mystics: from terms used in passing—such as “vision,” “contemplation,” and “ecstasy”—to such central and sustained images as that of the “ascent,” used to illustrate the road to union, and that of the “awakening” of the soul (“recuerdo” in John of the Cross), used to express its achievement. In their common insistence upon the need for purification and detachment of the will, there is a noticeable affinity in their formulation of negative imperatives: while Plotinus concludes the *Enneads* V, 3 with his categorical “Cut away everything,” the treatises of the Spanish saint resound with his emphatic “Nada, nada, nada. . . .”

The parallels are, no doubt, striking. Closer analysis will reveal, however, that the approximation to Plotinus in the Spanish mystic represents more of a conceptual and symbolic framework than a true coincidence in the manner of understanding the essence of mysticism and its achievement. Despite the palpable resemblances, it is safe to say that John of the Cross should not be looked upon principally as a Christian Neoplatonist.

Next we shall confront the two doctrines in search of the divergencies. Following the order we have established, we shall examine the disparities in the concepts of God or the Absolute, the universe, the human being, the purification or ascent, and the mystical union.

When speaking of the Absolute in Plotinus, one must distinguish between the One, or first hypostasis, and its primal product, the Nous, Logos, or second hypostasis. The One, or the Good (a name derived from Plato), is conceived of by Plotinus not only as transcendent but as beyond being. It is also beyond form, and therefore totally indeterminate. It is a reality more negative than positive, more logical than ontological. Against Aristotle, who made the divine intellect the first principle, Plotinus asserts that in the One there is no consciousness or intellection; this is so, he maintains, because the One in its absolute simplicity must be beyond the dichotomy of subject and object. The first product of the One, the Nous, is the divine intellect, the world or sphere of the forms. It is the realm of the divine properly speaking, for the One is beyond divinity. The Nous is inferior to the One, following the law of diminishing causality that governs the emanationist universe of Plotinus. However, many of the attributes denied of the One are affirmed of the Nous. The second hypostasis is an ontologically positive reality: it is being, being at its highest. It is specified by form, and it contains the forms or *logoi* or intelligible archetypes for all inferior realities. The Nous is alive with cognitive activity, for being is one with intellection; it is the sphere of the divinities, a host of individual knowing subjects cognitively present to one another. Needless to say, this Plotinian emanationist cosmos with its proliferation of divinities has little to do with the triune Christian God of St. John of the Cross. Ironically, though, there may be some historical link between the understanding of the one and that of the other, for early Christian Neoplatonists were influenced by Plotinus' thought on the One and its derivatives in their reflections upon the divine processions and the Trinity. One such speculator was fourth-century Marius Victorinus, whose thought was later improved upon by his contempo-

rary St. Augustine. At any rate, in the Christian theologian John of the Cross, God is not beyond being; He is, rather, the fullness of being. He is not merely logical, but metaphysically positive as well; He is infinite, but not indeterminate; He is omniscient and ever-conscious. In the manner of generation there is some remote resemblance with Plotinus, for in both bodies of thought the first procession from the Absolute is occasioned by an act of contemplative intellection, and that which proceeds—in Plotinus, the *Nous*; in the Carmelite theologian, the second trinitarian Person—is in its very essence intellective. However, the Christian God does not generate His inferior, but rather eternally generates and spirates His equal. It is when He creates “*ex nihilo*” that He produces something inferior.

This leads us to the divergencies in the two authors regarding the understanding of the visible or created universe. Plotinus stresses that the One is transcendent. However, as all things emanate from it through a chain of descending hypostases, there is a certain continuity between the higher and the lower. Each hypostasis is significantly inferior to the prior; nonetheless, there is no sharp ontological break in the entire descent. For this reason, along the descending chain, the lower contains the higher in some latent or virtual mode. In the depths, there is a kinship and a substantial identity between the human soul and the higher cosmic realities. The One, Plotinus tells us, “holds sway by all reason over a dense offspring of its own, a host that shares its divinity.”¹³ This explains how knowledge of the divine is possible: it is contained by the soul virtually or latently. In John of the Cross, on the other hand, God creates “*ex nihilo*,” and this very concept grounds a radical disproportionality between God and creatures. The consequence of this, looking at it “from above,” is that in John of the Cross—to put it simply—God is far more transcendent than in Plotinus. And looking at it “from below,” it means that the essence of created things does not contain even virtually or seminally a share in God’s nature; the human being is *not* divine. The discontinuity carries over into the realm of human knowledge: as creatures are disproportionate to God, likewise human cognition in terms of creatures, no matter how lofty, is disproportionate to God. Much unlike Plotinus, John of the Cross insists that one cannot know God or become united with Him by the operation of one’s cognitive faculties as they are given in nature.

