

The Partial Eclipse of Plotinus in the Middle Ages and his Recovery in the Renaissance



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Abstract

This article studies the Plotinian presence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. First, it accounts for the indirect transmission of the *Enneads* throughout Medieval times and the editions that reappears in the Renaissance. In this regard, it discusses the presence and influence of Plotinian ideas on Medieval thinkers. Secondly, it examines some main points of Plotin's thought –the three hypostases and a single universe– and thirdly, presents the profound coincidences between Plotin and Nicholas of Cusa's ideas, analyzing the pairings enfolding-unfolding, uncontracted-contracted. Finally, it considers the possibility of reuniting both lines in a Grand Unified Theory that goes through all the Middle Ages.

KEYWORDS: PLOTIN, NICHOLAS OF CUSA, *ENNEADS*, HYPOSTASES, UNIVERSE.

El eclipse parcial de Plotino en la Edad Media y su recuperación en el Renacimiento

Resumen

Este artículo trabaja la presencia plotiniana en la Edad Media y el Renacimiento. En primer término, se presenta el movimiento de transmisión indirecta de las *Enéadas* a lo largo de la Edad Media y las ediciones que resurgen en el Renacimiento. En esta línea, se discute precisamente la presencia e influencia de las ideas plotinianas en pensadores medievales. En segundo término, se despliegan ciertas notas nucleares del pensamiento de Plotino –las tres hipóstasis y un solo universo– para luego, en tercer término, exponer las profundas coincidencias que pueden encontrarse en la estructura del pensamiento de Nicolás de Cusa –con el estudio del lenguaje de los binomios complicación-explicación, incontracto-contracto. Finalmente, se considera la posibilidad de incluir a ambos autores en una Gran Teoría Unificada que se despliega a lo largo de la Edad Media.

PALABRAS CLAVE: PLOTINO, NICOLÁS DE CUSA; *ENÉADAS*; HIPÓSTASIS, UNIVERSO.

I. Introduction

The history of modern scholarship on Plotinus has been to a large extent the history of the establishment of a reliable text and of coming to understand Plotinus on his own terms in the context of the 3rd Century CE.¹ But the immediate problem for any modern reader is that in order to carry out this project for oneself, one has to go back to the Presocratics, Plato, Aristotle, Hellenistic thought, the Gnostics, as well as sideways and forward into some of the ground-formations of Christian and later Islamic and Jewish thought, and then further into the Medieval World where Plotinus' direct influence was eclipsed or limited, yet still indirectly pervasive, and so, finally, into the Renaissance and Modern Worlds. "Plotinus" is then a peculiar force of thought and practice that tends to leap across boundaries and to stand outside the parameters of conventional experience.

The deepest impulse of the soul, Plotinus says, is for that which is greater than herself (*Ennead* I.4 [46], 6: 17-18),² and the Greek Fathers, Augustine, and Dionysius the Areopagite themselves could immediately agree with this most intimate, yet transcendent principle. However, "mysticism", and pagan mysticism in particular,³ cannot be controlled—especially if the impulse for what is greater than oneself leads not to a definite secular or religious institution but to an infinite God, an infinite uncreated self and, finally, an infinite cosmos, as it did in the cases of Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno (on the basic Plotinian principles that the center of all things is everywhere and nowhere—VI.4-5 [24-25]—, and that there is something in us that has not descended—IV.8[6], 8). "Plotinus" might be an ally to Christianity or Islam against the forces of atheism or reductive materialism, but he could also be an ally for the establishment of an alternative pagan religion, as in the case of Thomas Taylor, or he could easily become branded by Christian groups after the Reformation as a decadent, oriental aberration—in much the same way, as in more recent times, Harnack and Barth have emphasized the strong divide between the good sense of the Bible and the supposed irrationalisms of Hellenism, or much as the regulative study of form in Kant and the Neo-Kantians radically expunged the mystical from Plato's Forms in favor of Forms as "limit-concept", "laws" (Cohen) or "hypotheses" (Natorp) (Natorp, 2004: 9-43 and 453-483). "Plotinus", however, is not a Christian or Muslim, but a pagan; in addition, he is altogether mystical: the Forms are not subject to conceptual analysis; he thinks outside of conventional boundaries especially in so far as one of the paradigms of thought he established is that everything genuinely intelligible is radically holographic, that is, in each thing, everything is virtually contained—especially *Ennead* V.8 [31], 4; such thought, therefore, may have a radical resonance with very different standpoints.

I therefore trace the beginning of modern scholarship on Plotinus to someone who embraced *all* of the above characteristics: the Florentine priest, Marsilio Ficino, who seems to have understood Plotinus profoundly on his own terms and yet simultaneously saw his thought as a *preparatio evangelica*. As Ficino puts it, however strangely, in his preface to the translation of Plotinus: "you should believe that Plato himself is talking about Plotinus when he exclaims: 'This is my Son, my beloved, on whom my favor rests, listen to him' (Mt 17:5)"⁴ (Creuzer, 1835: XI).

1 In preparing this work, I have used primarily Henry, 1935, 1938 and 1948; Schwyzer, 1951; O'Meara, 1992: 55-73; Saffrey, 1996; Narbonne, Achard and Ferroni, 2012: ccli-cxcxi. N. eds.: Translations of ancient and medieval texts are those of the author, unless expressly stated otherwise.

2 Citation of the *Enneads* is as follows: I.4 indicates the 4th treatise (Arabic number 4) of the First Ennead (Roman numeral I). This is followed in square brackets by the chronological number, that is, the order in which Plotinus wrote the treatises that we know from Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*. Here I.4 is 46th in the chronological order. This is followed by the chapter (6) and then the line number or numbers (17-18).

3 For recent treatment of Platonic Mysticism, see Versluis, 2017.

4 Cf. Mt 3:17, Mk 1:11, Lk 8:12. See Saffrey, 1996: 496.

II. Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: Text and Translations

For the purposes of this chapter, then, we can say that modern scholarship on Plotinus began with Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and others in the Renaissance, and particularly with Ficino's speedily executed and magnificent translation of the *Enneads*, published in 1492 (together, of course, with his works on Plato, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus and many other ancient figures).⁵ In the Middle Ages of the Western World before the time of Ficino (O'Meara, 1992: 58-59), Plotinus was virtually unknown. None of his works had been translated, and early translations like that of Marius Victorinus in late antiquity had been lost. Whether or not such figures as John Scotus Eriugena or William of Saint-Thierry were actually familiar with Plotinus, Plotinian resonances in these works could well result from Neoplatonic elements in Augustine, Ambrose, Macrobius, Boethius, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa –and, later still, Proclus through the *Liber de Causis*.⁶ Such figures, influenced by these indirect sources, include Albert the Great, Bonaventure, William of Auvergne, Vincent of Beauvais and Meister Eckhart. Some Plotinus could have been read in either Ambrose's sermons or the commentaries on Dionysius by John of Scythopolis. And at least one medieval writer, Hugh Etherian (c. 1166-82), read Plotinus in some form in Constantinople in the 12th century –and some traces can be found in his work, *De sancto et immortalī Deo* (PL 202: 233c and 339b) (O'Meara, 1992: 59). Certainly too the Arabic *Theology of Aristotle* and other collections⁷ that contain extracts from the *Enneads* was known to the Islamic tradition (Al Kindī,⁸ Al Farabī, Ibn Sina [Avicenna], the Brethren of Purity [Ikhwān al-Ṣafaʿ], and many others) and to medieval Jewish writers (Isaac Israeli, Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra), but it was not translated into Hebrew before the sixteenth century. Otherwise, no direct work of Plotinus was available in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

So the emergence of two manuscripts of Plotinus in the early fifteenth century in Florence was stunning, one acquired by Palla Strozzi, namely, the Parisinus Gr. 1976, and the other, the Laurentianus 87.3, brought first from Constantinople by Giovanni Aurispa and, after the death of its first owner, Nicolo Nicoli, purchased by Cosimo who, in turn, gave it to Ficino at Careggi in 1462.⁹ On this latter manuscript or on a copy made by Johannes Scutiatores –the Parisinus Gr. 1816, Ficino began work from 1463. While Ficino may have made a copy of the Parisinus Gr. 1976 before 1471 in Palla Strozzi's library, only the Laurentianus 87.3 and its copy, the Parisinus Gr. 1816, bear several different annotations in his hand. So although he did use other manuscripts (two collections of excerpts from Plotinus –and Plato– in Greek: Milan, Ambrosianus F 19 sup., and in Latin: Florence, Riccardianus 92 and Vat., Borg. gr. 22) (Saffrey, 1996: 491), these other manuscripts are all dependent upon the Laurentianus 87.3. Consequently, Ficino did not carry out a critical comparison of manuscripts but had to resort to conjectures –*divinatio*, as Saffrey puts it (1996: 505), however brilliant these conjectures may still have been. Of course, we also owe to Ficino's incisive understanding of Plotinus the division of the text into chapters with titles and headings

⁵ For a list of figures, see Laurens, 2012: lxxi-lxxxix.

