

Thought, Logos and Conscience in Plotinus' Enneads

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In Plotinus' theory, thought is an activity that does not require consciousness' reduplication for exercising itself. It does not mean that it has not some kind of self-awareness, but that self-awareness is not, in the case of pure thought a matter of becoming two in one. If consciousness implies some externalising of thought content, it is not proper to thought as thought. In the realm of thought indeed there is no need of a projection screen for a sense of thinking to awake. Thinking is an activity self-displaying, self-constituting, self-purporting. Plotinus undertakes a genealogy of thought issuing from its principle, the One. In this genealogy, he gives to thought the power of forming itself in its desire for the One. Desire for the One is precisely what allows it to form itself: by desiring the One, thought becomes totally itself, it becomes not what it would be, but what it must be. By so doing, it is a kind of life, coming from the One, more a desire than a thought in its early moment.

There is then a thought before thought, a thought in the making, that is not get thought of something, but a viewing of the One beginning to view something else than the One. The object of thought is appearing in thought by the very movement by which thought becomes itself. There is no object of thought outside thought; every object of thought is a thought, conceived as an object. The many objects of thought are all included in a single activity that is called thinking. They are the thinking members of thinking, in the same time as they are its objects. There is then some kind of identity which in Plotinus' philosophy, does not exclude some difference; it is not a difference of entity, but a difference of function, into the realm of thought. When it is forming itself, it is giving place to a kind of world, which in Plotinus' system is called the "One-many". The many objects are organic parts of the whole, they are not viewed from outside. This difference in identity requires some special sense of awareness. Awareness of its own internal viewing its objects is for thought another thing than consciousness in a more frequently used sense of the word.

Self awareness of thought, indeed, may be a kind of consciousness; it is necessary to reconsider the very notion of consciousness in order to apply it to pure thought. Plotinus distinguishes two aspects of consciousness, the first being a matter of internal sense in the exercising of an activity, not a "I think", but a "there is thinking going on by us and between us". This kind of awareness belongs to an activity self-determining, even if pure thought does what it does by desiring the One. Awareness of thought is as originary as thinking itself, it does not involve any sort of external medium, as logos will be for the more ordinary consciousness. In the first sense, consciousness in pure thought means the inner sentiment following immediately, or rather

echoing thought's own movement, by which it surveys its own world. That minimal consciousness must be paradoxical in the eyes of Plotinus, because it has to encompass both movement and simultaneity, pure thought excluding that succession of acts which may be called "discourse". There is no exteriority between the many contents of thought, and hence no getting off to get in anew. But there is nevertheless a continuous transition of thought, which pervades all its objects, without reviewing them one by one. That consciousness is of the whole by the whole, it is the whole sentiment of the thinking organic parts. Every one of them has that intimate sentiment of its own activity and of the activity of all other so that consciousness is not private consciousness. The sentiment of the whole is not going over the manifold sentiments of the thinking members; it is infinitely expressed by them, and each of them is conscious of the whole by being conscious of his own act. It is, all in all, an organic consciousness, where all members "see themselves in others" (Enneads, V, 8 [31], 4, 14 Armstrong); the whole is whole in every part, "all are everywhere and each and every one is all" (ibid. I. 9-10). Therefore, if there is transition, there is no extroversion, the movement of thought being felt everywhere simultaneously. Contents of thought are also activities, and comprehend in their own activity all other activities. All are wholes including the whole of all wholes, so that feeling oneself is feeling oneself as a part which is a whole. Hence pure thought has consciousness of itself in every one of its parts as a whole. And that consciousness includes a feeling of fullness, fullness at every part; there is no unrest, no uneasiness in that primary consciousness, to which life is an eternal present, never exhausted. But how, things being so, consciousness in the second and more ordinary sense can possibly arise? And first what is that sense? Consciousness is understood here far less mildly by Plotinus, who is putting the emphasis now on a more real duality in it, in so far as by now pure thought is subjected to some projection on a new medium, the medium of imagination. As Plotinus conceives it, consciousness as seizing back — reduplication — is consciousness of otherness. I am not now directly conscious of what I think, consciousness in that case needs something received, received from outside and from above. Plotinus does not identify the thinking soul and the conscious soul; when we are no more in the realm of pure thought, thinking is not immediately an object of consciousness; it is the most conspicuous feature of consciousness in its secondary sense, that discrepancy between the activity of thinking and the act of being aware of it. Thought in the soul can be unconscious, it is not as itself that it is present in consciousness. Plotinus, in an unusual way, even for a Greek, not only gives to

thought the right to keep its activity in an unconscious way, but ascribes the awareness of it to another position of the soul, which he calls "middle soul". Between "high soul" and "middle soul", there must be some go-between, some mediator that makes object of pure thought accessible to middle soul.

