

## The Intellect and the Metaphysics of Light: Evagrius Ponticus and Plotinus

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**ABSTRACT.** This article explores the concept of *nous* and the metaphysics of light in Evagrius Ponticus's mysticism, highlighting how his philosophical background, especially Neoplatonism, influenced his language. Although *nous* is often misunderstood, it serves as a mystical faculty for perceiving intelligible beings and attaining divine union. By comparing Evagrius and Plotinus's views on *nous* and related mystical experiences, including visions of intelligible light, we uncover Evagrius's pioneering approach to *nous*. While sharing similarities with Plotinus, Evagrius's originality is evident in his comprehensive theory of contemplative prayer and the role of *nous* in shaping the Christian ascetic self. His redefinition of *nous* as essential for union with God and his interpretation of spiritual experiences as a return to one's true state of being showcase his innovative contribution to Late Antiquity's understanding of mystical vision.

**Keywords:** *nous*, contemplation, noetic light, Evagrius Ponticus, Plotinus.

### Introduction

This article examines the concept of *nous* and the metaphysics of light in Evagrius Ponticus, focusing on how his philosophical background, especially Neoplatonism, influenced his language. Though often translated as 'mind' or 'intellect,' the full depth of the Greek term *nous* extends beyond these modern terms. Our aim is to show that, in a mystical context, *nous* goes beyond rational thought and acts

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as a higher, intuitive faculty for directly perceiving intelligible beings and ultimately uniting with the Divine. To do this, we compare and analyze texts from Evagrius Ponticus and Plotinus, studying their unique views on *nous*, their descriptions of mystical experiences like visions of luminous light, and the relationship between intellect and the divine. Our methods include philological analysis, contextual interpretation, and detailed comparison to highlight both commonalities and key differences. Ultimately, the article emphasizes Evagrius's original perspective on *nous*. While sharing similarities with Plotinus regarding luminous visions and intellectual purification, Evagrius's distinctiveness lies in his coherent theory of contemplative prayer and the special role of *nous* in shaping the Christian spiritual journey. His redefinition of *nous* as vital for union with God and his view of spiritual experiences as a return to one's true nature highlight his innovative contribution to understanding mystical vision in Late Antiquity.

### The concept of *nous*

The term '*nous*' holds a central place in the vocabulary of any Greek-language mystical tradition.<sup>1</sup> It is often translated as "mind" or "intellect," but neither term fully captures the depth of the Greek word's meanings. Additionally, neither has a corresponding verb, which causes the meanings of their derivatives (intellection, intellectual, etc.) to differ significantly from "*nous*" in Greek. This difference is largely cultural, as A. Louth observes:

"The Greeks were pre-Cartesian; we are all post-Cartesian. We say, 'I think, therefore I am,' that is, thinking is an activity I engage in and there must therefore be an 'I' to engage in it; the Greeks would say, 'I think, therefore there is that which I think – *to noeta*.' What I think is something going on in my head; what the Greek thinks, *to noeta*, are the objects of thought that (for example, for Plato) exist in a higher, more real world."<sup>2</sup>

While the latter primarily indicates a rational thought process, *nous* and *noesis* suggest an almost intuitive perception of reality. Festugière explains this difference as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> (Louth 2007), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> (Louth 2007), xiv.

“The great truths of religion — the existence and attributes of God, divine governance and providence, the origin, nature, and fate of the soul — are capable of being known through reason. They can be demonstrated. (...) However, it is one thing to approach these truths through reason, and another to grasp them through that intuitive faculty the ancients called *nous*, Francis de Sales called the ‘fine point of the soul,’ and Pascal called the ‘heart.’”<sup>3</sup>

God, in His essence, remains an unknown (*agnostos*) and infinitely surpasses reason. This is not due to a complete lack of knowledge about Him, but because His true being and intimate nature are inaccessible to us. Similarly, the soul also surpasses reason. While it includes reason, it is much more than that. By its very nature, the soul is a faculty of intuition and love. It seeks a form of knowledge that is direct contact, a ‘feeling,’ a touch, or a sight. Ultimately, it longs for a union that involves a “total fusion and interpenetration of two living beings.”<sup>4</sup> *Nous* is fundamentally a ‘faculty of mystical union,’ transcending what ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’ typically suggest. Although *nous* means mind and *noesis* refers to a ‘more contemplative form of thought,’ not entirely distinct from thinking, it’s essential to imbue these words with a mystical connotation, moving beyond their common, limited understanding.<sup>5</sup>

In Plotinus’s philosophy, *nous* is translated as ‘Divine Intellect’ or ‘Divine Intelligence,’<sup>6</sup> but it is most often rendered as ‘Intellectual principle,’ which, while imperfect, remains both “expressive and convenient.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in modern languages, the same term often refers to both the divine principle and its corresponding human

<sup>3</sup> (Festugière and Massignon 1986), 63.

<sup>4</sup> (Festugière and Massignon 1986), 64–65.

<sup>5</sup> (Louth 2007), xv.

<sup>6</sup> Plotinus distinguishes three principal hypostases: the One (τὸ ἓν), the Intellect (νοῦς), and the Soul (ψυχή). The first hypostasis is that of the One, which is both the principle and primary source of Being, and its ultimate goal. The second hypostasis is that of the Divine Intellect, eternally caught in the contemplation of the first principle and in self-thought [following the model of Aristotle’s Divine Intellect, *Metaphysics* 1072b.19–22: “And the Intellect thinks itself by perceiving itself as intelligible. It becomes intelligible by touching itself and thinking itself, so that Intellect and intelligible become identical. For Intellect is the receptacle of the Intelligible and of Being” – αὐτὸν δὲ νοεῖ ὁ νοῦς κατὰ μετάληψιν τοῦ νοητοῦ· νοητὸς γὰρ γίνεταί θιγγάνων καὶ νοῶν, ὥστε ταύτὸν νοῦς καὶ νοητόν. τὸ γὰρ δεκτικὸν τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ τῆς οὐσίας νοῦς. “Thinking in itself” is probably a way of referring to the highest form of human thinking, namely contemplation. (Aristotle 2019), 230–232]. It is, thus, intelligible, eternal, and incorruptible Being, which manifests the identity between primary Being and pure thought. Encompassing the totality of intelligible Forms, the Intellect is the intelligible model of all reality. The last of the three hypostases – namely, the Soul – governs the sensible world, impressing form and order upon it. However, the Soul is but an image of the intelligible model. See (Vlad 2011), 30–37.

<sup>7</sup> (Mackenna 1991), xxxii.

act. In both cases, the intellectual principle signifies what is “highest and truly knowable.” To fully capture the mystical and religious dimension of a text, some exegetes suggest temporarily retranslating ‘Intellectual principle’ as ‘Spirit.’<sup>8</sup> Plurality or multiplicity originates within the *nous*. This ‘divine intellectual principle’ not only contains but is the intelligible universe (*ta noēta*).<sup>9</sup> This universe, also called the Intelligible, embodies the entirety of ‘divine thoughts,’ known in the Platonic tradition as the Ideas (or Forms). These Ideas are real entities: they are “the eternal Originals, Archetypes, and Intellectual Forms of all that exists in the lower spheres.”<sup>10</sup> For this reason, this realm of intelligibles is sometimes called the ‘Spiritual Universe.’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The translation of the name of Plotinus’s second hypostasis has posed challenges for translators that are difficult to resolve. In French, the variants Intellect, Intelligence, and Esprit have been employed; in English, Intellect has been favoured; in German, it is Geist. The difficulty stems from the fact that in Plotinus, νοῦς refers to intuitive, supra-rational thought that does not deliberate or engage in reasoning – although it does not contradict the outcome of such reasoning if correct – a meaning that neither “Intellect” nor “Intelligence” conveys. Conversely, “discursive thought” based on reasoning is termed διάνοια or λογισμός by Plotinus. From this perspective, the variant “Spirit” would have been more suitable. The drawback of “Spirit” is its lack of etymological connection to “intelligible,” which corresponds to νοητόν, and therefore it cannot be associated with the phrase κόσμος νοητός, “intelligible universe” – an equivalent, in Plotinus, for νοῦς. Furthermore, “Spirit” carries a Christian connotation, translating πνεῦμα, a concept that has no relation to Plotinus’s νοῦς. Therefore, the variant “Intellect,” capitalized, is preferred, with the understanding that a clear distinction must be made between “Intellect” in Plotinus and what is typically referred to as “intellect.” See (Cornea 2009), 15.

<sup>9</sup> The expression κόσμος νοητός does not appear in Plato but is found in Philo of Alexandria, who, attempting to reconcile Greek philosophy with Hebrew theology, positions the Platonic Forms – which he claims are created – within a divine Logos (Philo, *De opificiis*, 4, 17–20). Plato, conversely, only spoke of a “place (τόπος) of Ideas” (cf. Plato, *Republic* 508c, 507b; Phaedrus 247c–e), which represents the model of the sensible universe (κόσμος αἰσθητός) (cf. *Timaeus* 30c–d). See (Chinadea 2008), 131–136. See also (Runia 1999), 160–162.