Moving on to the structure of human nature, for Plotinus man is composed of two distinct entities: body and soul. More than a composite, the human being is an ensemble built in layers. Souls pre-exist their existence in time. They dwell in and are part of the third hypostasis: *psyche*, Universal Soul. The higher part of the soul participates in *Nous*, or Intellect, although it has the capacity to descend to lower hypostases. Due to a certain “original sin” committed by some souls, there is a “fall” to the sensible world. The soul then informs matter. Its union with a particular body, however, is rather accidental; for it has the capacity, at another moment in time, to inform another one. Nonetheless, it is only the lower part of the soul which thus “falls”; the higher part continues to dwell permanently within the third hypostasis, having no contact with the sensible, the lower soul, or the body. Structurally, therefore,

the human being is built on two different planes. First there is the "true self," the contemplative and rational part, which is perpetually illuminated by Intellect and not involved in temporal life; this self cannot suffer, sin, or be ignorant. Then there is the "other self," formed by the bodily organism. An irradiation from the higher soul, this self is in communication with the sensible world; it suffers passions and ignorance, and it dwells in its body as in a prison.

Our sixteenth-century Carmelite would find this description of the human being almost unrecognizable. In matters pertaining to philosophical anthropology, John of the Cross was fundamentally Aristotelian, having studied the Stagirite both directly and through Thomas Aquinas. Historically, this is not at all surprising, given that he received his intellectual formation at the University of Salamanca in the decade of the 1560's, the heyday of the Silver Age of Scholasticism. For Juan de la Cruz, there is no pre-existence, transmigration, or reincarnation of souls. The soul is the substantial form of one particular body. Further, body and soul constitute a composite, or a unity in one supposit.¹⁴ Body and soul are components of an integrated whole. The soul dwells in and with the body, in isolation from which it cannot operate. It is not empowered to think or contemplate independently; nor can it effect a metaphysical or mystical flight of its own. Being a spiritual substance in which there are neither higher nor lower parts, the entire soul is in communion with the body it informs; being, further, the seat or principle of the composite's rational operations, the soul is in immediate contact with all things perceived, known, remembered, or desired by the subject. In John of the Cross the soul is a markedly historical and incarnate reality and never ceases to be so. Some might think this anthropology to be antagonistic to mystical ascent. We will see, however, that this thinker does reconcile this anthropology with mystical theology.

For now, though, let us focus upon the understanding of human knowledge in Plotinus and in John of the Cross, particularly since the two agree that mystical union takes place in the intentional order. In Plotinus' view, the highest degree of cognitive activity is that of contemplation of the forms and intellectual principles. The higher portion of the soul performs this activity of its own accord, by virtue of its kinship with the Nous, or Universal Intellect.¹⁵ The subsequently lower level of noetic activity is that of rational or discursive reasoning. It is performed by a correspondingly lower portion of the soul, that called the rational soul, which belongs to the realm of psyche, or Universal Soul. It has derived its intellectual principles from the Nous; but being lesser in perfection, its cognitive act is no longer contemplative or intuitive but discursive.¹⁶ At the lowest level of cognitive operations lie the activities of perception and memory. These two are seen as acts of the soul, as operations set in motion and radiating forth from it, and not as impressions received from its objects.¹⁷ According to Plotinus' epistemology, then, in the order of operations the initiative always comes from above, by a higher portion of the soul illuminating a lower one. The One, the Nous, the Universal Soul are constantly shedding their rays of illumination upon our individual souls, a fact

which we discover in philosophical reflection. Our knowledge always comes from above and from within; in no way is it derived from sense perception.