If there must be a mirror of pure thought, that must be some image-making of pure thought where middle soul will be able to read, as it were, contents of thought in another guise. But, in order that this reading take place, the content of pure thought has to be unfolded, reduplicative consciousness of thought relies thus on a mental discourse which, unlike the movement of pure thought, is motivated by a searching purpose and discloses what is indivisibly contained in every organic part of pure thought. "The intellectual act is without parts and has not, so to speak, come into the open, but remains unobserved within; but the verbal expression (logos) unfolds its content and brings it out of the intellectual act into the image-making power, and so shows the intellectual act as if in a mirror and this is how there is apprehension (Enneads, IV, 3, 30, ll. 8, 11, trad. Armstrong).

Logos is then the way of unfolding for middle soul what is always active in higher soul; it is not a forming principle of thought as thought, it is a principle of expression, allowing middle soul to perceive a thought that does not belong to her as such. Logos is a necessary condition for consciousness, when soul is addressing itself to another task than pure thinking. Even if thought is always present, logos must take the way of searching, it is a mean of conducting thought into the realm of time, where mental discourse is always lacking of fullness.

Logos is not the movement proper to thought, it is something like the secondary movement of thought outside its proper sphere, a kind of disclosing which is not necessary to the thinking being to perceive its own thinking, but needed by middle soul to be aware by return of the thinking exercised by a higher and prior reality. That consciousness "by return" includes in fact a triadic constitution: pure thought in its latent state, logos as searching succession of disclosing acts and final image of thought by the mediation of logos. Logos stand in the middle of the triad, at the very confines separating eternity and time, as if, by being expressed, pure thought were getting into time by the same token. Logos is the act of a soul in uneasiness, which does not apply to a single task, a busy soul which is feeling the fulfilment of its self-mastering. Logos insinuates itself into that undertaking, in which, nevertheless, it pursues another end, which is unitive and not separative. It is using the sensible productivity of middle soul when perceiving objects in the sensible world, to make known pure thought to middle soul, as if it were a way of remembering something asleep in soul.

So there is some kind of ambiguity in Logos' operation between pure thought and image-making. Logos, indeed, has its own way of acting, like a living bond, between the two, giving to perceive

by way of imaging what by itself goes over all image. However, Plotinus, in our locus of IV, 3, 30 describes the rising of consciousness in terms that remind us the classical plotinian description of procession. The unobserved state of pure thought is like a germ, of high density, able to self-disclose, in what may be strictly called an "evolution". So that the manifestation of unobserved thought, can perfectly be conceived also as necessary development of the germ, which commands secretly the act of Logos. Logos' act is not purely nor exclusively an act of its own, it is in its own way a kind of mean for pure thought's self-disclosure. Plotinus is not fond of sharp distinctions: for him necessity and spontaneity do not exclude one another, spontaneity is rather comprehended into necessity, and without knowing accomplishes it. Logos, for instance, is the spontaneous realization of pure thought's necessary development, and nevertheless, or rather because of it, it has a real activity, which is image-making, or, more strictly, the discursive preparation of image-making. The reception of pure thought cannot be direct, from the hidden content to its image. That is the reason why this consciousness is called "consciousness by return". Between the self-disclosing of thought and its reception by middle soul, the soul that says "I", there must be an unifying act, which has for its duty to pave the way for the reception, as if in it the whole soul was seeking to play at the same time on its many registers. To be aware of thought, soul has to form out a substitute for it, so that one cannot be sure that it is thought itself of which it is aware. Logos, in the first place, displays multiplicity where thought content in itself has for essential feature undivided unity. Secondly, it projects this internal multiplicity on a screen, as it were, consciousness by return being in that case a double translation.

Time and image are joining together in the act of Logos; consciousness is time-stuffed and image-made, it is a successive projection of what is simultaneous in pure thought. In a nutshell, in Plotinus' own terms elsewhere, "what appears at each successive time is its consciousness as it (i.e. soul) thinks" (Enneads, IV, 4, 13, l. 19 Armstrong). Successive appearance is the work of Logos, which receives and manifests, for soul itself, what it thinks as from outside. The paradox within Plotinus' conception of ordinary consciousness is here at its climax : thought is received as if it were coming from elsewhere and nevertheless, it is the more domestic activity of soul. Soul as a whole is then not wholly aware of what it does, "we are always thinking, but we do not always be aware of it" (IV, 3, 30, ll. 15, 16 Armstrong). This intermittent consciousness of thinking activity is, at first sight, quite strange. Thought being able to self-disclose, there would be permanent manifestation of its activity upon middle soul as receiver. And it is naturally the case. Thought is not by itself hidden in its involute state, owing to the inherent necessity of its manifestation, which is part of the natural necessity belonging to the One's manifestation. Middle soul remains in touch with the purely thinking part, which on its own

side does not be unwilling to reveal itself: how then may we understand the fact that we always think but are not always aware of it ? If it is not ascribable to pure thought by itself, we are to attribute that defect to middle soul. And indeed Plotinus ascribes the flaw to it.