<sup>10</sup> Plato reveals the relationship between the intelligible and the sensible as one between the original (model) and the copy. The Intelligible – comprising the eternal Forms – serves as the original (παράδειγμα, ἀρχέτυπον), while sensible, corporeal things, in continuous becoming, represent imitation (μίμημα), image, copy, and reflection (εἶδωλον). The Forms constitute the authentic reality, and by imitating or participating in them, sensory things acquire their reality, even if it is secondary, diminished, or derived reality. (Cornea 2003), 72.

<sup>11</sup> (Mackenna 1991), xxxiii.

## The Vision of Divine Light in Evagrius Ponticus

For Evagrius, *nous* is the highest dimension of man, the image of God within us.<sup>12</sup> Oriented by creation toward its Prototype,<sup>13</sup> the Intellect is most capable<sup>14</sup> of knowing God<sup>15</sup>, and prayer<sup>16</sup> is the most natural act for a human being.<sup>17</sup> Evagrius warns that the intellect (*nous*) must avoid any form of contemplation that might “imprint” a form upon it, because, even after surpassing the contemplation of corporeal nature (*theōrian tēs sōmatikēs physeōs*)<sup>18</sup>, the intellect remains caught in the multiplicity of intelligible things (*noēta*).<sup>19</sup> At the time of prayer, the *nous* must “completely detach from the senses” (*anaisthēsan ktēsamenos*),<sup>20</sup> because the intellect cannot perceive the “place of God” (*ho topos tou Theou*) within itself (*en heautō*)

<sup>12</sup> *Skemmata* 34.

<sup>13</sup> (Bunge 2022), 153.

<sup>14</sup> “The intellect, as the image of God, is receptive (*dektikos*) to its divine Prototype,” cf. *Epistula ad Melaniam* 16. See (Bunge 2022), 163–164.

<sup>15</sup> *Praktikos* 49.

<sup>16</sup> *De oratione* 84.

<sup>17</sup> (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a), 513–514.

<sup>18</sup> Evagrius frequently explores the concept of contemplation (*theōria*) throughout his *Kephalaia Gnostika* (hereafter *KG*). In *KG* 3.19 (S1), for instance, he differentiates between “Primary Contemplation” (Πρώτη θεωρία) and “Secondary Contemplation” (Δευτέρα θεωρία). The distinction lies not in the contemplative subject (the intellect, here termed “the seer”), but in the nature of the object: Primary Contemplation focuses on the immaterial, while Secondary Contemplation engages with the material. See (Ramelli 2015), 152. See also (Guillaumont 1972), 44.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 58: “Even if the intellect (ὁ νοῦς) rises above (ὑπὲρ) the contemplation (τὴν θεωρίαν) of corporeal nature (τῆς σωματικῆς φύσεως), it has not yet perfectly beheld (ἐθεάσατο) the place of God (τὸν τόπον τοῦ Θεοῦ); for it can exist within the knowledge of Intelligibles (ἐν τῇ γνώσει τῶν νοητῶν) and be diversified (ποικίλλεσθαι) by it.” (Casiday 2006), 192. *KG* 4.77 (S2): “Objects are outside the intellect, but the *theōria* concerning them is established inside it. But it is not so concerning the Holy Trinity, for it alone is essential knowledge.” (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 349. When contemplating the Holy Trinity, the distinction between subject and object dissolves. In this state, the intellect (*nous*) actively participates in the “non-numerical unity that is characteristic of God.” (cf. *Epistula fidei* 7: ἡ δὲ μονὰς καὶ ἑνὰς τῆς ἀπλῆς καὶ ἀπεριλήπτου οὐσίας ἐστὶ σημαντικὴ – “One and Only” is the designation of the simple and uncircumscribed essence.” (Casiday 2006), 48. God is uncircumscribed, and the knowledge of him remains an experience that cannot be encompassed or understood: “But only our intellect is incomprehensible to us, as is God, its creator. Indeed, it is not possible to understand what a nature receptive of the Holy Trinity is nor to understand the unity, that is, essential knowledge.” *KG* 2.11, S2; (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 213. Cf. (Conway-Jones 2018), 272.

<sup>20</sup> *De oratione* 120: “Blessed is the intellect that at the time of prayer attains total freedom from perception (ἀνασθησίαν κτησάμενος).” (Casiday 2006), 198. Cf. *De oratione* 118.

until it has surpassed all mental “representations” (*noēmata*)<sup>21</sup> related to created things.<sup>22</sup>

Evagrius defines prayer as “a state of the intellect (*nous*) destructive of every earthly ‘representation’ (*noēmatos*),”<sup>23</sup> meaning any image of a sensible object. “This inner experience”<sup>24</sup> frees the intellect from “the mental representations that leave imprints (*typoō*) upon it.”<sup>25</sup> The goal is to “approaching the Immaterial One in an immaterial way.”<sup>26</sup>

This “pure prayer” manifests as an intense, transitory process in which the intellect (*nous*), liberated from images and concepts, enters a “formless” state – achieving direct communion with God without intermediaries. This iconoclastic noetic experience also reflects a gnoseological movement from multiplicity to simplicity.<sup>27</sup>

In an exceptional use of language concerning ‘imprinting,’ Evagrius states in *On Thoughts* that, “at the moment of pure prayer (*proseuchēs katharas*), a divine

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<sup>21</sup> *De oratione* 70.

<sup>22</sup> *Skemmata* 23: Οὐκ ἂν ἴδοι ὁ νοῦς τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τόπον ἐν ἑαυτῷ, μὴ πάντων τῶν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν νοημάτων ὑψηλότερος γεγονώς; (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001c), 525, modif. (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 302.

<sup>23</sup> *Skemmata* 26: Προσευχὴ ἐστὶ κατάστασις νοῦ, φθαρτικὴ παντὸς ἐπιγείου νοήματος; (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001c), 526, modif. Evagrius stresses that one cannot ‘pray purely’ (προσεύξασθαι καθαρῶς), “while being tangled up with material things and shaken by unremitting cares. For prayer is the setting aside of representations (προσευχὴ γάρ ἐστιν ἀπόθεσις νοημάτων)”; *De oratione* 71; (Casiday 2006), 193. “Those who desire pure prayer (καθαρὰς προσευχῆς), must keep watch over their anger (θυμὸν), control their belly, limit their water consumption, keep vigil in prayer [...] knock at the door of Scripture with the hands of virtues. Then *apatheia* of the heart (καρδίας ἀπάθεια) will dawn for you and you will see, during prayer, the intellect shining like a star (νοῦν ἀστεροειδῆ ὄψει ἐν προσευχῇ).” *De malignis cogitationibus* 43; (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 298, 299.

<sup>24</sup> (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a), 518.

<sup>25</sup> This state of prayer assumes that the intellect is devoid of any representation, of any “form” – not only of sensible things and any created reality, but even of God Himself. See *De oratione* 67: “Never give a shape (Μὴ σχηματίζεις) to the divine as such when you pray, nor allow your intellect to be imprinted (τυπωθῆναι) by any form (μορφὴν), but go immaterial to the Immaterial (ἀλλὰ αὔτως τῷ αὔλῳ πρόσθι) and you will understand (καὶ συνήσεις).” Cf. (Casiday 2006), 193. Any representation of God, Christ, or angels that might arise at this moment can only be a deception of the demons, especially the demon of vainglory, cf. *De oratione* 116. See (Guillaumont 1984), 255–256.

<sup>26</sup> *De oratione* 67. The contemplative realizes that, in his reality as a creature, the fundamental dimension is not his material body, but his immaterial intellect (*nous*). This intellect, created and perfectly adapted, aims to know the Immaterial, namely, God as a non-numerical Trinity and perfect unity. The intellect thus becomes the “immaterial icon of the Immaterial God.” (Driscoll 2003), 15.

<sup>27</sup> *De oratione* 85: ἡ δὲ προσευχὴ προϊμίον ἐστὶ τῆς αὔλου καὶ ἀποικίλου γνώσεως – “And prayer is a prelude to the immaterial and simple knowledge.” (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 300.

light (*phos*) appears in the intellect and imprints (*ektypōō*<sup>28</sup>) ‘the place of God’ (*topos tou Theou*).” The use of ‘*ektypōō*’ here<sup>29</sup> is particularly surprising, as in the very next chapter, the ‘*noēma tou theou*’ is explicitly listed among ‘representations’ that leave no form in the intellect.<sup>30</sup>

In the expression *to noēma tou Theou*,<sup>31</sup> the word *noēma* no longer signifies a ‘representation,’ but rather the ‘idea,’ ‘concept,’ or ‘thought’ of God — *hē mnēmē tou Theou*, “the memory of God,”<sup>32</sup> as described in the *Chapters to Evagrius’ Disciples*.<sup>33</sup>

As this divine ray recreates the authentic “state of the intellect” (*noū katástasis*), it gains the capacity to contemplate itself, “like sapphire or sky-blue – which Scripture also calls ‘the place of God’ (*tópon Theoû*), seen on Mt Sinai by the elders.”<sup>34</sup> What it sees possesses brilliance and color but lacks form.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>28</sup> ἐκτυπώω (derived from ἔκτυπος) = “worked in high relief.” For another unusual use of the language of “imprinting” [τυπώω = “form by impress;” “form, mould, model”; (Liddell et al. 1996), 524, 1835], see *KG* 5.41 (Hausherr 1939), 231: “The one bearing the *intelligible cosmos* (νοητὸς κόσμος) imprinted (τυποῦμενον) in himself ceases from all corruptible desire (ἐπιθυμία φθαρτή); and he is ashamed at those things he first he enjoyed; his thought (λογισμός) frequently reproaches him for his earlier insensibility.” (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 380.