This entire schema is virtually inverted in John of the Cross' view of human cognition. His psychology of knowledge is Aristotelian in its basic contours. As such, sensation sets in motion the cognitive process, and all subsequent noetic operations are dependent upon it: "As the philosophers say, the soul, when God infuses it into the body, is like a smooth, blank tablet upon which nothing is painted; and, except for that which it experiences through the senses, nothing is communicated to it, in the course of nature, from any other source."¹⁸ In the process of cognition, perception leads to the production of phantasms or sensible images, which are indispensable for the operations of the intellect.¹⁹ The active intellect then abstracts the intelligible form from the sensible image, which in turn activates and informs the passive intellect. It is this latter faculty that performs the actions of intellection and judgment properly speaking. We are dealing here with an understanding of knowledge in which the process of cognition begins outside the person and then proceeds to move inward and upward. It is an epistemology which does not admit any form of innatism and which, while recognizing the mind's infinite capacity to know, holds that it can have no fully imageless, formless thoughts. Here again, John of the Cross' philosophical positions would seem to preclude any cognitive experience of a mystical nature.

Turning to the question of the mystical ascent to God, we shall see that here the divergencies become even more pronounced. In Plotinus the process of purification, or *katharsis*, is essentially dialectical, coming about by means of gradual suppressions of intelligible differences until the soul at last attains the simplicity and unity of the One. It is an ascent effected by metaphysical knowledge and thus barred from those individuals unable to obtain this particular intellectual discipline; nonphilosophers, in fact, are precluded from reaching any of the three highest hypostases—Universal Soul, the Nous, or the One. Further, this ascent is brought about by an introverted reflective gaze, which seeks to discover in the depths of the self the divinity that is latently present. In Plotinus' words, "The soul once seen to be thus precious, thus divine, you may hold the faith by its possession you are already nearing God: in the strength of this power make upwards toward Him: at no great distance you must attain: there is not much between."²⁰ In another passage: "To find ourselves is to know our source."²¹ This introverted motion is at once a reversion—a return to one's principle—and, since the principle is superior, an elevation. A direct and fundamental consequence is that in Plotinus no practice of religion is involved or necessary, or even recommended. There are no prayers, no sacraments, no rituals. This stems in part from the soul/body dichotomy, in which the actions of the latter have absolutely no impact upon the former. It is also rooted in the self-sufficiency and essential divinity of the soul. As Paul Henry formulated it,

[In Plotinus] salvation is not to be achieved. It is achieved. For its realization it is enough that one should become conscious of what one already is in one's inmost nature, where Intellect which is beyond the virtues identifies itself with true being and with the idea which

one forms of the self, of the world, and of God. The anchoritism of the soul and of God exclude at once all sacramentalism and all true history of becoming. The latent actuality of salvation and the cold transcendence of God make it impossible, in terms of Plotinian Socratism, to conceive of any genuine doctrine of grace.²²

This citation certainly introduces the contrast which we must proceed to make. In John of the Cross, introvertive reflection and self-knowledge are definitely indispensable, but they are only preparatory disciplinary exercises. The object of the ascent is not the self. It is unquestionably other, another: it is God. However, as there is an ontological abyss between the human being and God, the latter is not accessible to the former in one's natural state; more specifically, one's rational faculties cannot attain God as an object of their operations. In the order of nature, no amount of reflection or thought or even meditation can yield the slightest glimpse of God in His true essence. God can be attained only in the supernatural order, as a supernatural object and by supernatural means. The means is grace, which is merited by Christ and distributed sacramentally. Thus we see that for John of the Cross, not only is mysticism inherently bound up with religious faith, it is intrinsically Christocentric and sacramental as well. We ascend towards our mystical destiny by means of prayer, natural and supernatural virtues, the sacraments, grace.

We have seen that in Plotinus mystical ascent is essentially cognitive. In the mysticism of John of the Cross the role of the noetic is no less important, but it is more complex and somewhat paradoxical. The term of mystical ascent is unquestionably the contemplative vision of God; in beatitude this intuitive gaze will be fullest and clearest, while the cognitive act at the summit of the mystical union in time is an image of that higher fruition.²³ The ascent, however, is not realized by any form of natural knowledge, nor by any academic discipline or "science," not even that of theology. In fact, the content of these various bodies of human knowledge must be implacably denied as means of union with God. For "anything that the imagination can conceive and the intellect can grasp and understand in this life is not and cannot be the proximate means for union with God. . . . For all that the intellect . . . can understand . . . is most unlike Him. . . ."²⁴ The only available means for bridging the chasm are the theological virtues; they are effective by reason of being supernatural and having proportionality with the end. In the order of the actual operations, the communion between the soul and God is initiated by the virtue of faith and is perfected and completed by the remaining theological virtues of charity and hope. The infused virtue of faith makes the object present to the intellect and communicates it to the soul supernaturally: faith "gives and communicates God Himself to us, hidden beneath a silvery surface. . . ."²⁵ What is called for, then, is an "affirmation of all the powers . . . in pure faith,"²⁶ which is "the sole proximate and proportionate means for the soul to be united with God . . . ; and therefore, the greater is the faith in the soul, the more closely it is united to God."²⁷ The essence of the faith is in itself infinite in luminosity and intelligibility. However, and here lies one of the paradoxes, it is "a dark night to the soul,"²⁸ due to "our weak intellects, which become darkened and frustrated in so vast a light."²⁹ The subject is