Middle soul is also a mixed soul in its acts. It is not purely thinking or feeling, it is the power of relating one to another, of acting between the two, maintaining by the way the unity of the whole soul. If thought and perception are two ecstatic states of soul, middle soul tries to reinstate the ego's rule on ecstatic experiences, and in order to reconstitute that rule it is using Logos. Logos is then a kind of conversion, a way of going up to what is always revealing itself in thought; hence it is a mixed act, both remembering and translating, looking up and down at the same time. It is remembering because middle soul has not leisure for receiving pure thought's manifestation, being too busy in perception and action over sensible world for that. "And, if one ought to dare to express one's own view more clearly, contradicting the opinion of others, even our soul does not altogether come down but there is always something of it in the intelligible, but if the part which is in the world of sense perception gets control, or rather if it is itself brought under control, and thrown into confusion, it prevents as from perceiving the thing which the upper part of the soul contemplates" (Enneads, IV, 8, 8, ll. 1-6 Armstrong, transl. Armstrong).

The concept of recollection involved in that conception of Logos' work is very peculiar, in so far as it is recollection of thought, and thought is always acting. Logos' recollection relates to what is always the case, even to what is always giving itself, the flaw being due to the receiver. Logos is retaking thought by way of dematerializing the products of perception, offering thus a faint image of thought in time. So Logos is like a bridge on the occultation of thought, it is its expression only by being its recollection, not giving to it another form, but reduplicating it as if in a mirror. There is no more reality in the expression than in that which is expressed by it on the contrary there is less reality, the reality of the doubling thing, which is precisely the manifestation "by return".

Plotinus' conception of Logos' recollection relies on a deeper conception of the soul, whose activities are not necessarily known to each other. Unlike the Stoics, Plotinus does not view logos as a constant accompaniment to thinking, a kind of self-commentary, logos is rather a way of reinforcing thought's reception in soul, owing to the principle formulated in another Plotinus' treatise (Enneads I, 4, 9, ll 24-25 Armstrong) : "It will not be the whole of him (the good man, in that place) that is unaware of this activity (vz thinking) but only a part of him". Middle soul in this part that is sometimes in the dark, and is only liable to a distant awareness of thought. Its perception of thought is no witness to the reality of

thought's activity, but at the secondary level of image-making. Middle soul is not the whole of the soul, it is rather the bridge part which is filled with light but forgets it. Consciousness of thought presupposes occultation of thought, counteracted by logos. In this sense of the word, consciousness is not therefore in an intimate link with thought, the care of sensible world being an hindrance to a continuous attention.

It is then a possible conjecture that Plotinus is introducing Logos to distinguish two concepts of consciousness the first relating to a kind of awareness that is not a reduplicative activity, but rather some inward feeling of the thinking part, the second including an act of going back, middle soul being the very place of the turning back, because it is called back to its own interior principle. In that rise of consciousness as it were from outside, there is at backstage a concealed operation of thought, so that secondary consciousness or reflexive consciousness is nothing else but primary consciousness unfolded by projection on another set. From simple act to its doubling, the way is not that of self-dualizing thought, reflexivity being not necessary for it to know itself. But it is necessary to the ego for perceiving that it also thinks, so to speak, and Logos, in that view, remembers to him what is his eternal and essential activity. It is linking image of thought in middle soul with prior knowledge (I, 4, 10, ll. 15, 16 Armstrong) of thought's activity. By so doing, Logos assumes an ethical stance, that of unifying the various experiences of the ego, counteracting self-will, liberating the power of conversion to thought hindered by world's care and, first and foremost, increasing in soul the power of remembering its own state before its descent into body. However, Logos has no more place when pure activity is in front of the stage. Inward awareness is essentially linked with exercising the activity, reflexive awareness, as for it, does not include that kind of essential link, even if it is a projective form of inward awareness. Plotinus wants to preserve the highest experiences of soul — in relation to the One and the Intellect from the reflexive prejudice, which ascribes to all activities as an intrinsic feature consciousness following the act. "Conscious awareness in fact, is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness ; only when they are alone are they pure and more genuinely active and living" (Enneads, I, 4, 10, ll. 28 – 32 Armstrong, transl. Armstrong). Involvement in activity warrants its intensity and thought – not to speak of the One – proves its superiority as activity precisely by excluding reflexive consciousness. If Logos had to follow all activity of thought, it would be enfeebling and thought would be lacking of fullness in its own movement. Logos is rather a way of mediating thought in me and awareness of thought by me. It is not required for thought's full exercise but for self's proper unity.