<sup>29</sup> *De malignis cogitationibus* 40.9, which also appears in 25.40 (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 242: “But, pay attention to yourself (πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ) and see how the intellect (ὁ νοῦς) puts on the form (ἐνδύεται τὴν μορφὴν) of its own body without the face, but again imprints (ἐκτυποῖ) the neighbour entirely by means of discursive thought (κατὰ διάνοιαν), since having grasped beforehand and seen such a one entirely.”

<sup>30</sup> 41.27–29, (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 294: διότι τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα οὐκ ἐν τοῖς τυποῦσιν τὸν νοῦν νοήμασιν ἐστίν.

<sup>31</sup> *De malignis cogitationibus* 41.17. The expression τὸ νόημα τοῦ θεοῦ – which appears only here and in the *Scholion* 1 on *Psalm* 140.2(1) (“τὸ δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα”) – may seem unusual: the word νόημα takes on the meaning of “notion,” “idea,” or “concept” in this context rather than that of “representation.” (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 293, n. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Capita cíc auctoribus discipulis Evagrii* 61.6 (Évagre le Pontique 2007), 162. The formula “ἡ μνήμη τοῦ Θεοῦ” is another biblically inspired way of designating the state of prayer. See *Scholion* 22 on *Psalm* 118.55: “for the evil thought (λογισμός), lingering in the discursive thought (τῇ διανοίᾳ), distracts the intellect (τὸν νοῦν) and separates it from the memory of God (τῆς μνήμης τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ)” (Évagre le Pontique 2007), 162, n. 61. “The memory of God” plays an important role in Evagrian spirituality, as evidenced by *Admonitio paraenetica* 3. This expression stands in opposition to “passion-laden memories” (*Praktikos* 34.1: Ὡν τὰς μνήμας ἔχομεν ἐμπαθεῖς), which include bad thoughts and the distractions arising from people and worldly affairs. (Muyldermans 1952), 87, 126, 157.

<sup>33</sup> (Guillaumont 1998), 21–22.

<sup>34</sup> *De malignis cogitationibus* 39.3–6 (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 286: σαπφείρω ἢ οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερῆ, ἥντινα καὶ τόπον θεοῦ ἢ γραφὴ ὀνομάζει ὑπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ὀφθέντα ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ. (Casiday 2006), 114.

<sup>35</sup> See *Skemmata* 2: καὶ τότε ὄψεται αὐτὸν σαπφείρω ἢ οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερῆ – “then he will see the intellect appear similar to sapphire or to the colour of the sky.” (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001c), 521. *Skemmata* 4: Νοῦ κατάστασις ἐστίν ὕψος νοητὸν οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερές – “The state of the intellect is an *intelligible height*, comparable in colour to the sky.” (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001c), 521. (Stewart 2001), 197–198.

This “formless light,”<sup>36</sup> through which the intellect perceives itself, is not inherent to the intellect but is, in fact, the light of God Himself.<sup>37</sup> By seeing itself as light, much like the azure of the sky, the intellect uncovers its likeness to God. Simultaneously, it perceives and comprehends – “indirectly, as if in a mirror” – “the immaterial, uncreated light that is God.”<sup>38</sup> However, what the intellect sees is not God Himself in His essence. Instead, much like the people of ancient Israel, it perceives the ‘place of God,’ which is its own self, enveloped in divine light.<sup>39</sup>

## The Vision of Intelligible Light in Plotinus

A. Guillaumont argued that, to express the experience during pure prayer, “Evagrius used language influenced by his philosophical culture, especially Neoplatonism.”<sup>40</sup> For a diachronic comparison, Plotinus may serve as the primary point of reference due to his extensive descriptions of mystical experiences and luminous visions.<sup>41</sup>

Like Evagrius, Plotinus emphasized the highest spiritual experience, recognizing the limits of language in expressing it.<sup>42</sup> “For this reason the vision (*theama*) is hard to express (*dysphraston*) in words.”<sup>43</sup> Mystical vision, by its very nature, “transcends the

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<sup>36</sup> (Conway-Jones 2018), 271; (Guillaumont 1984), 256.

<sup>37</sup> Thus, in moments of “pure prayer,” the intellect sees itself because it has become luminous; however, this light that enables it to see itself and perceive its “state” is the divine light that envelops it. This divine light is God Himself, as Evagrius states, adopting the Johannine formula (1 Jn 1:5), “God, in his essence, is light.” Cf. *Kephalaia gnostica* 1.35, S1, (Frankenberg 1912), 79: Ωσπερ το φως παντα ημιν αποδεικνυσιν αλλου φωτος ου δειται προς το θεαθηναι εν αυτωι ουτως ουδε ο θεος αποδεικνυσιν ημιν παν τι φωτος δειται εις το γνωσθηναι εν αυτωι. αυτος γαρ τηι ουσιαι φως εστι. – “Just as light (*phos*) itself, while showing everything to us, does not need another light (*phos*) by which to be seen, so also God, although he shows everything, does not need another light (*phos*) by which to be known. For, in his essence, ‘He is light (*phos*).’” (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 169.

<sup>38</sup> (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a), 519.

<sup>39</sup> (Guillaumont 1984), 260.

<sup>40</sup> (Guillaumont 1984), 260.

<sup>41</sup> (Konstantinovsky 2009), 78.

<sup>42</sup> Plotinus differentiates between ordinary ‘inferential or discursive thought’ (called *dianoia* or *logismos*) and the ‘non-discursive, intuitive thought’ characteristic of the Intellect. For the latter, he employs the terms *noesis* (‘intellection’) and *theoria* (‘contemplation’). Unlike discursive thought, “non-discursive thought is not inferential; it grasps its objects all at once, is non-representational (not thinking in images), is veridical and certain, and possesses its object rather than searching for it.” See (Emilsson 2007), 176–185.

<sup>43</sup> *Enneads (hereafter Enn.)* 6.9.10 (Plotinus 2011b), 340.19–21; (Plotinus 2011b), 341.



limits of intelligible categories,” meaning it cannot be strictly analyzed in rational terms.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, providing a complete description of a profound spiritual experience is impossible from the perspective of the experience itself, as it requires transcending ordinary consciousness and annulling the subject-object distinction.<sup>45</sup> “How could you proclaim him as other /than yourself/, if, when you were in contemplation (*theaomai*), you did not see him as being other, but as a unity with yourself?”<sup>46</sup>

Due to the abolition of the subject-object distinction even at the level of awareness, the language used to describe the mystical experience, after the event,<sup>47</sup> will be approximate, possessing an evocative rather than an analytical character.<sup>48</sup>

In *Ennead* 4.8.1, Plotinus famously describes the “soul’s awakening from the body to the mystical beauty of the self”, followed by its “return from the Intellect to discursive reasoning.”<sup>49</sup>

“Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine (*tōi theiōi eis tautōn gegenēménos*); and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of the intelligible (*noēton*). Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from

<sup>44</sup> (O’Daly 2019), 82.

<sup>45</sup> See Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.9.1.1 sq.; 6.9.2.35; 6.9.11.8 sq.; 4.8.6.1.1 sq. (Konstantinovskiy 2009), 98.

<sup>46</sup> *Enn.* 6.9.10 (Plotinus 2011b), 340.20–21: πῶς γὰρ ἂν ἀπαγγείλει τις ὡς ἕτερον οὐκ ἰδὼν ἐκεῖ ὅτε ἐθεῖατο ἕτερον, ἀλλὰ ἐν πρὸς ἑαυτόν. (Plotin 2003a), 309.

<sup>47</sup> A description made after a mystical event, from a restored state of normal discursive reasoning and with the re-established distinction between subject and object, cannot fully capture the experience itself. See (Konstantinovskiy 2009), 99.

<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, Plotinus, aware that union with the Absolute represents the pinnacle of his thought, seeks to connect this description, albeit with reluctance, to his entire system of thought. Thus, he aims not only to evoke but also to analyse, perceiving the experience as a form of knowledge. (O’Daly 2019), 82.

<sup>49</sup> The experience describes a union with the One, beginning from the level of the Intellect, which does not operate through analytical and discursive thought. Once this experience concludes, the Soul returns to its “centre of gravity,” i.e., to reasoning and discursive thought. (Plotin 2003a), 250, n. 2. Following Plato, Plotinus opposes analytical intelligence (*dianoia*) to pure intellect (*nous*), which can access simple entities that cannot be expressed by a “*logos*” composed of subject and predicate (see Plato, *Republic* 511c–d; cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VIII, 10). The Soul can know these only by uniting with them, “being” them in a certain way. Knowledge in Plotinus becomes identification with the known object (see *Enn.* 6.9.3.10–13). (Plotin 2003a), 291, n. 28.

