

If language accompanies the ambiguity inherent in our condition, what is the exact way in which language and this condition go together? What is it about a being that is both sensible and intelligible and what is it about language that the two seem enfolded together? This is one of the driving questions behind Plotinus' *Ennead V 3*[49], which is explicitly concerned with how something can think itself. Plotinus' overt concern is about the kind of operation and the kind of being involved in something thinking itself, is about whether it is an activity performed by something complex or by something simple. However, implicit in this concern is the question about the relation between language and our ambiguous condition, an implication we can see unfold as we follow the course Plotinus takes in his discourse. Let us follow along with him, then, while keeping our guiding question in view. In that way, we may work through it and see how it is implicitly involved in Plotinus' explicit question. We ask, then—what is language, given its activity takes place within an ambiguous being; what is this being, given language takes place within it?

### V 3[49] 1

Plotinus asks what it means for something to think itself—the activity of a constituent part within a complex whole thinking all the other constituent parts or something simple thinking itself?<sup>1</sup> A being that is a composite of parts can only think itself when one part of it thinks the rest. One of its parts is designated with the activity of thinking, since if the whole *as whole* was charged with thinking, it would not be an activity in terms of a composite but of a whole. But in its mode of thinking, the composite part thinks the rest of the whole, which means it thinks about something other than itself. Even as a part within the same whole, it is still some distinct part other than the non-thinking ones. Since it operates in terms of being other than what it thinks about, we will still ask if the thinking part thinks itself. Now, this shows us we are looking for a

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<sup>1</sup> Plotinus. *V 3[49] 1*, 73. Trans. A.H. Armstrong. Harvard University Press: Cambridge. 1984.

simple being that, in thinking, thinks itself. Plotinus goes on to argue that even if we do not posit such a mode of thinking in humans, intellect itself has this power. If we do not grant such a power, then we have to say what is capable of thinking all that is intelligible and of knowing that it does so is not capable of thinking itself. This means that either intellect is unintelligible or is incapable of thinking everything that is intelligible, both of which are false by definition. The question, then, becomes how can intellect can itself, given it must be simple to do so but must also be able to think other intelligible beings. This is the question Plotinus is asking himself at the end of this chapter.

However, before moving on, let us note a few deposits he left along the way. Namely, if something composite thinks only with clear distinctions between that which thinks and that which is thought, the object of its activity is always something other. This implies its activities are always about, in regards to, or concerned with something else. There is a type of being that can only think *about* things on the very basis of being composite. On the basis of being composed of both sense and intelligence, our intellect can only be directed at something else because it is a part within a composition and not a simple being. Does our condition of being a composite that can only think about something require language to help secure, maintain, or otherwise enable the “about” linking thinking with its object? It would seem that we already have a way to answer our question about how language and being between the sensible and intelligible are related. A composite being can only think about something, which means there is a need to bridge the thinker with the thought, and language acts as that medium. Yet, before we get carried away, let us get back with Plotinus and see how in complicating the issue, he might also clarify it.

## V 3[49] 2

Instead of leaping to the intellect itself, Plotinus opts to work from the way the human soul comes to know and what it comes to know, whether this includes knowledge of itself, towards the way in which intellect itself knows. Plotinus makes two moves in this chapter that are important both for thinking through our question and for showing Plotinus' concern with it. One, he says sense perception "perceives the experiences in its body by its own agency, but the reasoning power in soul makes its judgment, derived from the mental images present to it which come from sense perception, but combining and dividing them."<sup>2</sup> He began with the basic experience that we perceive and that this perception is always of something, which means it apprehends what is external to the senses. Even when perceiving the hunger in my stomach, the organ of digestion is outside of the sense perception itself. In that way, Plotinus suggests our perception perceives something other than itself but does so "by its own agency." Although it depends on other objects, perception is still able to perform its operation on its own without deriving from another activity. We could say it has immediate access to what is external.

Now, and here is the first move, the judgment performed by the reasoning power is different, since it relies on mental images from sense perception. Unlike sense perception, the objects of reason come to it through another operation and so are not immediate. With reason, we have an operation that does not have immediate access to its objects, since the immediate qualities like color, sound, and taste each sense receives are formed back into a whole being, which reason can combine together or divide up. For instance, as I sit here, I am oriented to some objects as fitting under the group "furniture," some as "food," and others as "books" or "laptop." Reason can combine some things, proposing "the laptop is on the table;" it can distinguish and divide up as well as when it proposes "the apple is not a book." It can also combine in terms of

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<sup>2</sup> V 3[49] 2, 75

placing a particular presence—red, round, crunchy, sweet thing—into one category—apple—and divide by not placing it in another—i.e. chair or laptop. In both cases, reason does not work with the immediate qualities of sense perception but with the mental image that mediates between reason and sensation. Of course, the reasoning power is directed towards actual beings and not something in the mind, but it is directed through the mediating image. Plotinus, then, distinguishes sense perception, as having immediate access to its object, from reason as operating through something that mediates.