⁶ The pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de Causis*, an adaptation of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, as detected by Aquinas (*Super Librum de Causis expositio*, Proem. 3. 3-10, Saffrey), can be traced to the Al Kindī circle (D'Ancona, 2010: 879).

⁷ Paraphrases of *Enneads* IV-VI (partially collected in an English translation by G. Lewis in H-S1 II, 1959) that include: A. The so-called *Theology of Aristotle* (why it is attributed to Aristotle is unknown) in long and short, or vulgate, recensions (whose interconnection is unclear) includes a prologue, 142 chapter headings (for *Ennead* IV.4) and 6 books of paraphrase for *Enneads* IV-VI (perhaps Porphyry's lost comments and summaries. See Henry, 1937: 310-342; Schwyzer, 1941; Thillet, 1971; Goulet-Cazé, 1982: 321-323), traced either to a Syriac original or to the translator of Plotinus into Arabic from Syriac, Al Himsī, (Zimmerman, 1986: 131) or to Al Kindī himself (D'Ancona, 2010: 875, n 2); B. The *Letter of Divine Science*, attributed wrongly to Al Farabī, includes paraphrases of parts of *Ennead* V; C. Various materials attributed to the "Greek Old Man" paraphrases of *Enneads* IV-VI and, thus, parallel to the *Theology*.

⁸ On Al Kindī, see Adamson, 2016: 26-32 & 2017; D'Ancona, 2010: 872-884.

⁹ On this and Ficino's library, see Laurens 2012: lxxi-lxxxix, especially lxxvii-lxxix.

expressing the development of ideas that we use today. His translation of Plotinus with commentary was published in 1492 and was widely used by scholars in Italy and elsewhere, including Giordano Bruno and many others. In the sixteenth century it was reprinted five times, and his commentary separately reprinted three more times.

In 1580, Ficino's 1492 Latin translation was used in the *editio princeps* of the Greek text that appeared in Basle under the editorship of Pietro Perna. The text was prepared for Perna by an unknown editor (H-S¹) (identified by O'Meara [1992: 59], on the basis of Perna's preface, fol. 3v and fol. 203v, as Domenico Montesoro of Padua), who consulted four manuscripts.¹⁰

In 1519 Plotinus also appeared in disguise through the long version of the *Theology of Aristotle* translated into Latin and then incorporated into editions of Aristotle published by A. Jacobus Martin (Lyons, 1578), Joachim Périon (1580), and Claudius Marnius and Johannes Aubrius (Frankfort, 1593) and in different ways by others. The authorship of the *Theology* was not rejected until Luther (1483-1546) and Pierre de la Ramée (1515-1572) in the sixteenth century, and not traced to Plotinus' *Enneads* until Thomas Taylor in 1812. No vernacular translations of Plotinus seem to have appeared in these centuries, except perhaps for a missing commentary attributed to Paulus Scalichius (1534-1575) (O'Meara, 1992: 55-73). So the Perna text, together with "Plotinus" in the guise of "Aristotle" –but with lesser consequence, was to prove seminal for the sixteenth up to the nineteenth centuries– until the emergence of a truly scientific text on the basis of all the manuscripts and indirect evidence with Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolph Schwyzer, sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries that for many reasons –including the ones we noted above– were at times very unfavorable to Ficino's revival of Plotinus.

III. The Hidden Role of Plotinus during the Medieval Eclipse: Introduction

In the preface to his 1857 edition of Plotinus, Bouillet notes the often hidden influence of Plotinus in Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas and even Dante, an influence linked to discussions of Peripatetic thought in Jewish and Islamic philosophy –often by way of Ibn Gabirol's influential work, the *Fons Vitae*; he also notes Plotinus' influence in modern writers such as Bossuet, Fénelon, Malebranche and Leibniz, who "reproduced, even without their knowledge [Plotinian/Neoplatonic] doctrines, whose provenance very often they did not even suspect".¹¹ Something like this is what I shall argue here in relation to the discovery of an infinite God, a single infinite cosmos, and, finally, an infinite uncreated self, as I indicated above was the case for Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno (on the basic Plotinian principles that the center of all things is everywhere and nowhere, and that there is something in us that has not descended). In other words, I shall argue that in the absence of Plotinus, Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, albeit in different ways, brought important elements in the thought of Plotinus to certain logical conclusions, and that while Giordano Bruno –with Ficino's text and translation of Plotinus in hand– might seem to have destroyed the Neoplatonic hierarchy, he in fact unraveled a particular strand of that tradition that might well be traced back to Plotinus himself. I shall take these questions up in the following order:

¹⁰ See Henry, 1948 (*Manuscripts*): 295-319; H-S1 I, *Praefatio* xxv-xxvi.

¹¹ "Ce n'est pas que tous ces auteurs aient eu sous les yeux les écrits mêmes de Plotin ou de ses disciples; mais, nourris comme ils l'étaient de la lecture des Pères de l'Église, dont plusieurs étaient platoniciens, et dont quelques-uns, comme on l'a vu, avaient fait à Plotin des emprunts directs, familiarisés d'ailleurs avec la théologie scolastique dans laquelle avait passé et s'était pour ainsi dire incorporée une grande partie des doctrines néoplatoniciennes, ils reproduisaient, même à leur insu, ces doctrines, dont le plus souvent ils ne soupçonnaient pas la source" (Bouillet, 1857: xxxii-xxxiii).

- a) first, the general character of Neoplatonism: the hierarchical arrangement of the so-called hypostases (the One or Good, Intellect and Soul) and the characteristic two worlds –the intelligible and sensible worlds– by contrast with a “single universe” theory;
- b) second, the use of terms such as “uncontracted” and “contracted” by Nicholas of Cusa, developed, perhaps, from Duns Scotus (1265/66-1308) and John Peckham (1230-1292), but prefigured in Plotinus and the earlier tradition;
- c) third, the ultimate convergence of the One and matter in Giordano Bruno; and
- d) finally, the question of an infinite, “uncreated” self and divine self-causative love. I will not have time for this, but I should like anyway to flag its importance.

IV. A Hypothetical Plotinus

So if Plotinus had been alive in the latter part of the 16th Century –while Giordano Bruno was still writing– and if he had been able to look back over the 1200 years since his death in 270, if we leave out of account the immediate Neoplatonists, Porphyry and Iamblichus just after his own time, what would he have thought about it all?

I know he would have applauded the great commentary tradition, since it was part of the practice in his own school to read Alexander, Aspasius, and other commentators and think critically and creatively through them. Proclus' commentaries, his Platonic Theology and especially the *Elements* of both Theology and Physics would have intrigued him. Although, on the basis of Porphyry's testimony in the *Life* and from Plotinus' own method in the *Enneads*, we might well suppose that he would have disapproved of overly dogmatic approaches, he might have viewed the *Elements* in particular as part of the Platonic tradition *more geometrico* and perhaps inspired by Book VI of Aristotle's *Physics*.

After dealing with Christians and Gnostics in own seminars and throughout his writing life, he might have been astonished at the works of Ambrose, Victorinus, Augustine, Dionysius and Eriugena –to see how so much of his thinking could so effortlessly be appropriated by Christians. But then if Origen of Alexandria really had studied with him under Ammonius Sacchas, maybe he would not have been so astonished, since a Christian component would have been there from the very beginning. And therefore even Plotinus might have thought that Dionysius antedated him! He might have wanted to argue things out somewhat with Evagrius Ponticus and others from the desert tradition, not to mention the other Cappadocians, especially Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, and then some of the later thinkers rooted in Constantinople, especially on the question of the Trinity, for he himself had argued that the Good –and Intellect– must be cause and love of Itself and he had, therefore, however unconsciously provided two Trinitarian models for future thinking.

Nicholas of Cusa's method here might help us guess, since although he is critical of Platonic Forms, he tends to follow paths laid out by Plato and Aristotle, Gregory of Nyssa, Boethius, and Dionysius above all (*De Venatione Sapientiae* 124). As an inhabitant of the imperial city of Rome, Plotinus would be dismayed by the fall of the Western Empire, though perhaps not unduly surprised, given the weight of war and immigration in the hundred years before his death. He would certainly have been saddened by the early death of the massively talented Boethius, but delighted to see how the legacy of Platonism flourished in the *Consolation of Philosophy* and other works. He would certainly be astonished, as we today still are, to see how the whole

Greek tradition, after the fall of the schools of Athens and Alexandria, was remarkably transformed, partly via his own thought under the name of Aristotle, together with the real Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias, Proclus and more, in the school of Al Kindī, and transmitted to Saʿadya Gaon, Isaac Israeli, Ibn Gabirol (Avicebron), in the Jewish tradition, and to Al Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Rushd, Al ‘Arabi, Suhrawardi, and many others, in the Islamic tradition – only then to be retranslated back into the Christian tradition and cause so much difficulty from charges of pantheism to problems about soul and intellect and God or the One. I think he might have felt sympathy for Thomas Aquinas before his confrontation with Siger of Brabant and the Averroists, despite understanding why Ibn Rushd had posited the unity even of the potential intellect.