Intellect (*nous*) to discursive reasoning (*logismos*), I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, even when it is in the body.”<sup>50</sup>

Some commentators have interpreted this Plotinian passage as a depiction of personal mystical experiences,<sup>51</sup> which his student, Porphyry, also references in *Vita Plotini* 23.<sup>52</sup>

A. Guillaumont sought to link Plotinus’ ecstatic experience in *Enneads* 4.8.1<sup>53</sup> with Evagrius’ accounts of the intellect contemplating itself as light during ‘pure prayer.’ However, Professor Bitton-Ashkelony suggests that a comparable record of ecstatic experience is absent from Evagrius’ writings.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Evagrius does not seem to regard ‘pure prayer’ as ecstatic in the strict sense. While ecstasy (*ekstasis*) implies a ‘standing out’ from oneself, Evagrius’ prayer involves a *katastasis* – a “return to one’s true state of being” – rather than self-abandonment.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Enn.* 4.8.1 (Plotinus 2011a), 396.1–9: Πολλάκις ἐγεγρόμενος εἰς ἑμαυτὸν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος καὶ γινόμενος τῶν μὲν ἄλλων ἕξω, ἑμαυτοῦ δὲ εἴσω, θαυμαστὸν ἡλίκον ὁρῶν κάλλος, καὶ τῆς κρείττονος μοίρας πιστεύσας τότε μάλιστα εἶναι, ζῶν τε ἀρίστην ἐνεργήσας καὶ τῷ θεῷ εἰς ταῦτόν γεγεννημένος καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ ἰδρυθεὶς εἰς ἐνέργειαν ἐλθὼν ἐκείνην ὑπὲρ πᾶν τὸ ἄλλο νοητὸν ἑμαυτὸν ἰδρύσας, μετὰ ταύτην τὴν ἐν τῷ θεῷ στάσιν εἰς λογισμὸν ἐκ νοῦ καταβάς ἀπορῶ, πῶς ποτε καὶ νῦν καταβαίνω, καὶ ὅπως ποτέ μοι ἔνδον ἢ ψυχὴ γεγένηται τοῦ σώματος τοῦτο οὕσα, οἷον ἐφάνη καθ’ ἑαυτήν, καίπερ οὕσα ἐν σώματι (Plotinus 2011a), 397, modif.

<sup>51</sup> See (Wallis 1976), 121–154. Especially the passages that describe the radiant luminosity of the Intelligible world [*Enn.* 6.7.15: “so that the region is illuminated by noetic light – ὡς φέγγει νοερῷ καταλάμπεσθαι τὸν τόπον... but one must become that [the Intellect], and make oneself the contemplation” – δεῖ δὲ ἑαυτὸν ἐκεῖνο γενόμενον τὴν θεάν /ἑαυτὸν/ ποιήσασθαι.” (Plotinus 2011b), 136.30–31; 32–33. (Plotinus 2011b), 137] represent a type of proof that Plotinus has in mind “an actual experience” and that the *nous* is “not a mere theoretical construction derived from the Aristotelian and Middle Platonic tradition.” (Wallis 1976), 123. See also A. Cornea, (Plotin 2003a), 250, n. 1: “Philosophy in Plotinus is not only a desk affair or a commentary, but an attempt to interpret in rational terms and, following the Platonic tradition, a *personal mystical experience*.”

<sup>52</sup> For Plotinus (Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 23), “his end and goal was to be united to, to approach the God who is over all things.” – Τέλος γὰρ αὐτῷ καὶ σκοπὸς ἦν τὸ ἐνωθῆναι καὶ πελάσαι τῷ ἐπὶ πᾶσι θεῷ. (Plotinus 1989), 71. “Plotinus attained this goal [of union with the One] four times, not as a mere possibility but in ineffable actuality.” – Ἐτυχε δὲ τετράκις που, ὅτε αὐτῷ συνήμην, τοῦ σκοποῦ τούτου ἐνεργεῖα ἀρρήτῳ [καὶ οὐ δυνάμει]. (Plotinus 1989), 70.15–18; (Plotinus 1989), 71.

<sup>53</sup> (Guillaumont 1984), 260: “Plotinus describes in analogous terms a state that he claims to have experienced many times (*Enn.* 4. 8.1.1–11).”

<sup>54</sup> (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 304.

<sup>55</sup> (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b), 514.

The experience of *ekstasis*<sup>56</sup> in Plotinus occurs “suddenly” (*exaíphnēs*),<sup>57</sup> and the Intellect has the vision of a light, not of an object illuminated by a light that is different from itself,<sup>58</sup> but of the light itself.<sup>59</sup> This is the light of the Good, the Good itself, which illuminates the Intellect, and the Intellect sees itself illuminated,<sup>60</sup> shining, and filled with intelligible light, until it becomes pure light itself: “It is therefore possible

<sup>56</sup> To reach the transcendent, the Intellect must acquire “another way of seeing” (ἀλλὰ ἄλλος τρόπος τοῦ ἰδεῖν), “to go out of itself” (ἐκστασις) and become something “simple” (ἁπλως) (*Enn.* 6.9.11.22–23), “not Being, but beyond Being” (οὐκ οὐσία, ἀλλ’ ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας) (*Enn.* 6.9.11.41). (Chindea 2008), 218. Nevertheless, for Plotinus, “ecstasy is nothing but a revelation, at a given moment, of an eternal *datum*.” (Dodds 1960), 6. In Evagrius, the term ἐκστασις appears with its pejorative meaning of “disorder of the mind” (Liddell et al. 1996), 520. See *Praktikos* 14.6 (Évagre le Pontique 1971), 534: ἐκστασις φρενῶν – „losing one’s mind”. *Capitula xxxiii (definitiones passionum animae rationalis)* 9, (Migne 1863), 1265B: Ἐκστασις, ἔστι νεύσις πάλιν πρὸς κακίαν λογικῆς ψυχῆς μετὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν καὶ γνῶσιν τὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ – „Ecstasy is a turning back towards vice of the rational soul, after having acquired virtue and the knowledge of God.”

<sup>57</sup> ἐξαίφνης = “suddenly,” “unexpectedly,” or “abruptly” (Liddell et al. 1996), 582. Platon, *Symposium* 210.e.4–5: ἐξαίφνης κατόψεται τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν – “suddenly, he glimpses something by its nature wonderfully beautiful.” (Platon 2011), 148. See Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.3.17.29: ὅταν ἡ ψυχὴ ἐξαίφνης φῶς λάβῃ – “when the Soul suddenly caught sight of light” (Plotin 2009), 341; cf. *Enn.* 5.5.3.13; 5.5.7.34; 5.8.7.14; 6.7.34.13; 6.7.36.19. The immediate nature of the light’s appearance experienced by Plotinus (*Enn.* 5.5.7.26) can also be confirmed by Plato (*Letters* VII, 341c7–d1), who talks about knowledge transmitted from teacher to student: οἷον ἀπὸ πυρὸς πεδήσαντος ἐξάφθην φῶς – “which leaps forth like a light from a kindled fire.” See (Bussanich 1988), 137–139. Knowledge that comes suddenly and unexpectedly (*exaíphnēs*), as an enlightenment, is, for Evagrius (cf. *Epistulae* 64.67), a gift from God, an undeserved grace. (Abba Evagrius Ponticus 2022), 375, n. 889.

<sup>58</sup> *Enn.* 6.7.36.10–13 (Plotinus 2011b), 198: Ὅστις γένηται ὁμοῦ θεατῆς τε καὶ θέαμα αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων καὶ γενόμενος οὐσία καὶ νοῦς καὶ <ζῶν παντελές> μηκέτι ἔξωθεν αὐτὸ βλέπει – “Whoever suddenly becomes both seer and vision – seeing himself and seeing the rest – becoming being, Intellect, and ‘Complete Living Being,’ would no longer be able to look at Him from the outside.” (Plotin 2009), 85.

<sup>59</sup> *Enn.* 6.7.36.15–21 (Plotinus 2011b), 200: Ἐνθα δὴ ἐάσας τις πᾶν μάθημα, καὶ μέχρι τοῦ παιδαγωγηθεὶς καὶ ἐν καλῷ ἰδρυθεὶς, ἐν ᾧ μὲν ἐστὶ, μέχρι τούτου νοεῖ, ἐξενεχθεὶς δὲ τῷ αὐτοῦ τοῦ νοῦ οἷον κύματι καὶ ὑποῦ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ οἷον οἰδήσαντος ἀρθεὶς εἰσεῖδεν ἐξαίφνης οὐκ ἰδὼν ὅπως, ἀλλ’ ἡ θέα πλήσασα φωτὸς τὰ ὅμματα οὐ δι’ αὐτοῦ πεποίηκεν ἄλλο ὄρᾶν, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸ τὸ φῶς τὸ ὄραμα ἦν – “There you set aside all knowledge; up to a certain point, you received instruction. Being established in Beauty, you think as far as your present state. But, being carried beyond the very wave of the Intellect itself, swept away by its swelling surge, you saw suddenly (*exaíphnēs*), without seeing how; the vision, filling your eyes with light, did not make you see something else through light, but what you saw was it – the light!” (Plotin 2009), 86.