admonished to proceed under the exclusive guidance of the light of faith, which means to proceed in darkness. "Faith . . . contains within itself the divine light."³⁰ Thus, by augmenting the amount of supernatural faith and by dispelling all disproportionate semblances of God, the ray of infused contemplation becomes visible, the object of faith becomes progressively manifest to the intellect. Self-imposed darkness leads to light; the night of faith leads to the dawn of mystical illumination.

Earlier we spoke of John of the Cross' "epistemological realism," his theory of knowledge in which sensation is the first step of the knowing process and in which all cognition is tied to phantasms. He is able to maintain such a position while affirming also the reality of mystical knowledge because mystical noetic acts are infused and therefore extraordinary. Interestingly, though, the numerous forms of "supernatural apprehensions of the intellect" which he discusses in his treatises are carefully detailed and explained within the framework of his realist theory of knowledge.³¹ Typically, infused acts of knowledge are explicated in terms of suspension of the lower stages of the cognitive process while the integrity of the remaining stages is retained and respected. An infused communication might, for example, be made directly to the internal senses of fantasy and imagination, bypassing the external senses. Once this extraordinary apprehension is received, the process of knowledge follows its normal course. The internal powers confect a "sensible species," from which the active intellect abstracts an "intelligible species," which is then understood by the passive intellect; the content of the apprehension is retained in memory and is subject to recall, as in ordinary knowledge. An immensely more perfect supernatural communication might be made, free of images, directly to the passive intellect; in this case all the lower stages of the cognitive process—external and internal perception, the formation of phantasms, and the operation of the active intellect—would be bypassed. The highest mystical communications take place in this way, from pure spirit to pure spirit, "stripped of accidents and phantasms."³²

Finally, we must point to some central divergencies in the notion of the mystical union itself. In Plotinus' presentation the summit of mystical realization appears as an experience which is beyond any and all virtues. Even at the lower stages of existence, neither virtue nor vice affects the soul intrinsically; the function of virtue, at most, is to remove accretions which have accidentally accrued to it. At the apex of mystical union there is no virtuous action, only contemplation: for the Good or One itself is beyond virtue. A particular irony of Plotinus' doctrine is that despite the fact that the ascent is dialectical and cognitive, the highest pinnacle of mystical experience is bereft of consciousness. Within his mystical schema, when the level of contemplation reached is that of the Nous, which is Intellection itself, the soul is fully conscious; it is experiencing, indeed, the plenitude of cognitive activity. This degree of contemplation tends to be the resting place of mystical souls, both during their lifetime and after death. However, in those rare, fleeting moments in which the soul attains union with the One, the experience is devoid of consciousness. Emphatically he states that "the Principle transcending Being has no intellec-

tual act."³³ In fact, "[the Good and First Principle] possesses nothing: it will therefore have no intellection."³⁴ Following upon the lack of consciousness of the One, and upon the fact that knowledge comes from an illumination of the lower by the higher, "awareness of this Principle comes neither by knowing nor by the Intellection that discovers the Intellectual Beings but by a presence overpassing all knowledge. In knowing, soul or mind abandons its unity. . . . Our way then takes us beyond knowing. . . ."³⁵ At this supreme stage, what takes place is, in effect, communion of a dehumanized soul with a first principle totally devoid of personal character.