He would certainly notice that Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* was structured upon the Neoplatonic model of Abiding, Procession and Conversion, and he would agree with Proclus, Dionysius, Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa on at least three major issues: a) first, that while we cannot know anything about God’s nature, we can know significant things about God from his creation; b) second, that nescience, learned ignorance, and a recognition of the incomprehensible is the beginning of wisdom; and c) that not only can we not know the nature of God, but that complete self-knowledge for human beings or a *reditio completa* is not possible in this life.

However, it is by no means clear what he would have thought about later views of Intellect (and soul from Intellect’s perspective): Is my soul mine or is it part of the whole intelligible world, and if so, in what sense? In light of the influence of Aristotle and Alexander on Al Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, where is the “agent” intellect to be situated? Do we share, i.e. participate in, an agent intellect, is the agent intellect separate from all intellects or is it common for all, and what about the potential intellect that Ibn Rushd supposed was one for all human beings? In other words, how would this hypothetical Plotinus have fared from his eclipse in the Middle Ages? The problem of the “reconciliation” between Plato and Aristotle became the problem of the reconciliation of Aristotle and Plotinus.¹²

V. The Three Hypostases and a single Universe

So let us go back to the *Enneads* themselves and start with the general character of Plotinian Neoplatonism, that is, the hierarchy of three hypostases outlined famously in *Ennead* V.1 [10], 8-9, and Plato’s two-world view that permeates the *Enneads* as a whole. This is the traditional view of Plotinus’ thought, of course, and it is correct, even if the word “hypostasis” does not have a technical sense for Plotinus.¹³ Indeed, Plotinus sees the world rather differently from our typical modern thinking. We tend to take bodies to be the only real, because we live in a materialist, money-driven and scientific fact-laden universe; and even if we admit that organisms need an organizing principle or soul, we think of soul, if we think of it at all, as somehow being *in* body. Plotinus sees bodily organization and matter as merely the tip of a much vaster iceberg: soul is not in body so much as body is *in* soul (as Plato states, in *Timaeus* 36d-37c). Bodies, nature and the entire physical world are rooted in three much larger oceans or originative principles: All Soul, All Intellect and the ultimate principle that

¹² George Karamanolis has shown how Ammonius, Porphyry (perhaps Plotinus), and others might have viewed the “reconciliation” of Plato and Aristotle not as identity of thought but rather as belonging to the same school or *hairesis*, that is, not *symphonia* or comprehensive agreement, but allowing for differences between them, though Porphyry, for one, thinks these differences might be, a) perspectival or trivial, b) misunderstandings of Plato by Aristotle, or c) misunderstandings of Aristotle by later interpreters (Karamanolis, 2006: 322-323).

¹³ For the sense of *hypostasis* in and after Plotinus, see Narbonne et al., 2012: cxvii-cl.

Plotinus calls simply, the One or the Good (see for the Good VI.7 [38], 42: 21-24); and for both see the title of VI.9 [9]: *On the Good or the One*). Let me illustrate this with a powerful image Plotinus uses for the soul-body relation:

Κεῖται γὰρ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἀνεχούση αὐτὸν καὶ οὐδὲν ἄμοιρόν ἐστιν αὐτῆς, ὡς ἂν ἐν ὕδασι δίκτυον τεγγόμενον ζῶη, οὐ δυνάμενον δὲ αὐτοῦ ποιεῖσθαι ἐν ᾧ ἐστίν· ἀλλὰ τὸ μὲν δίκτυον ἐκτεινομένης ἤδη τῆς θαλάσσης συνεκτέταται, ὅσον αὐτὸ δύναται· οὐ γὰρ δύναται ἀλλάξοθι ἕκαστον τῶν μορίων ἢ ὅπου κεῖται εἶναι. Ἡ δὲ τοσαύτη ἐστὶ τὴν φύσιν, ὅτι μὴ τοσῆδε, ὥστε πᾶν τὸ σῶμα καταλαμβάνειν τῷ αὐτῷ, καὶ ὅπου ἂν ἐκταθῇ ἐκείνο, ἐκεῖ ἐστὶ· καὶ εἰ μὴ εἴη δὲ ἐκείνο, οὐδὲν ἂν αὐτῇ εἰς μέγεθος μέλου· ἐστὶ γὰρ ἥτις ἐστὶ. (IV.3 [27], 9: 37-43).

The universe lies in soul which bears it up, and nothing is without a share of soul. It is as if a net immersed in the waters was alive, but unable to make its own that in which it is. The sea is already spread out and the net spreads with it, as far as it can; for no one of its parts can be anywhere else than where it lies. And soul's nature is so great, just because it has no size, as to contain the whole of body in one and the same grasp; wherever body extends, there soul is (trans. Armstrong, 1984a: 65).

If this true of soul, it is even more so of Intellect and the One. The One is infinite, vaster than Intellect or Soul (VI.7 [38], 32-35).

Yet this is not Plotinus' only view of the hypostases. To talk of the One, the One-Many as Intellect, and the One in the Many as Soul (as Plotinus does in V.1 [10]) is not to talk of spatial hierarchy or of an aggregate (1+2+3) but, in fact to speak of a single, if layered reality –as Plotinus does in fact speak ambiguously of *hen* and *hen on* in his great work on omnipresence, VI.5 [23].¹⁴ Indeed, to speak in modern terms of “soul and body” or of a soul-body *relation* is false since soul-body is not a material aggregate or a formal *addition*, as Socrates argued cogently in the *Phaedo* 95a-102 –that is, not soul and body–, though we *can* think of it in that way as *post rem*, or as Plotinus puts it in VI.3, 8, we can think of “sensible substance” as false substance when it is viewed as a *symphoresis* of qualities and matter.¹⁵

In reality, however, *ousia*, which we might legitimately translate as “really cool stuff” is the threshold from which things become identifiable, definable or real organic things. From this perspective, there is a window from perception into understanding. As Plotinus says in VI.7 [38], 7: 30-32: “here” perceptions are dim understandings; “there” understandings are clear perceptions.¹⁶ Consequently, we often find two views in the *Enneads* which commentators have sometimes called Intellect *stricto sensu* and Intellect *latiori sensu*, that is, Intellect as Intellect, in which each *nous* is both itself and everything else,¹⁷ and Intellect in the broader sense as containing all substances –indeed, everything that can be fitted to a logos, as Plotinus says in VI.2, 21.¹⁸ So much is this the case that Plotinus even claims that matter and qualities are in the

¹⁴ See especially *Ennead* VI.5 [23], 1-4.

¹⁵ *Ennead* VI.3 [44], 8: 31-37: “καὶ οὐ δυσχεραντέον, εἰ τὴν οὐσίαν τὴν αἰσθητὴν ἐξ οὐκ οὐσιῶν ποιούμεν· οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸ ὅλον ἀληθῆς οὐσία, ἀλλὰ μμιούμενον τὴν ἀληθῆ, ἥτις ἄνευ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν περὶ αὐτὴν ἔχει τὸ ὄν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐξ αὐτῆς γινομένων, ὅτι ἀληθῶς ἦν· ὡδὲ δὲ καὶ τὸ ὑποβεβλημένον ἄγονον καὶ οὐκ ἰκανὸν εἶναι ὄν, ὅτι μὴδὲ ἐξ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἄλλα, σκιὰ δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ σκιᾷ αὐτῇ οὐσὴ ζωγραφία καὶ τὸ φαίνεσθαι” [And there is no need to object if we make sensible substance out of non-substances; for even the whole is not true substance but imitates the true substance, which has its being without the others which attend on it, and the others come into being from it, because it truly is; but here what underlies is sterile and inadequate to be being, because the others do not come from it, but it is a shadow, and upon what is itself a shadow, a picture and a seeming” (trans. Armstrong, 1988a: 203)].

¹⁶ *Ennead* VI.7 [38], 7: 30-32: “ὥστε εἶναι τὰς αἰσθήσεις ταύτας ἀμυδράς νοήσεις, τὰς δὲ ἐκεῖ νοήσεις ἐναργεῖς αἰσθήσεις”.

¹⁷ See, v.g., *Ennead* V.8 [31], 4.