<sup>60</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.17.34–38 (Plotinus 1984), 134: φωτισθεῖσα δὲ ἔχει, ὃ ἐζητεῖ, καὶ τοῦτο τὸ τέλος τάληθινὸν ψυχῇ, ἐφάψασθαι φωτὸς ἐκείνου καὶ αὐτῷ αὐτὸ θεάσασθαι, οὐκ ἄλλου φωτί, ἀλλ’ αὐτό, δι’ οὗ καὶ ὄρᾳ. Δι’ οὗ γὰρ ἐφωτίσθη, τοῦτο ἐστίν, ὃ δεῖ θεάσασθαι – „But when it is enlightened, it possesses the One it seeks, and this is the true goal of the Soul – to come into contact with that light and to see it through the light itself, not through another light, but through the very light by which it also sees. Indeed, it is the very light by which it was enlightened that it must look through.” (Plotin 2009), 342.

Here to see (*horaō*) Him and to see your Self, as you are allowed to see: your Self / to see it/ shining, full of an intelligible light (*phōtos plērēs noētou*); rather the Self itself having become pure light (*phōs katharon*), unburdened, light, having become a God, or rather being God.”<sup>61</sup>

When contemplating the light, the Intellect does not see it as something existing outside itself,<sup>62</sup> but rather like the eye, which, in darkness or under pressure,<sup>63</sup> suddenly sees a light emanating from within itself:

“Thus, the intellect (*nous*), having veiled itself from all other things and gathered itself (*synagagō*) inward (*eis to eso*), seeing nothing /external/ (*meden horon*), will behold (*theaomai*) not a different light (*phōs*) in something else, but the light (*phōs*) itself, in itself (*kath’ heauton*), the only pure (*katharon*) light, suddenly (*exaiphnēs*) manifesting within itself (*eph’ heautou*).”<sup>64</sup>

According to J. Bussanich,<sup>65</sup> “the One, as the source of light<sup>66</sup> and the luminosity

<sup>61</sup> *Enn.* 6.9.9.56–59 (Plotinus 2011b), 338: Ὅραν δὴ ἔστιν ἐνταῦθα κάκεῖνον καὶ ἑαυτὸν ὡς ὁρᾶν θέμις· ἑαυτὸν μὲν ἡγλαΐσμενον, φωτὸς πλήρη νοητοῦ, μᾶλλον δὲ φῶς αὐτὸ καθαρὸν, ἀβαρῆ, κοῦφον, θεὸν γενόμενον. (Plotin 2003a), 307–308.

<sup>62</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.7.21–23 (Plotinus 1984), 176: Ἀλλ’ ἐπεὶ μὴ ὡς ἕξω ὄν δεῖ τὸν νοῦν τοῦτο τὸ φῶς βλέπειν – “But the Intellect must not look at this light as something external (to itself)...” (Plotin 2003b), 368.

<sup>63</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.7.25–29.

<sup>64</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.7.31–34 (Plotinus 1984), 178: Οὕτω δὴ καὶ νοῦς αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων καλύψας καὶ συναγαγὼν εἰς τὸ εἶσω μηδὲν ὁρῶν θεάσεται οὐκ ἄλλο ἐν ἄλλῳ φῶς, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸ καθ’ ἑαυτὸ μόνον καθαρὸν ἐφ’ αὐτοῦ ἐξαίφνης φανέν. (Plotin 2003b), 369.

<sup>65</sup> Throughout Chapter 7 of Treatise 5.5 [32], Plotinus makes extensive analogies between *aisthesis* (sensation) and *noesis* (intellection) to clarify the relationship between the One and the Intellect. He shows that *aisthesis* is dual, involving both the sensible object (*aistheton*) and the light medium through which it is perceived (lines 1–16). “Similarly” (*houtos*), “*noesis* is directed toward the intelligible objects and the light from the One that illuminates them” (16–22). Plotinus then discusses the “light internal to the eye, which is apprehended by not seeing when external objects are removed from the field of vision” (22–31). “Similarly” (*houtos*), the Intellect perceives its own internal light when it ‘veils itself’ from its objects” (31–35). See (Bussanich 1988), 133–139.

<sup>66</sup> The sources of sensible and intelligible light are briefly mentioned in this chapter: the sun (5.5.7.11) and “the primary nature” (πρώτη φύσει) (5.5.7.17–18). Elsewhere, the procession of Intellect from the One is presented more explicitly as light, which is associated with the theory of double-activity (*energeia*). See *Enn.* 5.3.12.40–45 (Plotinus 1984), 116: “We shall say that the first *energeia*, which, as it were, flows from it (ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ) like light from the sun (ὡς ἀπὸ ἡλίου φῶς), is the *nous* and all intelligible nature (πᾶσαν τὴν νοητὴν φύσιν); but he himself, remaining motionless at the summit of the intelligible world (ἐπ’ ἄκρῳ τῷ νοητῷ), reigns over it (βασιλεύειν ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ): he does not cast out the radiance (ἐκφανέν) from himself – for we would admit another light before light (ἢ ἄλλο φῶς πρὸ φωτὸς ποιήσομεν) – but always illuminates (ἐπιλάμπειν), remaining unchanged over the intelligible world (ἀεὶ μένοντα ἐπὶ τοῦ νοητοῦ).” (Plotinus 1984), 117. For the Good as the cause of Intellect and intellection, closely following Plato, *Republic* 508e–509b, cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.7.16.21–31. See (Bussanich 1988), 134–135.

of the intelligible universe,”<sup>67</sup> serves as the starting point for “the mystical vision of the One,” as illustrated by Plotinus in this passage.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, as the “Intellect withdraws from intelligible objects,”<sup>69</sup> it undergoes a “gathering inward.”<sup>70</sup> “This inward turning is a mystical imperative, not only because the Good is present within everything, but also because it too ‘is, if we may say so, borne to his own interior.’”<sup>71</sup>

The radical transformation of the ‘Intellect’s normal intelligible vision’ is captured by the phrase *mēden horōn* (“seeing nothing”<sup>72</sup>). This mirrors what occurs when the eye turns inward: “For then in not seeing (*ouch horōn*) it sees (*horāi*), and sees then most of all; for it sees (*horāi*) light (*phōs*).”<sup>73</sup> The Intellect, in turn, sees this light but is soon enveloped by it, leading to the instantaneous dissolution of distinctions between subject and object, as well as inner and outer. This hyper-

<sup>67</sup> According to Plotinus, in the intelligible universe, considered apart from the One, light is pervasive. See *Enn.* 5.8.4.5–7 (Plotinus 1984), 248: “for all things are transparent (*διαφανῇ*), and there is nothing dark (*σκοτεινὸν*) or opaque (*ἀντίτυπον*); everything and all things are clear to the inmost part to everything (*εἰς τὸ εἶσω*); for light (*φῶς*) is transparent to light (*φωτὶ*).” (Plotinus 1984), 249. Based on the principle of omnipresence, and continuity, of light, Intellect is the source of light for the Soul, cf. *Enn.* 4.3.11.14–15 (Plotinus 2011a), 70: Ἦν δὲ νοῦς ἐκεῖνος ὁ ἐκεῖ ἥλιος – “So that sun in the divine realm is Intellect,” and what derives from Intellect is “light from light” – φῶς ἐκ φωτός (4.3.17.13–14); (Plotinus 2011a), 88. See (Bussanich 1988), 135.

<sup>68</sup> (Bussanich 1988), 135.

<sup>69</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.7.31: αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων καλύψας – “having veiled itself from all other things” – suggests that the ‘Intellect is moving away from its usual apprehension of intelligible beings’ and shifting toward ‘a direct inner awareness of the One.’ The Intellect’s turn to focus on the light-medium through which it perceives is also expressed earlier at 5.5.7.20: ἀφήσει τὰ ὀρώμενα – “it abandons the things it sees” (Plotinus 1984), 177, a phrase that echoes the technical language of negative theology at 5.3.17.38: Ἀφελε πάντα – “Take away everything!” (Plotinus 1984), 135. See (Bussanich 1988), 135.

<sup>70</sup> (Bussanich 1988), 136. The phrase “εἰς τὸ εἶσω” signals a ‘mystical approach to the One,’ as reflected in the statement that “the soul must let go of all outward things and turn altogether to what is within.” *Enn.* 6.9.7.17–18 (Plotinus 2011b), 328: πάντων τῶν ἔξω ἀφεμένην δεῖ ἐπιστραφῆναι πρὸς τὸ εἶσω πάντη (Plotinus 2011b), 329.

<sup>71</sup> *Enn.* 6.8.16.13 (Plotinus 2011b), 280: ὁ δ’ εἰς τὸ εἶσω οἷον φέρεται αὐτοῦ. (Plotinus 2011b), 281.