Here again, Plotinus' and John of the Cross' formulations are unrecognizable to one another. Regarding the question as to whether there is consciousness in mystical union, the Carmelite thinker stresses that the term of the ascent is the crystal-clear vision of beatitude, the highest mystical stage attainable in this life being a foretaste, a prelude. This being so, as a cognitive act it is not clear; but it is not dark either, as is the mystical night. Standing between the two extremes, it is "a tranquil night, at the onset of the rise of dawn."³⁶ The ray of contemplation is described as "a serene and limpid light,"³⁷ by means of which "God communicates to the soul certain half-obscure glimpses of His divine beauty. . . ."³⁸ And further, in that transfiguring union it is said that the subject discovers God's infinite attributes, referred to in the *Living Flame* as "lamps of fire" which "give forth knowledge and love of God," enlightening and enkindling the soul "within their splendors."³⁹

Much unlike Plotinus, Juan de la Cruz sees the virtues as performing a pivotal role at the apex of mystical communion. As stated earlier, the feat of communion with God is not accomplished by the unaided strength of the subject, nor by the natural capacities of one's rational powers, but by the theological virtues which perfect the latter and infuse into them the life of God. The virtue of hope purifies the memory of its natural contents. The virtue of faith perfects the intellect, bringing it to attain God cognitively. And the virtue of charity perfects the will, enabling it to perform a proportionate act of love. The theological virtues are so indispensable and so intimately involved that they themselves can be looked upon as the bond of union. Their function is, in turn, linked with the trinitarian character of John of the Cross' mysticism; and here we are at the antipode of cold Neoplatonic impersonalism. By the virtue of faith the soul comes to share in the Divine Intellect; that is, to participate in the act of generation of the Son by the Father. By the virtue of charity, the subject shares in God's own Act of Love, which is one and the same as the spiration of the Holy Spirit. The third theological virtue, hope, is correlated in union with the divine nature in a generic way. Thus, mystical communion is an indwelling of the Trinity in the soul "enlightening its intellect in the wisdom of the Son, delighting its will in the Holy Spirit, and absorbing it powerfully and mightily in the abysmal embrace of the sweetness of the Father."⁴⁰

We can conclude our exploratory remarks by pointing out that while Plotinus and John of the Cross can both be legitimately looked upon as mystics, we are dealing here with two very heterogeneous realities. On the one hand we

have the learned, serene, impassible pagan sage, wrapped up in the mystical contemplation of ever simpler metaphysical realities; on the other, the austere friar, learned but unreliant upon his erudition, on fire with divine love, transfigured by charity, his senses often suspended in rapture. There are unquestionably traces of Plotinus' magnificent schema in the thought of John of the Cross. But they are not much more than traces. After all, the historical transmission from the one to the other was not direct. It took place by way of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, who had received the Neoplatonic heritage from the Athenian Proclus, within whose elaborate framework he inserted Christian doctrine. It is Dionysius and St. Augustine, along with a number of Franciscan mystics influenced by both of them, who represent the direct Neoplatonic influences on John of the Cross. Thus it was that the latter received a Neoplatonic legacy which had undergone several phases of Christianization. The result of this distance, in combination with numerous other factors, is that there is a substantial difference between the two modes of living and conceptualizing mysticism. Based on this difference, we may look upon Plotinus, without in any way wishing to minimize the awesomeness of his figure, as a "Prince of Natural Mysticism," in contrast to St. John of the Cross, who can unequivocally be termed a "Prince of Christian and Supernatural Mysticism."