¹⁸ *Ennead* VI.2 [43], 21: 33-34: “ὅλως γὰρ πανταχοῦ, ὅσα ἂν τις ἐκ λογισμοῦ λάβοι ἐν τῇ φύσει ὄντα, ταῦτα εὐρήσει ἐν νῷ ἄνευ λογισμοῦ ὄντα”.

intelligible.¹⁹ There is, then, no substance without all substances –and this applies to matter, since there is, according to Plotinus, a *logos* of matter (III.3 [48], 4: 37-40)²⁰ and since matter too, as Plotinus says in V.8 [31], 7: 23-24, is “a last form”. In other words, there is no sensible world without the Intelligible that makes it a world. There is no *imago* without the *exemplar* in which it has its complete being. The categories of Aristotle’s *Organon*, by contrast, are for Plotinus *post rem* abstractions –which is why he rejects them a structuring intelligible principles in the so-called logical works, *Ennead* VI.1-3. But this does not mean that predications understood in a substantial way cannot be interpreted differently: qualities, for instance, are just qualities in matter (II.6 [17], 1) but they can also be activities –and in the latter case, they are already intelligible beings.²¹ So my first thesis is this: despite the hierarchy of hypostases and the distinction between the intelligible and sensible universes, Plotinus’ world is at root *one*: at any point the whole of everything is actually or virtually present; indeed too, the gentle presence of the One is so intimate we don’t even notice it –but the Good is open “whenever anyone wishes/wills it” (V.5 [32], 12: 33-34).

So in talking of the hypostases and the intermediaries between the One and us, we should keep in mind that Plotinus does not in fact approve of the many hypostatic and inter-hypostatic hierophants of the Gnostics –Sethian or Valentinian. Everything is, by contrast for him, immediately and dynamically present, even if we experience this in an unfolded way or get it wrong altogether; and even this is not enough, since the One as power of all things is present in a no-thing and no-substance way to everything, whether sleeping, waking, rational, non-rational, hidden potential –even negligibly possible.

And this leads me to my second thesis: unlike many modern experts and non-experts on Neoplatonism, Nicholas of Cusa, even without direct access to Plotinus, gets “Plotinus” (and much of the ancient Platonic tradition) profoundly right, at least in part, on the single universe hypothesis. In an emphatic, if difficult passage from his *De dato Patris luminum* equally worthy of *Genesis*, the *Timaeus*, and *Ennead* VI.7 [38], 1-7, Nicholas writes the following:

Sed quia data aeternitas non fuit nisi contracte recepta, hinc aeternitas sine principio principiative recepta existit. Mundus igitur non habet principium, ut in ipso aeternitas est omne esse eius. Sed quia non est recepta aeternitas nisi principiative in descensu mundi, tunc mundus non est aeternitas absoluta sed aeternitas principiative contracta. Aeternitas igitur mundi principiativa est et aeternus mundus factus est, neque est alius mundus, qui apud patrem est aeternus, et alius, qui per descensum a patre est factus, sed idem ipse mundus sine principio et principiative per descensum in esse proprio suo receptus [...] sed ut in descensu a patre in esse proprio receptus est, transmutabilis est in vicissitudine ombrationis instabiliter fluctuans, quasi mundus sit deus transmutabilis in vicissitudine obumbrationis, et mundus intransmutabilis et absque omni vicissitudine obumbrationis sit deus aeternus (*De dato Patris luminum* III: h IV.106).

But because eternity has not been given except as received in contracted form, eternity without a beginning stands out as an eternity in a beginning mode. Therefore the world does not have a beginning in so far as its entire being is eternity in God himself. But because eternity has not been received except under the mode of beginning in the descent of the world, then the world is not absolute eternity but eternity contracted

¹⁹ *Ennead* VI.2 [43], 21: 51-53: “καὶ ζωῆς ἐπιθεούσης, μᾶλλον δὲ συνούσης πανταχοῦ, πάντα ἐξ ἀνάγκης ζῶα εἴνετο, καὶ ἦν καὶ σώματα ὕλης καὶ ποιότητος ὄντων” [and since life is running over it, or rather everywhere accompanying it, all things necessarily become living beings, and there are bodies there also since there is matter and quality (trans. Armstrong, 1988a:173)].

²⁰ See also *Ennead* III.8 [30], 2: 23-25.

²¹ Compare *Enneads* II.6 [17], 2 and II.3 [37], 3.

in a beginning mode. Eternity therefore is the beginning mode of the world and an eternal world was made, *nor is there one world* which is eternal with the Father, *and another different world* which has been made through descent from the Father, but *the very same world* without beginning and in beginning mode received through descent in its own proper being [...] but as in descent from the Father it has received in its own being, it is changeable, oscillating unstably in the changing mode of a shadow, *as if* the world were a changeable, shadow-form God, and the unchangeable, shadow-free world were the unchangeable God.

This is my translation of the Latin text that, with Jasper Hopkins, avoids the mis-translations of Jacobi (Hopkins, 1983: 33-57). God or God's eternity is not the direct, individual or specific "being" of this changeable world and of everything in it. Each thing in this world and the world itself has its own being –and yet, precisely as in Plato and Plotinus, the real being of the image nonetheless depends on, and consists entirely in, its exemplar. This is what Nicholas insists on evidently with the *Timaeus* in mind: it is *as if* his world were a shadow or image world of an eternal paradigm identified in *De dato Patris luminum* with the Demiurge; *Timaeus* calls it a "blessed god"; Nicholas calls it here a "shadowy god", to indicate that he is thinking of Plato.²² However, as with Plotinus and much earlier with Aristotle who criticized Plato on precisely this count, that is, for needlessly duplicating worlds, if we imagine that there are *two* worlds, an intelligible *and* a sensible world, we misunderstand both Plato and Aristotle and we make of creation, production or coming-to-be a qualitative or quantitative aggregate, whereas substance cannot be A+B, as Socrates had argued in the *Phaedo* and as Aristotle rightly insisted in *Metaphysics* VII.17 (Z); substance as form cannot be an aggregate A+B or AB, Aristotle concludes, but something different, a syllable, that is, a new organic meaning: *heteron ti*.²³

There must, therefore, be a single world understood in different ways, as exemplar and resemblance, as God and as image. In the above passage, on the one hand, Nicholas is re-interpreting Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and the subsequent tradition in a revolutionary way, but at the same time getting them partly right –and on their own terms. Indeed, this has to be emphasized since, as far as I know, it is an almost universal misunderstanding of Neoplatonism: as substance, *there can be only one world*, for both Plotinus and Nicholas. Without *ousia*, the sensible world is nothing; without *ousia* understood as intelligible, sensible substance is just accidents and matter. This is the ultimate point of Plotinus' critique in VI.1-3 [42-44].

On the other hand, Nicholas' view of reality is very different from that of late ancient pagan thought, for there is only need for one exemplar, God, not many exemplars, Forms, and therefore there is no intelligible universe and no world soul as such. Instead, as we see in *De docta ign.* II: h I.148-149: we do not arrive at the maximum from here, Nicholas argues; instead:

Nam ostensum est non perveniri ad maximum simpliciter, et ita non posse esse aut absolutam potentiam aut absolutam formam sive actum, qui non sit Deus; et quod non

22 For similar language see *De docta ign.* II: h I.134: "... quasi creatura sit deus occasionatus... ut omnis creatura sit quasi infinitas finite aut deus creatus" [as if the creature were an occasioned god [...] as it were, a finite infinity or a created god (trans. Bond, 1997: 134)].

23 *Metaphysics* VII.17.1041b 11-19: "Ἐπει δὲ τὸ ἕκ τινος σύνθετον οὕτως ὥστε ἔν εἶναι τὸ πᾶν, [ἀν] μὴ ὡς σωρὸς ἀλλ' ὡς ἡ συλλαβὴ - ἡ δὲ συλλαβὴ οὐκ ἔστι τὰ στοιχεῖα, οὐδὲ τῶ βᾶ ταῦτὸ τὸ καὶ τὸ β καὶ α [...] ἔστιν ἄρα τι ἡ συλλαβὴ, οὐ μόνον τὰ στοιχεῖα τὸ φωνῆεν καὶ ἄφωνον ἀλλὰ καὶ ἕτερόν τι" [Since what is compounded from something so that the all of it is one, not like a heap but like a syllable –and the syllable is not its elements, nor is BA the same as B and A [...] the syllable then is something, not only the elements, the vowel and the consonant, but also something else]. Aristotle, of course, is talking of sensible things, but he means that substance in the sense of form is not its material constituents but something new. Evidently, the Plotinian hypostases cannot be understood as elements or constituents of any greater whole, but *mutatis mutandis* the same principle applies. Substance as inclusive of everything substantial cannot be a hypostatic aggregate but a one-many.

sit ens praeter Deum non contractum, et quod non est nisi una forma formarum et veritas veritatum, et non est alia veritas maxima circuli quam quadranguli. Unde formae rerum non sunt distinctae, nisi ut sunt contracte; ut sunt absolute, sunt una indistincta, quae est Verbum in divinis (*De docta ign.* II: h I.148).

neither absolute potency nor absolute form, or absolute actuality, that is not God can exist [...] every being except God is contracted [...] there is only one form of forms and one truth of truths, and [...] the maximum truth of the circle is not other than the maximum truth of the quadrangle. Hence, it is only in their contracted existence that the forms of things are distinct; as they exist absolutely they are one indistinct form, which is the Word of God” (trans. Bond, 1997: 153).