<sup>72</sup> Werner Beierwaltes underscores that the luminous nature of theophanic events is central to epistemology, defining knowledge as a direct, illuminated participation in divine reality. See (Beierwaltes 1961), 343: “‘Seeing nothing’ (*Nichts sehend*), the Intellect sees, because light (*Licht*) cannot be grasped as an objective thing, because it does not reside in something else as a quality, but, being in itself (*in sich seiend*), is only itself (*nur es selbst ist*) and shines only from itself (*nur von sich selbst her scheinend ist*). Light is light because it is unified in itself (*einig in sich selbst ist*). But non-seeing (*Nicht-Sehen*) is the only appropriate way of seeing (*Sehens*) corresponding to light that is in itself (*in sich seienden*), which does not see with the help of light (*Lichtes*), but is one with it by seeing-not-seeing (*nichtsehend-sehend*).”

<sup>73</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.7.29–30 (Plotinus 1984), 178: Τότε γὰρ οὐχ ὁρῶν ὁρᾷ καὶ μάλιστα τότε ὁρᾷ· φῶς γὰρ ὁρᾷ·

noetic<sup>74</sup> mode of knowledge is analogous to “immediate intuitive apprehension” (*athroa prosbolē*<sup>75</sup>), a state attributed to the eye when it turns upon itself.<sup>76</sup>

It is important to emphasize the analogy between the Intellect’s “turning inward” (*synagō eis to eisō*) and the contemplation (*horaō/theaomai*) of light (*phōs*) in Plotinus, and Evagrius’s theory that, during prayer, the intellect contemplates (*horaō/theōreō*) its “own state (*katastasis*),”<sup>77</sup> “its own light/radiance (*phengos*)”<sup>78</sup>. In this context, the Plotinian concept of the Intellect’s “dual vision”<sup>79</sup> could become, as Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony suggests,<sup>80</sup> the key to understanding the culmination of Evagrius’s theory of “pure prayer.”

“Intellect (*nous*) also, then, has one power (*dynamis*) for thinking (*noeō*), by which it looks (*blepō*) at the things in itself (*en autō*), and one by which it looks at what transcends it (*epekeina autou*) by a direct intuition (*epibolē*) and direct reception (*paradochē*), by which also before it saw (*horaō*) only, and by seeing (*horaō*) acquired intellect (*nous*) and is one.”<sup>81</sup>

The Intellect’s self-contemplation in Plotinus is likened to light (*phōs*) seeing itself (“*auto ara auto horai*”), a conception based on the fact that “actual seeing is double”<sup>82</sup> and that, “There” (*ekei*), in the intelligible universe,

“it sees not through another (*di’ heterou*), but through itself (*di’ hautēs*), because there is nothing outside (*mēde exō*) it. Therefore, one light (*phōs*) sees (*horaō*) another light (*phōs allo*) by means of another light (*allō phōti*),

<sup>74</sup> Cf. also (O’Daly 2019), 84.

<sup>75</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.7.8 (Plotinus 1984), 176. The same term describes the Intellect’s intuitive grasp of the One at 3.8.10.33. See (Plotinus 1980), 396: προσβολῇ συνείς – “knowing it by intuition”; (Plotinus 1980), 397], just as its synonym, ἐπιβολῇ, does: 3.8.9.21 [(Plotinus 1980), 390: ἐπιβολῇ ἀθρόα – „immediate intuition”; (Plotin 2003b), 330]; 6.7.35.22 [(Plotinus 2011b), 196: βλέπει... ἐπιβολῇ – „sees by immediate intuition.” (Plotin 2009), 84.

<sup>76</sup> See (Bussanich 1988), 136.

<sup>77</sup> Evagrius, *De malignis cogitationibus* 39.2–6: ἑαυτοῦ κατάστασιν.

<sup>78</sup> Evagrius, *Gnostikos* 45.6–8: τὸ οἰκεῖον φέγγος; *Praktikos* 64.1–3: τὸ οἰκεῖον φέγγος.

<sup>79</sup> *Enn.* 6.9.3.33–34 (Plotinus 2011b), 312: Δύναται δὲ ὁρᾶν ὁ νοῦς ἢ τὰ πρὸ αὐτοῦ ἢ τὰ αὐτοῦ [ἢ τὰ παρ’ αὐτοῦ] – “The Intellect can see either those things that are prior to it, or its own things, [or those that proceed from it.” (Plotin 2003a), 292.

<sup>80</sup> (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 304.

<sup>81</sup> *Enn.* 6.7.35.20–24 (Plotinus 2011b), 196: Καὶ τὸν νοῦν τοίνυν τὴν μὲν ἔχειν δύναμιν εἰς τὸ νοεῖν, ἢ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ βλέπει, τὴν δὲ, ἢ τὰ ἐπέκεινα αὐτοῦ ἐπιβολῇ τινι καὶ παραδοχῇ, καθ’ ἣν καὶ πρότερον ἑώρα μόνον καὶ ὁρῶν ὕστερον καὶ νοῦν ἔσχε καὶ ἔν ἐστι. (Plotin 2009), 84, modif.

<sup>82</sup> *Enn.* 5.5.7.1 (Plotinus 1984), 174: Ἡ ἐπειδὴ διττὸν καὶ τὸ ἐνεργεῖα βλέπειν. (Plotinus 1984), 175.

not through anything else (*di' allou*). So then, one light sees another light, and consequently, it sees itself (*auto hautō horā*).<sup>83</sup>

This Plotinian perspective of the Intellect, which “needs to see itself, or rather to possess the seeing of itself (...), and its seeing is its substance,”<sup>84</sup> must have been significant, as Bitton-Ashkelony concludes, “in shaping Evagrius’ theory of the self-vision of the *nous*, the summit of the activity of the praying *nous*.”<sup>85</sup>

## Evagrius and Plotinus

It is broadly acknowledged that phenomena involving light during meditation are documented across a range of religious traditions. When comparing figures such as Evagrius and Plotinus<sup>86</sup> or other mystics, it is important to remember that seemingly similar terminology can obscure significant differences<sup>87</sup> in usage. Moreover, experiences that appear alike might lead us to overlook crucial distinctions in religious culture.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup> *Enneade* 5.3.8.20–22: ἐκεῖ δὲ οὐ δι’ ἐτέρου, ἀλλὰ δι’ αὐτῆς, ὅτι μὴδὲ ἕξω. Ἄλλω οὖν φωτὶ ἄλλο φῶς ὁρᾷ, οὐ δι’ ἄλλου. Φῶς ἄρα φῶς ἄλλο ὁρᾷ· αὐτὸ ἄρα αὐτὸ ὁρᾷ (Plotin 2009), 329. See also (Hadot 1997), 104: “For Plotinus, as for Plato, vision consists of a contact between the inner light (*lumière intérieure*) of the eye and the outer light (*lumière extérieure*). However, Plotinus concludes that when vision becomes spiritual, there is no longer any distinction between the inner light and the outer light. Vision is light, and light is vision (*La vision est lumière et la lumière est vision*). There is a kind of self-vision of light (*autovision de la lumière*): light is as if transparent to itself (*la lumière est comme transparente à elle-même*).”

<sup>84</sup> *Enn.* 5.3.10.9–13 (Plotinus 1984), 104: τὸν νοῦν δεηθῆναι τοῦ ὁρᾶν ἑαυτόν, μᾶλλον δὲ ἔχειν τὸ ὁρᾶν ἑαυτόν,..., καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ ὁρασιν εἶναι. (Plotinus 1984), 105.

<sup>85</sup> However, unlike Plotinus, Evagrius does not describe the mechanism of the *nous*’s dual capacity to see; he merely states that “just as, then, the intellect receives the representations of all sensible things, so too does it receive those of its own organism.” *De malignis cogitationibus* 25.14–16; (Évagre le Pontique 1998), 240. (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 305.

<sup>86</sup> Similar to Evagrius, Plotinus created his own symbolic language to articulate ineffable experiences. His accounts of union with supreme reality feature subjective elements, such as joy and light, alongside poetic and metaphorical descriptions, like a ‘choral dance.’ (*Enn.* 6.9.8.38). See (Konstantinovskiy 2009), 99.

<sup>87</sup> For example, Guillaumont points to texts where Plotinus describes the light perceived by the *nous* as inherent to itself when it moves beyond discursive thought, rather than being external (see *Enn.* 5.3.17.29–37; 5.5.7.23–32). Also, in Book 6, Plotinus identifies this light as the “constitutive nature of the *nous* itself, originating from the light that generates all intelligibles.” (*Enn.* 6.7.36.21–27; 6.9.9.56–61). See (Stewart 2001), 195 and n. 106.

<sup>88</sup> See (Katz 1978), 46: “Mystical experience is ‘over-determined’ by its socio-religious milieu: as a result of his process of intellectual acculturation in its broadest sense, the mystic brings to his experience a world of concepts, images, symbols, and values which shape as well as colour the experience he eventually and actually has.”