This seems to confirm the suspicion that because we are a composite of sense and intelligence, we need something to mediate between our activity of knowing and what we know. Because our intellect operates as part of a composite, it receives its object in a mediated way, which means a mediator is needed. Language arises precisely because the intellect must work with what is given through sense perception. Language receives what is given and makes of it something intelligible *like* chair or table instead of brownish extended thing. Indeed, even “brownish” and “extension” are general categories, reinforcing how language always deals with the sensible world in terms of groupings. Language is this mediation between sense perception and reason in that the grouping together is intelligible but what is being grouped is sensible. Thus, the operation of language in its relation to our ambiguous condition arises from a being in touch with sense and intellect at the same time, that requires a mediation between both ways of being. Language is precisely that means.

However, Plotinus will both complicate the issue and yet clarify it when he makes a second move, saying that “things which come to [the reasoning power] from Intellect, it observes what one might call their imprints, and has the same power also in dealing with these.”<sup>3</sup> Two things are at play here: one, our reasoning has immediate access to what is intelligible just as

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<sup>3</sup> V 3[49] 2, 77

sense perception has immediate access to what is sensible. The image of receiving an imprint suggests this immediacy in that when a round object is imprinted on wax, the object interacts with the wax directly. The circular imprint in the wax results from the circular object being pressed on it. Yet, and two, the reasoning power does not simply stop at receiving these intelligible impressions but “has the same power also in dealing with these.”<sup>4</sup> Presumably, Plotinus means that just as the reasoning power combines and divides sensible objects through a mediator, it “recollects” the intelligible impressions by “fitting” newly arrived ones into ones that “have long been within it.”<sup>5</sup> There is not just a reception of impressions but a grouping and fitting of them together, which means there is an operation that must deal with these impressions in a mediated fashion. The operation that collects these impressions back together with ones already in the soul must work with the impressions, not with what impresses. If the objects of this recollection are the impressions, then its operation is distinct from the operation that immediately receives the impression

Bringing all this together, there is a sensible part that has immediate access to sensible objects and an intelligible part with immediate access to intelligible objects. Within this set up, the reasoning power combines and divides objects given to it through the senses but also recollects intelligible impressions. Thus, the reasoning power operates both in relation to sensible perceptions and intelligible impressions, operating in terms of a mediator in both cases. This leads to the question of whether language acts as the mediator in the case of intelligible impressions and recollection in the same way it mediates between sense perception and reason. Following along with Plotinus in seeking whether language as a mediator works differently

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<sup>4</sup> V 3[49] 2, 77

<sup>5</sup> V 3[49] 2, 77

depending on whether sensible or intelligible impressions are at play, we will see the ways language accompanies our ambiguous condition.

### V 3[49] 3

In this chapter, it is more obvious that Plotinus is inquiring into the nature of language, our ambiguous condition, and the relation these two share. Plotinus begins by saying “when sense-perception sees a human being and gives its impression to discursive reason,” reason does not say anything but stops at knowing, unless it asks “who is this?” just in case one met this person before.<sup>6</sup> First, a clarification can now be made. The impression or mental image is not yet language, since reason does not say anything until it asks “who is this,” until it questions whether this particular perception is *like* some others previously experienced. On the basis of being given something from the senses, language arises at the moment of recognizing likeness or resemblance. When I ask “who is this,” the implication is that some particular, concrete sensible thing is before me, a “this”. But, with the “who,” it also implies something beyond any particular, concrete instance, something seen as the same in this instance as it was in some past one. Reason does not need to say anything, does not require language until there is this admixture, which implies that language does not operate until particularity and generality are confluent. Language, in this case, is a matter of taking a present experience of something and likening it with something one has already experienced. When I say “this is a book,” some particular presence is seen to be enough alike some collection of likenesses experienced in the past as to be appropriated into that group. In short, we experience the particularity of sensation and the generality of intelligibility all at once. Language is the vehicle that lets us reasonably navigate the sensible world.

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<sup>6</sup> V 3[49] 3, 77

However, language not only arises because we need to navigate between this particular sense perception and some general categories obtained through repeatable experiences. For instance, if I say “this is good,” the claim originates in sense perception because of the “this” but what is ascribed to it does not simply originate in sense perception but because we have a likeness to the good in ourselves.<sup>7</sup> Goodness is not like a category derived from repeated and repeatable experiences but is a principle in us that resembles the intelligible realm. Upon having a particular sense perception, this principle is reflected in that perception, since the intellectual part of our soul “receives the reflection of intellect coming down upon it.”<sup>8</sup> Goodness is one of the impressions received by our intelligence, which can reflect the goodness of sensible beings. It is as if our soul becomes a looking-glass that is angled to catch the light from the intelligible realm and reflect it in some sensible being. Like grouping something as “chair” or “apple,” the reasoning power in this case directs its efforts to something in the sensible world. Unlike this categorization, what is good comes from us reflecting the intelligible itself from the sensible instead of fitting some particular presence into a general category. Still, in both cases, the reasoning power is directed towards objects of the sensible world.