So Nicholas, like Basil of Caesarea and others after him, insists that the hypostases are not quantitatively numerable.²⁴ They are not aggregates, in other words, something that Plotinus himself follows in his methodology since unlike the Sethian Gnostics –Iamblichus and Proclus–,²⁵ but like Porphyry, he tends to “telescope” the hypostases at times²⁶ so that the One is immediately present to the individual “self”.²⁷ Indeed, the logic of Proclus’ and Dionysius’ thought insists that the power of the One is immediate to individuals –more “piercing” than that of henads, Intellect, or Soul in Proclus’ case,²⁸ more real and henadically unifying than any other auxiliary presences, in Dionysius’ case.²⁹ So for Nicholas, when we visit God in his Word or Spirit, we are effectively “indistinct”. There is no longer a relation of A and B mediated through an Intelligible World, but something more immediate –and something that Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus were also committed to, if in different ways.

VI. Enfolding-Unfolding, Uncontracted-Contracted: An Infinite God and a Contracted Infinite Universe

What about the language of contraction and non-contraction, enfolding and unfolding, that we find throughout the corpus of Nicholas’ works? I have suggested above that the terms come from Duns Scotus and John Peckham but I don’t really know where they originate –except for the fact that they must in some indirect fashion be related to Plotinus and specifically to *Ennead* VI.7 [38], since they are first used in Plotinus’ critical reevaluation of Plato’s representation of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*. A Divine Being, Plotinus argues, cannot need to deliberate, plan or reason, for this is a defect. Instead, what is unfolded or explicate in our experience as beings subject to the time-space continuum is “earlier” enfolded or implicate in the complete activity of the Divine Intellect;³⁰ we can see this even in our present discursive experience of forms

24 Basil, *De Sancto Spiritu* XVI.38 (SC 17bis, Pruche); see Corrigan, 2008. By contrast with Plotinus’ second and third hypostases, the created world, for Nicholas, “non potest creatura ut creatura dici una, quia descendit ab unitate, neque plures, quia eius esse est ab uno; neque ambo copulative. Sed est unitas eius in quadam pluralitate contingenter” (*De docta ign.* II: h I.100) [cannot be called ‘one’, since it descends from unity, nor ‘many’, since it takes its being from the One, nor both ‘one’ and ‘many’ conjointly. But its unity exists contingently and in a certain plurality (trans. Bond, 1997: 132)].

25 See Turner, 2001.

26 See Armstrong, 1967: 266-267. This is more pronounced in Porphyry (Lloyd, 1967: 287-288).

27 See *Enneads* V.5 [32], 12: 33-34; V.3 [49], 14: 8-19; VI.9 [9], 10: 14-20 & 11: 23-25; VI.7 [38], 35: 7-16.

28 Proclus, *in Alc.* 330.7: “more piercing” (*drimuteros*); the higher the principle, the more extensive or the more piercing is its effect; cf. *ET* prop. 57. For comment, see Dillon, 1973: 236-38 (on Olympiodorus, *in Alc.* 110.13 ss).

29 See Dionysius, *DN* 13, “Concerning ‘Perfect’ and ‘One’”. Compare *DN* 1, 596d-597a: “Οὐ γὰρ [...] αἰτία μόνον ἐστίν [...] ἢ ὑπερόνομος ἀγαθότης [...]. Πάντα δὲ ἀπλῶς [...] ἐν ἑαυτῇ τὰ ὄντα προσηλῆφε”. [For the unnamed goodness is not simply the cause [...] it actually precontains everything in itself].

30 *Ennead* VI.7 [38], 1: 46-58: “οὐ μὴν ἄλλ’ εἰ δεῖ ἐκάστην ἐνέργειαν μὴ ἀτελῆ εἶναι, μηδὲ θεμιτὸν θεοῦ ὅτιοῦν ὄν ἄλλο τι νομίζειν ἢ ὅλον τε καὶ πᾶν, δεῖ ἐν ὁμοίῳ τῶν αὐτοῦ πάντα ἐνυπάρχειν. δεῖ τοίνυν καὶ τοῦ αἰε εἶναι. δεῖ τοίνυν καὶ τοῦ μέλλοντος ἤδη παρόντος εἶναι. οὐ δὴ ὑστερόν τι ἐν ἐκείνῳ, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἤδη ἐκεῖ παρὸν ὑστερον ἐν ἄλλῳ γίνεται. εἰ οὖν ἤδη πάρεστι τὸ μέλλον, ἀνάγκη οὕτω παρῆναι, ὡς προνοημένον εἰς τὸ ὑστερον· τοῦτο δὲ ἐστίν, ὡς μηδὲν δεῖσθαι μηδενὸς τότε, τοῦτο δὲ ἐστὶ μηδὲν ἐλλείποντος. πάντα ἄρα ἤδη ἦν καὶ αἰε ἦν καὶ οὕτως ἦν, ὡς εἰπειν ὑστερον τότε μετὰ τότε·

in nature, “if you unfold the form to itself, you will find the reason why”.³¹ Even in the sensible world the mutual implicative causality of all things that we can work out by discursive reasoning manifests the total simultaneous implicate nature of Divine activity in the explicate order (VI.7 [38], 2: 1-37).³² Here then at the intelligible level, and from our experience of discursive reason in the sensible world, there is a model for understanding how one order of complex coming-to-be can in reality be unfolded out of a higher and simpler order of being itself.

This is exactly the language that Nicholas uses.³³ In the *De Visione Dei*, for instance, God’s sight sees “the whole page”, “roundabout, above and below all things at once”. Eternity “both enfolds and unfolds all things” (Hopkins, 1983: 46); by contrast, we see only parts successively. Nonetheless, just as in Plotinus’ form that is unfolded in time but that we can fold back upon itself in order to see the complex intelligible nexus of mutual causality even on the sensible plane, so too in Nicholas’ *simplicissimus conceptus* all movements and sounds are enfolded (*complicantur*) in such a way that “whatever occurs successively” is “the unfolding (*explicatio*) of the concept”. Temporality in this sense emerges not out of any prior time, but from the *explicatio* of an eternal *complicatio* (*De visione Dei*: h VI.46). Nicholas links this implicitly as does Eckhart explicitly with Augustine: *tu eras intus, ego foris*: “when I find you to be a power that enfolds all things, I go in. When I find you to be a power that goes forth, I go out” (*Deutsche Werke* I.47). Indeed, too, while the surrounding language of contraction/non-contraction, absolute and relative, is not in Plotinus, the identification of the enfolded with the simple and unified³⁴ is exactly to be found in Plotinus (VI.7, 1), therefore, argue that *Ennead* VI.7 is in some curious way (whether via Proclus or John Philoponus or other intermediaries) a source of Nicholas’ implicate/explicate distinction; and, as a further corollary to this thesis, I suggest that the notion of contraction, generally, is to be indirectly related to Plotinus’ use of the word *synhypostasis* (which only appears twice in the *Enneads* and only in this treatise, VI 7 –here in chapters 1-2 and later in chapter 40) to signify the implicate/explicate co-hypostatic reality that is simultaneously intelligible in the broad sense and in the larger sense in so far as it reaches right down into sensible things –in one sense, an unfolding of a simple enfolded reality; and in another, a contraction of intelligible totality into a determinate form: what is the human being, Plotinus asks; and he replies: it is the form that makes *this* human being, *indwelling, not separate; and for those who define the essence even of enmattered forms, this is the right method of proceeding* (VI.7, 4).³⁵ In other words, the “thisness” of any

ἐκτεινόμενον μὲν γὰρ καὶ οἷον ἀπλούμενον ἔχει δεικνύονα τὸδε μετὰ τὸδε, ὁμοῦ δὲ ὄν πᾶν τὸδε. τοῦτο δὲ ἐστὶν ἔχον ἐν ἑαυτῷ καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν. By “earlier” Plotinus means not in time, but logically earlier, that is, what is enfolded in the intelligible world “can show this after this, but as all together it is entirely this; and this means having its cause also in itself” (ibid. 56-58).

31 *Ennead* VI.7 [38], 2: 16-19: “ὁ γὰρ ἐστὶν ἕκαστον, διὰ τοῦτό ἐστι. λέγω δὲ οὐχ ὅτι τὸ εἶδος ἐκάστω αἴτιον τοῦ εἶναι –τοῦτο μὲν γὰρ ἀληθές– ἀλλ’ ὅτι, εἰ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος ἕκαστον πρὸς αὐτὸ ἀναπτύττει, εὐρήσεις ἐν αὐτῷ τὸ “διὰ τί”.