The experiential contents recounted by Evagrius and Plotinus<sup>89</sup> can be best understood through a holistic<sup>90</sup> approach that considers the essential aspects of their conceptual systems.<sup>91</sup>

Plotinus develops the concept of *henosis*<sup>92</sup> to designate “the union of the Soul with the Intellect,”<sup>93</sup> and for union with the One, he resorts either to the verb *henoō* (“to be united, to become united”<sup>94</sup>), or to the expression *hen amphō*: “no longer are they two, but both – one.”<sup>95</sup>

Plotinus’ description of mystical union stems from his conception of the One: just as the higher part<sup>96</sup> (“summit”) of the soul remains in eternal union with the Intellect, the highest level of the Intellect – “the *nous* in love” or “that in *nous* which is not *nous*” – also remains in eternal union with the One. Therefore, the One does not need to “turn towards us,” because it is always present at the core of our being: to realize it, we only need to “remove all things” (*aphairesis*). By doing this, we “make ourselves formless” and anticipate the sudden appearance of the One.<sup>97</sup>

At the highest point of the Plotinian ascent, the vision of the One occurs through the power of the Intellect, yet through a *nous* “emptied” of content. The perception of the One’s presence aligns with a kind of simple intuition, but an intuition that is experienced only when the soul becomes completely one with the

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<sup>89</sup> See (de Andia 2005), 83: “Evagrius Ponticus, like Dionysius the Areopagite, also aligns with the thought of Plotinus and Porphyry, for whom the *noûs*, which contemplates the One, is without form, *aneideos*.”

<sup>90</sup> See (Katz 1978), 47: “Choosing descriptions of mystic experience out of their total context does not provide grounds for their comparability, but rather severs all grounds of their intelligibility, for it empties the chosen phrases, terms, and descriptions of definite meaning.”

<sup>91</sup> See (Konstantinovskiy 2009), 101–102.

<sup>92</sup> In contrast, Evagrius’ “doctrine of prayer does not promote any ecstatic behaviour, nor does it lead to union with God in the classic sense of *henosis*.” (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 299. See also (McGinn 2004), 154: “Evagrius never uses the term ‘mystical union,’ and even the standard terms for union (*henosis*, *koinonia*, etc.) are largely absent from his vocabulary.”

<sup>93</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 4.4.2.26.

<sup>94</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, 23.15: ἐνωθῆναι. See also Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9.9.33–34; 45–47.

<sup>95</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.7.34.13–14: οὐδ’ ἔτι δύο, ἀλλ’ ἐν ἅμφω; (Plotin 2009), 83. (de Andia 1996), 7.

<sup>96</sup> Evagrius, *De oratione* 36: „Prayer is the ascent of the intellect to God.” – Προσευχὴ ἐστὶν ἀνάβασις νοῦ πρὸς Θεόν. Evagrius speaks of “an ascent of the intellect,” that is, the “higher” part of our being, and not the soul. As I. Hausherr points out, it is crucial to acknowledge Evagrius’s tripartite division. This framework, although unusual for us, consistently uses “intellect” in contexts where we would typically refer to the “soul.” (Hausherr 1959), 145. Although Evagrius most often speaks only of the intellect, as Bunge notes, he always has in mind the whole human being, specifically viewed as the “image of God,” oriented toward a personal encounter with God through “knowledge” (*gnosis*). See (Bunge 2022), 136.

<sup>97</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.8.23–25; 6.7.35.5–9; 6.8.11.33–35; 6.8.21.25–28; 5.3.17.36–38. (Wallis 1989), 473.



Intellect.<sup>98</sup> To attain union with the One, “the soul must become entirely simple”<sup>99</sup> relinquishing awareness of all intelligible, and previously sensible, realities.<sup>100</sup> In this process, it loses ‘consciousness of self,’ but at the same time, it discovers its ‘true Self.’ This ‘spiritual journey’ is not an external quest but “an inward movement, experienced by the soul as a return to its origin and true home.”<sup>101</sup>

According to D. Linge, Evagrius’ understanding of reality, while inspired by Platonic thought, is essentially ‘experiential,’ serving as a “path of purification through which the ascetic ascends to union with God.” Platonic philosophy offered reflective Christian ascetics like Evagrius a “metaphysics of transformation, which they connected to the Church’s anticipated eschatological transformation, ultimately where ‘God will be all in all’.”<sup>102</sup> This metaphysics is ‘transformative’ because its description of reality – “unfolding in descending levels from the supreme Good” – acts as a ‘ladder of ascent’ for “the initiated to rediscover their true nature and achieve the direct vision of God.”<sup>103</sup>

Although the direct influence remains unproven, Evagrius’ concept of the ‘first creation’ may exhibit similarities with Plotinus’ Intellect and its relationship to the One and the lower Hypostasis (Soul). Analogous to Plotinus’ Intellect, Evagrius regards the ‘original creation’ as “strictly immaterial.” For both thinkers, the “descending

<sup>98</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.8.10.31–32: Εἰ δὲ ἀφελῶν τὸ εἶναι λαμβάνοις, θαῦμα ἔξεις – “But if you grasp it by taking away being from it, you will be filled with wonder.” (Plotinus 1980), 397). In this way, Plotinus’ mysticism can be considered “a mysticism of the *nous*.” (Merlan 1963), 2. Cf. (Carabine 1995), 141.

<sup>99</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.3.14.2–3.

<sup>100</sup> The soul’s imperative to “flee alone to the Alone” (φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον), means it must shed ‘external relations’ and “separate itself from this foreign world” (ἀπαλλαγὴ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν τῆδε). See *Enn.* 6.9.11.50–51). As K. Corrigan clarifies, this ‘flight’ is not ‘narcissistic’ or ‘solipsistic.’ Instead, it signifies a purification from all that is alien to one’s identity, leading to an ‘integral union’ that bestows meaningful existence and light. In this context, *monos* (alone) does not imply ‘abandonment’ or ‘self-absorption,’ but rather a state ‘free of barriers’ that could hinder ‘complete union.’ See (Corrigan 1996), 41–42. Cf. Evagrius, *De oratione* 67 (Migne 1865), 1181: “Never give a shape (Μὴ σχηματίζης) to the divine as such when you pray, nor allow your intellect to be imprinted (τυπωθῆναι) by any form (μορφὴν), but go immaterial to the Immaterial (ἀλλὰ ἄυλος τῷ ἄϋλῳ πρόσθι) and you will understand (καὶ συνήσεις).” Evagrius emphasizes this formless approach because God has no body and leaves no mental impression (cf. *De oratione* 41). His “go immaterial to the Immaterial” closely parallels Plotinus’ “fleeing alone to the Alone.” (*Enn.* 5.1.16, 6.9.11). (Casiday 2006), 235, n. 25.

<sup>101</sup> (Gregory 1999), 124.

<sup>102</sup> 1 Cor 15:28.

<sup>103</sup> See (Linge 2000), 543. Linge argues that the ‘unifying theme in Evagrius’ thought’ stems from “Plato’s concept of the spiritual cosmos’s ‘coming forth’ from God, its subsequent fall into material plurality, and its eventual return to harmony with the transcendent Source.” This Platonic framework, evident in *Timaeus*’s (27d–52c) cosmic structure and the ascent themes of *Symposium* (204b–212a), *Phaedrus* (247c–251b), and *Republic* (511b–515e), highlights the “essential religious core of the Platonic tradition, particularly as developed by Middle Platonism and Neoplatonists like Plotinus, through the themes of ‘procession’ (*próodos*) and ‘return’ (*epistrophē*).” See (Linge 2000), 543 and n. 8.

metaphysical movement” signifies a “transformation from the immaterial to the material,” whereas “the reverse, soteriological movement, ultimately results in the complete ‘annihilation’ of the body.”<sup>104</sup>

In describing ‘fallen’ rational creatures, some scholars propose a tripartite ‘anthropology’ of *sōma*, *psychē*, and *nous*, applying this framework to humans, angels, and demons alike. Following this interpretation, Evagrius’ analysis appears closer to Plato and Plotinus than to Origen, notably due to the central and prominent role he assigns to the concept of *nous*. Like Plotinus, Evagrius considers the *nous* to be the “contemplative essence of the human being, capable of existing independently of the soul and body.”<sup>105</sup> In its ‘current’ embodied state, the *nous* has taken on a discursive function (*to logistikon* or *dianoia*), engaging with the world of plurality and change. Meanwhile, its higher, original nature – as ‘direct apprehension’ (*theoria*) – remains ‘concealed and inactive,’ influenced by the ‘passible soul.’<sup>106</sup>

Evagrius appears to view the ‘natures’ into which intellects have fallen within the ‘second creation’ as notably ‘provisional.’ According to Linge, this provisionality highlights the “influence of ascetic life on his theology.” “One’s ‘nature’ – their place in the ‘hierarchy of being’ – is not permanently fixed;” instead, it develops “from and also reflects their current capacity (or incapacity) for contemplating God.”<sup>107</sup>

Recently, Doru Costache<sup>108</sup> has proposed a new interpretation of the metaphysical positions in *Kephalaia Gnostika*,<sup>109</sup> considering them – “at least on a

<sup>104</sup> See KG 2.15, 17, 77; 3.66; 1.26 and *Epistulae* 64. Evagrius, much like Plotinus, focuses on the “non-discursive awareness of rational beings” and how the lower regions of being “participate in” and are, in fact, “images” of the higher ones. This can be seen by comparing Evagrius’ writings, such as KG 2.4, 4.90 or *De oratione* 55–73 (on ‘formless prayer’), with Plotinus’ treatises like ‘On Intelligible Beauty’ (*Enn.* 5.8.4) and ‘On the Kinds of Being’ (*Enn.* 6.2.21, 28 sq.). See (Linge 2000), 544 and n. 11.