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Notes

- 1 Pierre Aubenque, "Plotin et le dépassement de l'ontologie grecque classique," *Le Neoplatonisme* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1971), pp. 101-109.
- 2 *Enneads*, VI, 7, 9-12. Plotinus' works are cited from *Plotinus: The Enneads*, tr. Stephen MacKenna, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).
- 3 *Cántico*, 5, 3. The works of John of the Cross are cited from *Vida y obras de San Juan de la Cruz*, ed. Lucinio Ruano, 9th ed. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1975). All translations into English are my own.
- 4 *Cántico*, 4, 1. Cf. E. Wilhelmsen, *Cognition and Communication in John of the Cross* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1985), pp. 4-70.
- 5 *De Anima*, III, 8, 431b21-432a3; III, 4, 430a3-10; II, 12, 424a17-24.
- 6 A. H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1940), pp. 39-42.
- 7 Paul Henry, "The Place of Plotinus in the History of Thought," published as an Introduction to Plotinus' *Enneads*, MacKenna translation, p. xlii.
- 8 *Subida*, I, 1, 1-2.
- 9 *Ibid.*, I, 2, 5. Emphasis is mine.
- 10 Armstrong, p. 39ff.
- 11 *Llama*, 3, 49.
- 12 *Enneads*, IV, 3, 9.
- 13 *Ibid.*, V, 5, 3.
- 14 "...por la comunicación que hay de la una parte a la otra, por razón de ser un solo supuesto" (*Noche*, II, 1, 1). Cf. also *Noche*, I, 4, 2 and II, 3, 1; and *Cántico*, 13, 4.
- 15 "The knowing of the things belonging to the Intellectual is not in any such degree attended by impact or impression: they come forward, on the contrary, as from within, unlike sense-objects known from without: they have more emphatically the character of Acts; they are Acts in the stricter sense, for their origin is in the Soul, and every concept of this Intellectual order is the Soul about its Acts" (*Enneads*, IV, 6, 2). "Of the Intellectual [Beings . . . the soul] is said to have intuition by memory upon approach, for it knows them by a certain natural identity with them; its knowledge is not attained by besetting them, so to speak, but by in a definite degree possessing them; they are its natural vision; they are itself in a more radiant mode, and it rises from its duller pitch to that greater brilliance in a sort of awakening, a progress from its latency to its Act" (*Enneads*, IV, 6, 3).
- 16 "The Soul is the Reason-Principle of the universe, ultimate among the Intellectual Beings—its own essential Nature is one of the Beings of the Intellectual Realm—but it is the primal Reason-Principle of the entire realm of sense. Thus it has dealings with both orders—benefited and quickened by the one, but by the other beguiled, falling before resemblances, and

so led downwards as under a spell. Poised midway, it is aware of both spheres" (*Enneads*, IV, 6, 3).

- 17 "To the sense-order [Soul] stands in a similar nearness and to such things it gives a radiance out of its own store and, as it were, elaborates them to visibility: the power is always ripe and, so to say, in travail towards them, so that, whenever it puts out its strength in the direction of what has once been present to it, it sees that object as present still. . . . Sensation and memory, then, are not passivity but power. . . . Sensations are not impressions" (*Enneads*, IV, 6, 3).
- 18 *Subida*, I, 3, 3. Compare this with the following text of Aristotle: "The mind is in a sense potentially whatever is thinkable, though actually it is nothing until it has thought. What it thinks must be in it just as characters may be said to be on a writing-tablet on which as yet nothing actually stands written: this is exactly what happens with mind" (*De Anima*, III, 429b29-430a1).
- 19 "... [El hombre] ninguna cosa de suyo puede saber sino por vía natural: lo cual es sólo lo que alcanza por los sentidos, para lo cual ha de tener las fantasmas y las figuras de los objetos presentes en sí o en sus semejantes, y de otra manera no" (*Subida*, II, 3, 2). "Porque las potencias del alma no pueden de suyo hacer reflexión y operación sino sobre alguna forma, figura, e imagen" (*Subida*, III, 13, 4). "El alma no puede obrar de suyo nada si no es por el sentido corporal ayudada de él" (*Llama*, 1, 9).
- 20 *Enneads*, V, 1, 3.
- 21 *Ibid.*, VI, 9, 7.
- 22 Henry, p. xxxix.
- 23 *Cántico*, 14-15, 16.
- 24 *Subida*, II, 8, 4-5.
- 25 *Cántico*, 12, 4; *Subida*, II, 6, 2: "... la fe es la sustancia de las cosas que se esperan."
- 26 *Subida*, II, 1, 2.
- 27 *Ibid.*, II, 9, 1; *Subida*, II, 2, 1: "... la fe, la cual es el admirable medio ... para ir al término, que es Dios."
- 28 *Ibid.*, II, 3, 4.
- 29 *Noche*, II, 5, 3.
- 30 *Subida*, II, 9, 3.
- 31 *Ibid.*, II, 11-32.
- 32 *Cántico*, 14-15, 14.
- 33 *Enneads*, V, 6, title.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 35 *Ibid.*, V, 9, 4. Cf. I, 6, 9; V, 3, 17; VI, 7, 34-36; VI, 8, 15; VI 9, 11.
- 36 *Cántico*, 14-15, 23.
- 37 *Subida*, II, 15, 3.
- 38 *Cántico*, 11, 4.
- 39 *Llama*, 3, 3 and 9.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 1, 15. Cf. *Cántico*, 29, 3, and *Llama*, Prologue, 2; 1, 6; and 2, 1ff.