32 See also *Ennead* VI.8 [39], 14: 16-31.

33 For the range of meaning in *contractio* see Hopkins, 1983: 99-101.

34 *De visione Dei*: h VI.60: “... tu es ipsa infinitas esse omnium complicans simplicissima virtute, quae non foret infinita nisi infinita unita” [you are infinity itself, enfolding the being of all things by a most simple power, which would not be infinite were it not infinitely unified (trans. Hopkins, 1988: 708-709)].

35 *Ennead* VI.7 [38], 4: 6-30: “φανείη δ’ ἂν ἴσως τισὶν ὁ αὐτὸς οὐτός τε κάκεινος εἶναι. [...] ἀλλ’ εἰ τὸ ἐκ ψυχῆς λογικῆς καὶ σώματος ὁ λόγος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, πῶς ἂν εἴη ὑπόστασις αἰδίου, τούτου τοῦ λόγου τοῦ τοιούτου ἀνθρώπου γινομένου, ὅταν σῶμα καὶ ψυχὴ συνέλθῃ; ἔσται γὰρ ὁ λόγος οὗτος δηλωτικός τοῦ ἐσομένου, οὐχ οἷος ὃν φαμεν αὐτοάνθρωπος, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἑοικώς ὄρω, καὶ τοιούτῳ οἴω μηδὲ δηλωτικῷ τοῦ τί ἦν εἶναι. οὐδὲ γὰρ εἶδους ἐστὶ τοῦ ἐνύλου, ἀλλὰ τὸ συναμφοτέρον δηλῶν, ὃ ἐστὶν ἦδη. εἰ δὲ τοῦτο, οὐπω εὐρήται ὁ ἀνθρώπος; ἦν γὰρ ὁ κατὰ τὸν λόγον. εἰ δὲ τις λέγοι «τὸν λόγον δεῖ τὸν τῶν τοιούτων εἶναι συναμφοτέρον τι, τὸ δ’ ἐν τῷδε», καθ’ ὃ ἐστὶν ἕκαστον, οὐκ ἀξιῶ λέγειν; χρὴ δὲ, καὶ εἰ ὅτι μάλιστα τῶν ἐνύλων εἰδῶν καὶ μετὰ ὕλης τοὺς λόγους χρὴ λέγειν, ἀλλὰ τὸν λόγον αὐτὸν τὸν πεποιηκότα, οἷον τὸν ἀνθρώπον, λαμβάνειν καὶ μάλιστα, ὅσοι τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι ἀξιοῦσιν ἐφ’ ἑκάστου ὀρίζεσθαι, ὅταν κυρίως ὀρίζωνται. τί οὖν ἐστὶ τὸ εἶναι ἀνθρώπου; τοῦτο δ’ ἐστὶ, τί ἐστὶ τὸ πεποιηκὸς τοῦτον τὸν ἀνθρώπον ἐνυπάρχον, οὐ χωριστόν» [perhaps it might seem to some people that this man and that man are the same [...]] But if what is composed of rational soul and body is the rational form of man, how could it be something eternally existent, since this rational form of this kind of man comes into existence when body and soul come together? For this rational form will be explanatory of what is going to be, not the sort we say is absolute man, but more like a definition, and the kind of definition which does not explain the essential nature. For it is not even a definition of the form in matter, but explains the composite,

sensible particular is the causal form in the determinate thing, logically prior to it and therefore a window open upon all intelligible reality. Plotinus does not speak of “contraction” –only “conhypostasis”, but he is relatively clear: in individual sensible things, the form that makes them what they are is a co-hypostasis or enfolding-unfolding, perhaps on different levels, of simple “absolute” or “unloosed” Being. In his criticism of Avicenna’s unfolding creation through intelligence, soul and nature, instead of a simple emanation of the contracted maximum from the absolute maximum (*De docta ign.* II: h I.116: *per simplicem emanationem maximi contracti a maximo absoluto*) –as Plotinus actually does in VI.7, 1-2, Nicholas indicates that something like this immediate contraction to “thisness” is what he has in mind when he defines it in the same passage for the first time in *DDI* as follows: “Contractio dicit ad aliquid, ut ad essendum hoc vel illud” [Contraction signifies contraction to something so as to be this or that] (*ibid.*); and on Aristotle’s view that there is nothing in between agent and patient, producer and product –often cited by Plotinus as one of his fundamental principles, Nicholas insists, against any notion of an Anima Mundi over the Christian Verbum in which God makes all things.³⁶

VII. A “Neoplatonic” Critique of Neoplatonism?

However, Nicholas in the *DDI* also does something very different from Plotinus, something with which I nonetheless think that our hypothetical *Plotinus redivivus* would finally have to agree. Nicholas develops a train of thought that seems, on the face of it, directly opposed to many Neoplatonic images, but one that effectively works out their logical implications more appropriately, notwithstanding. In the third century, Plotinus inhabited a cosmology, as we have seen above, that could easily be adapted later through the influence of Aristotle and Alexander to the picture of concentric celestial spheres rooted in the *Primum Mobile* that reached down to the moon and was presided over by an agent intellect together with the Archangel Gabriel. This is the picture we find in Al Farabi and Ibn Sina. And yet Plotinus’ whole mystical and intellectual thought was not really concentric sphere-directed, but focused on the immediate omnipresence of unity and being (VI.4-5 [22-23]). So I suggest that there is a hidden tension in Neoplatonic thought between a localized cosmology, on the one hand, and a local-global orientation of spiritual focus that seems oddly incongruent with any cosmology based on a Peripatetic world-view. At the same time, by analogy with our own big bang theories, Plotinus likens the emergence of Intellect from the One, and of Soul from Intellect as an expansion, an unfolding into multiplicity³⁷ –as, in Pythagorean thinking, a point expands into a line, a triangle, and finally a four-dimensional cosmos or, again, to take the most famous Neoplatonic image, as a circle expands or grows through³⁸ its radii into a circumference.³⁹

which already exists. But if this is so, the man is not yet found; for he was going to be the one according to the rational form. But if someone were to say “The rational form of such beings must be something composite, this in this”, he does not think fit to say *by what each exists*; but one must, however much one must also speak of the rational forming principles of forms in matter as including matter, grasp the forming principle itself which makes, for instance, man; this applies especially to those who claim to define the essential nature in each case, when they define strictly and properly. What is it, then, to be a man? That is, *what is it which has made this man here below, which exists in him and is not separate?* (trans. Armstrong, 1988b: 97-99)]. What concerns Plotinus here is that there *is* a certain sameness and yet difference between intelligible and sensible human being, in so far as *this* sensible human being has to be defined in relation to an intelligible forming principle; and so the question arises how αὐτοάνθρωπος or τὸ εἶναι ἄνθρωπον can be “in” this sensible human being. The only solution is that it must be the productive form present in the thing, not separate that makes *this human being this determinate, definable, but real entity!*

³⁶ *De docta ign.* II: h I.150: “Nec cadit eo modo medium inter absolutum et contractum”.

³⁷ For examples, see Corrigan, 2002; Bussanich 1988 & 2007, *passim*.

³⁸ For the growth-image see *Ennead* VI.8 [39], 18: 12-13. Cf. *Ennead* III.8 [31], 8: 32-38.

³⁹ *Ennead* VI.8 [39], 18: 7-22; for other examples see Sleeman & Pollet, 1980: sub *grammē, kuklos* etc.

Nicholas does exactly the opposite. From the geometrical image of the infinite undivided line, understood non-quantitatively, what is unfolded is a “contracted infinity”⁴⁰ contracted by and into the curvature of space-time that results in triangles, circles and spheres in the mathematical imagination (*De docta ign.* I.11-12; II.1) and in what are only approximations of such figures in perceptible things.⁴¹ The Neoplatonic image is implicitly erased, but the hidden logic of its thought articulated. The infinite line is both maximal and minimal –that than which, in Anselm’s terms, nothing greater or lesser can exist or be thought–. God is infinite; and our world is a contracted infinite. Contraction –not expansion, controlled explosion or broadening emanation– better fits the logic of creation, if we accept through learned ignorance the immensity of God, which bears no comparison whatever with a contracted world. What suggested the image of the line to Nicholas? He mentions Anselm who compared maximum truth to infinite straightness (*De Veritate X*), that is, the Supreme truth (*rectitudo*) has neither beginning nor end. I wonder if we have also here the notion of the undivided line that is implicitly presupposed by Socrates’ simile of the divided line in *Republic* 6.⁴² The cuts on the divided line are like contractions of truth that represent the world from their own perspectives but, however unconsciously, presuppose, first, an infinite contracted line in which curvature is possible (that is, in the created world) and the infinite uncontracted line in which there is no curvature (that is, God).