<sup>105</sup> KG 4.85.

<sup>106</sup> In Plato’s *Republic*, Book IX, he identifies three parts of the soul: the rational (*logistikon*), irascible (*thymikon*), and desiring (*epithymēton*). He advises preparing for sleep by stimulating the rational part with arguments, calming the irascible, and moderately satisfying the desiring part, which he deems particularly dangerous due to its ‘lawless dimension’ (571d–572a, 572b). Evagrius adopts this terminology, replacing *logistikon* with *nous*, likely because *nous* more closely aligns with the biblical concept of the ‘heart’ or the human center. See (Case 2006), 160, n. 267 and 161, n. 268. *Epithymia* and *thymos* are influenced by the changing realm of sensory experience. Therefore, from the perspective of the individual ‘fallen *nous*,’ the purpose of life in the material-visible world is to gradually “free oneself from the influences of the soul and body.” See (Linge 2000), 544–545.

<sup>107</sup> (Linge 2000), 547.

<sup>108</sup> See (Costache 2021), 718–730.

<sup>109</sup> KG 3.28: „The soul is the intellect which, through its negligence, has *fallen* from unity; and because of this negligence has descended to the level of practice.” (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), S2, 269. Typically, scholars interpret this passage in a metaphysical sense, seeing it as describing the “fall” of the intellect into the condition of the “second creation.” Cf. (Linge 2000), 545; (Ramelli 2015), 156–157.

certain hermeneutical level – metaphorical depictions of monastic life.” “In the monastic code,” the passage reflects “the trials and dangers faced by advanced monastics on their spiritual journey,” including the risk of “regressing to the status of simple ascetics, incapable of gnosis.” Similarly, “the primordial unity of the intellects symbolizes the fellowship of Evagrius’ monastic peers, perhaps his own circle of disciples.”<sup>110</sup>

In this new framework, the “‘degradation’ of the intellect into the soul of a simple, ‘practical’ ascetic” signifies the advanced ascetic’s need to “return to basics” after “succumbing to bodily passions,” aiming to “retrieve lost perfection.” Through this lens of ‘ascetic theology,’ seemingly metaphysical topics like ‘the renunciation of the body’<sup>111</sup> and ‘final restoration’<sup>112</sup> become ‘metaphors’ for conquering ‘bodily passions’ and achieving a ‘higher spiritual state.’ Thus, considerations of restoration – “the intellect’s ascent from the ‘second creation’” – represent “the existential transformations experienced during spiritual progress.”<sup>113</sup>

Spiritual ascent, therefore, is not an ontological change, literal ‘angelization,’ or final ‘disembodiment.’ Instead, Costache sees it as “parables and images of the monastic journey”<sup>114</sup> – a life traditionally called ‘angelic,’ perfected through ‘immaterial’ or ‘undistracted prayer.’<sup>115</sup> Evagrius’s use of ‘cosmological parables’ to illustrate monastic life aligns with his scriptural interpretation, enabling the “monastic ‘spirit’ to imbue the metaphysical ‘letter’ of his cosmological speculations. By examining his stance on this intricate scriptural and monastic foundation, it becomes evident that “under the guise of cosmological narratives and metaphysical speculations, Evagrius spoke of the experience of the spiritually advanced.”<sup>116</sup>

Costache concludes that Evagrius’ ‘metaphysical speculations’ in *Kephalaia Gnostika* were designed for advanced students, using a ‘heuristic pedagogy’ to help them “read between the lines and decode puzzles.” Behind the “fragmented cosmological narrative,” these students could see “a complex map of the spiritual journey’s” changes, rather than just “a story of a dissolving world.”<sup>117</sup>

<sup>110</sup>(Casiday 2013), 76–99. Cf. (Costache 2021), 724.

<sup>111</sup>See KG 1.26; 3.68.

<sup>112</sup>KG 3.60: “The sign of the East is the symbol of the saints; the sign of the West is (the symbol of) the souls that are in Sheol. But the Holy Trinity is the end of the *return* ‘course’ of all.” (Évagre le Pontique 1958), S2, 123. On “return” (S2: *pūnāyā*, probably Gk. *epistrophe*, cf. Acts 15.3 Peshitta), see also KG 5.22; 6.19. (Evagrius of Pontus 2024), 214–215, 287.

<sup>113</sup>KG 5.22. (Costache 2021), 725.

<sup>114</sup>Costache suggests that this interpretation may even apply to the entire Evagrian metaphysical discourse. (Costache 2021), 726.

<sup>115</sup>See (Harmless 2004), 351–352.

<sup>116</sup>See (Costache 2021), 726–727.

<sup>117</sup>“Thus, the view that Evagrius believed in the ‘dematerialization of the cosmos,’ advocating for a ‘spiritualist metaphysics,’ does not hold up under careful scrutiny,” cf. (Costache 2021), 729–730.

As noted, Plotinus delved into many mystical themes also found in Evagrius. These include the ‘soul’s withdrawal from the multiplicity of objects (*pragmata*)’<sup>118</sup> as a prelude to a ‘higher state of consciousness,’ its ‘resemblance to and union with the supreme Reality,’ the ‘temporary suspension of the subject-object distinction,’ and ‘liberation from bodily awareness.’<sup>119</sup>

While Plotinus’ language of union may have influenced the mystical imagery of Late Antiquity,<sup>120</sup> extending the analogy too far with Evagrius risks obscuring the unique nature of his thought.<sup>121</sup> Unlike the Neoplatonic<sup>122</sup> tradition of the third and fourth centuries, which lacked a comprehensive theory of contemplative prayer and the ‘praying *nous*,’ Evagrius’ coherent teaching made a remarkably stimulating and innovative contribution to the ascetic self in Eastern Christianity. This underscores its profound novelty within the broader Christian and non-Christian understanding of mystical vision in Late Antiquity.<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

The study of the concept of *nous* in Greek and Christian mysticism, through a comparative analysis of the works of Evagrius Ponticus and Plotinus, reveals a level of semantic complexity and experiential depth that goes well beyond modern translations like ‘mind’ or ‘intellect.’ In this context, *nous* is better understood as an intuitive ability to grasp intelligible beings and as a capacity for mystical union with the divine that surpasses discursive rational processes.

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<sup>118</sup> Evagrius, *Skemmata* 23; *De malignis cogitationibus* 40.

<sup>119</sup> (Konstantinovsky 2009), 99.

<sup>120</sup> (Guillaumont 1984), 260.

<sup>121</sup> (Konstantinovsky 2009), 99–100. Evagrius, a man of letters, philosopher, theologian, and dialectician, sharpened his skills in Constantinople’s anti-Arian struggles before bringing his refined spirituality to the Egyptian deserts, emulating the monastic model of the Cappadocians. Although he owed much to Gregory of Nyssa’s asceticism, Origen was his primary influence. Evagrius read Origen directly, wholeheartedly embracing his ideas without the reservations held by the Cappadocians. Nevertheless, the spiritual system he crafted from Origen’s teachings was distinctly his own and *original*. Cf. (Bouyer 1963), 382. For Evagrius’ classical education, see (Lackner 1966), 17–29.

<sup>122</sup> For Proclus (412–485 AD), “philosophical prayer” (exemplified by Plato’s *Timaeus*) goes beyond verbal invocation. It signifies a profound alignment of human will and intellect with the divine, making the act of philosophizing and ordering one’s life according to divine principles the ultimate prayer. This leads to divine unification and the fulfilment of existence. See (Layne 2013).

<sup>123</sup> Cf. (Bitton-Ashkelony 2017), 20; (Bitton-Ashkelony 2011), 303.

While both Evagrius and Plotinus describe mystical experiences involving light visions, their interpretations and the roles of this phenomenon differ fundamentally. For Evagrius, the human *nous* is considered the ‘image of God,’ realizing its essence through ‘pure prayer.’ In this state (*katastasis*), the *nous* sheds all mental images and enters into direct communion with God, leading to the appearance of a divine light (the “place of God”) that reflects the *nous*’s likeness to the Divine. Plotinus, in contrast, presents an ecstatic union with the One, where light is not external but becomes the very essence of the Intellect. This comparison highlights the influence of Neoplatonism on Evagrius’s mystical language while emphasizing the uniqueness of Christian spirituality.

Ultimately, although there are obvious terminological similarities, the approaches of the two authors differ in their cultural contexts and goals. While Plotinus examines a wide range of mystical themes related to union with the One through *henosis*, Evagrius develops a ‘metaphysics of transformation’ (Linge) that is deeply connected with ascetic monastic life. This view not only emphasizes Evagrius’s originality in creating a coherent theory of contemplative prayer but also highlights his innovative contribution to understanding the ascetic self in Eastern Christianity. In conclusion, the *nous*, in its many forms, acts both as a bridge to the divine and as a mirror reflecting humanity’s inner transformation.

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