Whatever the case, Nicholas goes on to work out rigorously the logic of a new cosmology based on the omnipresence, through and in God, of all contracted being whose picture is falsified by the expansion model of the center-radii-circumference circle or sphere image. Arguably, this logic better fits Plotinus’ underlying thought, namely, instead of concentric spheres with the earth at the center or of a circumference supposedly contracting through its radii into a center, the contraction occurs in the opposite direction. The perfect circle with its even more perfect center *is* helpful, but it belongs to the mathematical imagination. In the created world we do not find perfect circles –only approximations. Nor do we find localizable centers such as the earth or even the sun. The center and the circumference are everywhere and nowhere. The only center is God and God is everywhere –not as a center or circle, but as uncontracted infinity.⁴³ My hypothetical Plotinus, I suggest, would have had

40 *De docta ign.* II: h I.112: “Nam ipsum contractum seu concretum cum ab absoluto omne id habeat” [a contracted maximum [...] that which is contracted or concrete holds all that it is from the absolute (trans. Bond, 1997: 137)]; *ibid.* 114: “Nam infinitas contracta aut simplicitas seu indistinctio per infinitum descendit in contractione ab eo, quod est absolutum [...] Quare quamvis sit maxime unum, est tamen illa eius unitas per pluralitatem contracta, sicut infinitas per finitatem” [contracted infinity, or simplicity or indistinction, in virtue of its contraction, falls infinitely lower than that which is absolute [...] And although it is maximally one, its unity, however, is contracted through plurality, just as its infinity is contracted through finiteness (trans. Bond, 1997: 138)]; God is all in all, yet each created thing has its own being; *ibid.* 115: “Et quia quidditas solis absolute non est aliud a quidditate absolute lunae – quoniam est ipse Deus [...] et quidditas contracta solis est alia a quidditate contracta lunae – quia, ut quidditas absoluta rei non est res ipsa, ita contracta non est aliud quam ipsa” [The absolute quiddity of the sun is not other than the absolute quiddity of the moon, for this is God [...] But the contracted quiddity of the sun is other than the contracted quiddity of the moon, for whereas the absolute quiddity of a thing is not the thing, the contracted quiddity is not other than the thing (trans. Bond, 1997: 139)]. We should probably understand contracted infinity as maximally one and therefore an image or symbol of infinity in light of *De visione Dei*: h VI.57-58: “Infinitum enim non est contrahibile, sed manet absolutum [...] Et sicut nihil addi potest infinito, ita infinitum non potest ad aliquid contrahim ut sit aliud quam infinitum” [the Infinite is not contractible but remains absolute [...] And just as nothing can be added to the Infinite, so the Infinite cannot be contracted to anything so that it would become other than the Infinite (trans. Hopkins, 1988: 706-707)]. However, in Plotinus, the infinity of the One awakes a corresponding infinity and infinite love in the soul or intellect of the soul in *Ennead* VI.7 [38], 33-35.

41 *De docta ign.* II: h I.159: “Et quoniam nos motum non nisi comparatione ad fixum [...] hinc in coniecturis ambulantes in omnibus nos errare comperimus et admiramus” [Since we are able only to detect motion in relation to a fixed point [...] so we find that in our conjectures we are in error in all of our measurements (trans. Bond, 1997: 159)].

42 For an infinite undivided line that seems to curve around a point as an image for eternity and its relation to time, see also *Ennead* VI.5 [23], 11: 18-22: οἷον εἰ γραμμῆς εἰς ἄπειρον ἰέναι δοκούσης εἰς σημεῖον ἀνηρημένης καὶ περὶ αὐτὸ θεούσης πανταχῆ οὐ ἂν δράμῃ τοῦ σημείου αὐτῆ ἐμφανταζομένου αὐτοῦ οὐ θέοντος, ἀλλὰ περὶ αὐτὸ ἐκεῖνης κυκλομένης [it is like a line that seems to go on to infinity depending on a point, and as it runs around it the point is imagined everywhere the line runs to, though the point does not run, but the line circles around it [...] in relation to this infinity of power, swinging alongside and hanging from it].

43 *De docta ign.* II: h I.156: Since we cannot reach any simply maximum or minimum in any genus, including that of motion, there can be no simply minimum such as a fixed center: “Centrum igitur mundi coincidit cum circumferentia. Non habet igitur mundus circumferentiam. Nam si centrum haberet, haberet et circumferentiam [...] Cum igitur non sit possibile

to agree that Nicholas' cosmology better fits the logic of Plotinus' own thought than the expansionist view of emanation.

I argue, therefore, that Nicholas' discovery of an infinite contracted world immediately rooted in uncontracted infinity (that is, separated by nothing but otherness) makes more sense of Neoplatonic thought *on its own terms* than some of Neoplatonism's own images of center and circumference, the emanation of massive rivers from prior unitary sources,⁴⁴ or, as in Avicenna, a burgeoning intermediate hierarchy of intelligence, soul and nature (*De docta ign.* II: h I.116). Contrary to common opinion, however (Koyre, 1957: 17), Nicholas does not do away with hierarchy; he really wants to understand hierarchy in a non-ontological way as degrees of contraction.⁴⁵ At least, this is how I read him.

VIII. Nicholas of Cusa, Plotinus and Giordano Bruno

What happens, then, when the text of Plotinus is retrieved and translated and Plotinian thought can be compared directly with this radical new thinking of Nicholas of Cusa? Giordano Bruno sees explicitly perhaps for the first time a kind of Grand Unified Theory: the single infinite universe enfolded in God, but unfolded and contracted as itself into different layers of possibility, does not need matter as traditionally conceived (*khora*, nurse, oscillating *flux*, *je ne sais quoi-substratum*), for *God Is To-Be-Possible* (as Nicholas argues in *De Possesse* and earlier) and all possibility, however contracted it might be, is in God and is God. After all, Nicholas argues in *DDI* that the Platonists had posited an absolute matter prior to all things that was not "coeval" with God and that was "*absoluta possibilitas*" [the possibility for all things] yet "*nihil omnium actu*" [actually nothing at all] (*De docta ign.* II: h I.132). But if uncontracted possibility can be a kind of "absolute possibility", then in God such possibility must *be* God, since as Nicholas also argues that every possibility is contracted, but contracted by actuality (*De docta ign.* II: h I.137-139).

I am here simply suggesting how Bruno might have read the *DDI* but evidently with an eye upon Proclus and Plotinus. If the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle are intrinsically dynamic, then Plotinus and Nicholas go even further. For Nicholas, absolute possibility coincides with actuality: "Praesupponit enim posse fieri absolutum posse, quod cum actu convertitur, sine quo impossibile est quicquam fieri posse" [the possibility-of-being-made presupposes absolute possibility, which is converted with actuality and without which it is impossible that anything is able to be made] (*De possesse*: h XI/2.29). For Plotinus, the One is not only *dynamis panton*, but it is "Τὸ ἐν

mundum claudi intra centrum corporale et circumferentiam, non intelligitur mundus, cuius centrum et circumferentia sunt Deus" [The center of the world, therefore coincides with the circumference. And therefore the world has no circumference [...] if it had a center, it would also have a circumference [...]. Since it is not possible for the world to be enclosed between a corporeal center and circumference, the world, whose center and circumference are God, is not understood]; *ibid.* 162: "... cum semper cuilibet videatur, quod sive ipse fuerit in terra sive sole aut alia stella, quod ipse sit in centro quasi immobili et quod alia omnia moveantur, ille certe semper altos et altos polos sibi constitueret [...]. Unde erit machina mundi quasi habens undique centrum et nullibi circumferentiam, quoniam eius circumferentia et centrum est Deus, qui est undique et nullibi" [Since it always appear to every observer, whether on the earth, sun, or another star, that one is, as if, at an immovable center of things and that all else is being moved, one will always select different poles in relation to oneself [...]. Therefore, the world machine will have, one might say, its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere, for its circumference and center is God who is everywhere and nowhere]. Compare Plotinus. *Ennead* VI.9 [9], 4: 24-25: "οὐ γὰρ διή ἀπεστιν οὐδενὸς ἐκεῖνο καὶ πάντων δέ, ὥστε παρὼν μὴ παρῆναι" [For that One is not absent from any, and absent yet from all, so as in being present not to be present]; *Ennead* V.5 [32], 8: 23-24: "Θαῦμα δὲ, πῶς οὐκ ἐλθὼν πάρεστι, καὶ πῶς οὐκ ὄν οὐδαμοῦ οὐδαμοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ὅπου μὴ ἔστιν" [It is indeed a wonder how he is present without having come and how though being nowhere there is nowhere he is not]. See also Dionysius, *DN* 13, 977b ss.

44 *Ennead* III.8 [31], 10: 3-10: "Νόησον γὰρ πηγὴν ἀρχὴν ἄλλην οὐκ ἔχουσαν, δοῦσαν δὲ ποταμοῖς πᾶσαν αὐτήν, οὐκ ἀναλοθεῖσαν τοῖς ποταμοῖς, ἀλλὰ μένουσαν αὐτὴν ἡσύχως, τοὺς δὲ ἐξ αὐτῆς προελθούσας πρὶν ἄλλον ἄλλη ρεῖν ὁμοῦ συνόντας ἔτι, ἥδη δὲ οἶον ἐκάστους εἰδόμενος οἱ ἀφήσουσιν αὐτῶν τὰ ρέματα· ἢ ζῶην φυτοῦ μεγίστου διὰ παντὸς ἐλθοῦσαν ἀρχῆς μενούσης καὶ οὐ σκεδασθεῖσης περὶ πᾶν αὐτῆς οἶον ἐν ῥίζῃ ἰδρυμένης".

45 *De docta ign.* II: h I.123-126, to be compared with *De docta ign.* III.

πάντα καὶ οὐδὲ ἓν· ἀρχὴ γὰρ πάντων, οὐ πάντα, ἀλλ' ἐκείνως πάντα· ἐκεῖ γὰρ οἶον ἐνέδρομε· μᾶλλον δὲ οὐπω ἐστίν, ἀλλ' ἔσται" [all things and no one of them; it the originative principle of all things, not all things, but all things in the mode of that; for there they so to speak ran in it; or rather they are not there yet, but they will be] (V.2 [11], 1: 1).⁴⁶ The One is their "future", as it were –their absolute possibility. Often in the *Enneads dynamis* as power implicitly contains potentiality and possibility—for example, the power to be *from* the One but as a possibility present *in* pre-intellect or, again, in relation to soul and the sensible cosmos, in *Ennead* IV.8 [6], 5: 32-36:

τὴν τε ψυχὴν αὐτὴν ἔλαθεν ἂν ἃ εἶχεν οὐκ ἐκφανέντα οὐδὲ προόδον λαβόντα· εἶπερ πανταχοῦ ἢ ἐνέργεια τὴν δύναμιν ἔδειξε κρυφθεῖσαν ἂν ἀπάντη καὶ οἶον ἀφανισθεῖσαν καὶ οὐκ οὐσαν μηδέποτε ὄντως οὐσαν.

the soul herself would not have known what she possessed had they not appeared and come forth, since activity or energy everywhere showed power / potentiality / possibility altogether hidden and so to speak obliterated and not existing because it is not yet really existing.

What "doesn't yet really exist" can apply equally to pre-intelligible, intelligible, and sensible being. For Plotinus, *dynamis* is prior to actuality, a kind of unrestricted activity "to be" beyond being, yet present in different contractions throughout being and becoming. In reading Plotinus, then, I imagine that Giordano Bruno saw the connection with Nicholas but also realized that the more radical conclusion to be drawn was the following: 1) if there is only one matter, not the two that Plotinus proposes in *Ennead* II.4 [12], 2) if intelligible and sensible matter are only distinguished by "the form upon them" as Plotinus maintains in II.4, 5,⁴⁷ and 3) if the One and matter are alike simple—"a paradoxical meeting of extremes" noted by Plotinus himself (in VI.7 [38], 13), as Dodds notes;⁴⁸ and 4) if for Proclus, "even privation of forms is from there" (*ET* 57); but 5) if while for Plotinus, the infinity that is the One becomes *peras* or limit in Intellect, but is still in its first moment "unshaped", for Proclus the infinite is not connatural with the One but *allogrion* (*ET* 149); then Bruno chooses Plotinus and Nicholas over Proclus, abolishes any distinction between sensible and intelligible matter as unnecessary, and identifies God and matter as the active absolute possibility of all things, in which the possibility of making and the possibility of being made cannot be separated.

Bruno's arguments in his dialogue *De la Causa, Principio et Uno* are broader and more complex, but this is effectively his conclusion via a critical analysis of Ibn Gabirol and Plotinus. In the words of Discono, one of the speakers:

una sia la materia, una la potenza per la quale tutto quel che è, è in atto; e non con minor ragione conviene alle sustanze incorporee che alle corporali, essendo che non altrimenti quelle han l'essere per lo possere essere, che queste per lo possere essere hanno l'essere (*CPU*: 301).

There is a single matter, a single potency, by which everything that exists does so in act

⁴⁶ Compare Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei*: h VI.48: "Tu enim, qui occurris, quasi sis omnia et nihil omnium simul" [For you, who seems as if you were both all things and nothing of all things (trans. Hopkins, 1988: 702)].

⁴⁷ *Ennead* II.4 [12], 5: 14-16: "Διάφορόν γε μὴν τὸ σκοτεινὸν τὸ τε ἐν τοῖς νοητοῖς τὸ τε ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς ὑπάρχει διάφορος τε ἢ ὕλη, ὅσῳ καὶ τὸ εἶδος τὸ ἐπικειμένον ἀμφοῖν διάφορον".

⁴⁸ Proclus, *ET* 232, ad props. 58 and 59. Bruno comes to Plotinus by way of Ibn Gabirol (Avicebron), in whose thought, matter and form already converge (Pessin, 2013), and he concludes (*CPU*: 299): "se la materia [...] non è corpo e precede, secondo la sua natura, l'essere corporale, che dunque la può fare tanto aliena da le sustanze dette incorporee?" [if matter is not a body [...] but by its nature precedes the corporeal being, why, then, would it be so inimical to the substances called incorporeal?] (trans. de Lucca, 1998: 75-76)].

[...] this applies equally to both corporeal and incorporeal substances, since the former have their being through their capacity to be, in the same way that the latter, through their capacity to be, have their being” (trans. de Lucca, 1998: 77).

And finally, at the beginning of the 5th Dialogue, Teofilo concludes:

È dunque l’universo uno, infinito, immobile. Una, dico, è la possibilità assoluta, uno l’atto, una la forma o anima, una la materia o corpo, una la cosa, uno lo ente, uno il massimo ed ottimo; il quale non deve poter essere compreso; e però infinibile e interminabile, e pertanto infinito e interminato, e per conseguenza immobile (*CUP*: 318).

The universe is, therefore, one, infinite and immobile. I say that the absolute possibility is one, that the act is one; the form, or soul, is one, the matter, or body, is one, the thing is one, being is one. The maximum, and the optimum, is one: it cannot be comprehended and is therefore indeterminable and not limitable, and hence infinite and limitless, and consequently immobile (trans. de Lucca, 1998: 87).⁴⁹

IX. Conclusion

In short, our hypothetical Plotinus turns out to be not so hypothetical after all. He was somehow alive and well, even as a hidden leading interlocutor in complex conversations with many thinkers in the Middle Ages, but especially in Nicholas of Cusa’s thinking through the past in Plotinus’ physical absence. What happened in the Renaissance was not only a recovery of antiquity but a profound re-orientation into the future by thinking through the hidden implications of late ancient thought exemplified in Plotinus and his heritage everywhere. If we put Plotinus and Nicholas finally side by side after 1492, we have unfortunately the combustible material that leads, in part, to Giordano Bruno’s death and that puts Galileo on trial, but we also provide the possibility for Copernicus, Kepler and Newton to thrive, even if they need to live in a finite universe, as human beings inevitably seem to –despite Anaximander, Lucretius, Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno. In any case, Ficino defined the future for so many later thinkers, though, despite the influence of Plotinus upon so many figures in philosophy, theology, literature, art, ranging from Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel, Schelling to Thomas Taylor, More, Cudworth, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Emerson, Dickinson, the “danger” of Plotinus has remained pervasive from 1492 to the present. Despite the present revival and respectability of Plotinus thanks to the *editio major* and *editio minor* of the *Enneads* by Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolph Schwyzer, he still remains on the margins of things. Most people, including the vast majority of our students, have never heard of him. Many scholars of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and other Eastern religions either seem embarrassed by the need to mention Plotinus or ignore him altogether. Stephen MacKenna’s translation of the *Enneads* might now be overshadowed by those of A. H. Armstrong and others, but his powerful evocation of his experience of reading Plotinus remains relevant to any age, resonates strongly with that of Ficino, and goes a long way to explain Plotinus’ enduring fascination:

Whenever I look into Plotinus I feel always all the old trembling fevered longing: it seems to me that I must be born for him, and that somehow someday I must have nobly translated him: my heart, untravelled, still to Plotinus turns and drags at each remove a lengthening chain. It seems to me that him alone of authors I understand by inborn sight (Dodds, 1936: 114).

⁴⁹ Compare Nicholas, *De visione Dei* h VI.63: “Tu, enim, qui occurris mihi quasi prima materia formabilis, quia recipis formam cuiuslibet te intuentis, tunc me elevas” [Therefore, my God, when You seem to me as if You were formable prime matter, because You receive the form of each one who looks unto You, You elevate me (trans. Hopkins, 1988: 710)].

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