Language allows us to navigate between the sensible and intelligible in two ways: one, by way of dividing things up into categories and groups that can apply to new, particular experiences. Language allows us to form these categories and then to determine whether particular, sensible objects present before us can fit into them. Two, language acts as a sort of looking-glass that reflects, from that light of intelligibility, the intelligibility of sensible things as if angled between the two. In catching the light of what is received directly from the intelligible along with its shining in the sensible world, language mediates between intelligibility and

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<sup>7</sup> V 3[49] 3, 77

<sup>8</sup> V 3[49] 3, 79

sensibility. Plotinus will refer to both of these as “discursive reasoning,” whose project is to busy itself, to work with what is external and other than itself.<sup>9</sup> This power of reasoning and the language it employs is not concerned with illuminating or examining its own operation but with observing and working with sensible beings. Since this reasoning power is assigned the function of busying itself with the sensible and does so by virtue of having a connection with the intelligible, we see how reason is hinged between two powers within which it must mediate. Since language mediates in the two ways described above, it does not arise out of or result from the reasoning power but is its mediating operation. Since both reasoning and language are mediators between intelligibility and sensibility, since the ambiguity of our condition is the way we are hinged between two powers, language is the reasoning power at work. The former is the activity and operation of the latter. Language does not arise from our condition like an effect from a cause but is the ambiguous condition at work, performing its function of busying itself with the sensible in terms of the intelligible.

Indeed, we can see this clearer in Plotinus’ distinction between reason and intellect. He proclaims, “[t]he activities of Intellect are from above in the same way that those of sense-perception are from below; we are this, the principal part of the soul, in the middle between two powers.”<sup>10</sup> We are neither sensible nor intelligible but the middle voice between the two. Intellect is not something that purely belongs to the soul but something the soul can accord and align itself with. Reason, however, is proper to the soul because “we always use” it<sup>11</sup> in that we are always navigating the sensible world in terms of cataloging different experiences from it or reflecting an illumination from the intelligible within it. Reason is generated out of the

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<sup>9</sup> V 3[49] 3, 79

<sup>10</sup> V 3[49] 3, 81

<sup>11</sup> V 3[49] 3, 81



intelligible and sensible as their middle voice, while language is the expression of this generation, relating with this ambiguous condition as its performance.

However, does this not imply that language and reason are confined to keeping its focus on the sensible and, likewise, to keeping us confined to sensible objects as the aim of our focus, never being able to turn towards the intelligible itself? Or, and here we see how tightly wound together our question is with Plotinus' explicit one, can reason think itself? Now, it cannot do so as part of a composite being, since in that case reason would perform its operation as a distinct function within a whole activity. As we saw above, being a part confines something to being about or in regards to something else, meaning language and reason must at least peek beyond this ambiguous, composite condition. Our question is whether this movement requires a suspension of language. For if language is not to be a hindrance, it must not say *something about something* but *say something*—must say the thing itself. To help us out of this quandary, let us turn to Plato's *Phaedrus* where Socrates offers a metaphor to say what the soul is like.

### **A Light Detour**

Now, in both ways of reasoning, we saw that the operation was concerned with likeness, either as a collection grouped from repeated experiences or as catching the likeness of the intelligible within the sensible. It might appear dubious to turn to Socrates' description of what the souls is like if we want to ascertain whether language can *say something* and not just say *something about something*. Yet here, "like" suggests a metaphorical likeness, since "the soul is like the combined functioning of a yoke-team of horses and their driver, all winged."<sup>12</sup> This type of likeness takes a pair of seemingly unlike things but insists on their association as when I say "her eyes are like stars." Two objects fitting into two different categories are nevertheless said to be similar. To see how this type of likeness functions differently than the one described above,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 246a

let us follow Socrates' depiction of the human soul. The driver part of this soul is responsible for two different types of horses, one being upright, calm, and of noble stature with the other one being twisted, unruly, and gross. Although the human soul had a vision of true being unencumbered by the separation and division into sensible beings, its wings were defiled when it failed to witness being. Since being nourishes its wings, its lightness conducive to flight and ascent, this forgetting of being sends the soul tumbling down to be weighed down by gross mass. The horse associated with being crooked and unruly is not the body but part of the soul, which presumably makes the chariot car the body. This part of the soul inclines towards earth in the sense of weighing down,<sup>13</sup> of inclining towards mass and gravity. It wants the soul to be other than it is, to leave its home in revolving around being. Thus, that obviously makes the charioteers part of the job to resist this movement downwards and away from itself, while the light horse is to offer the most support and least resistance. Still, the human soul is like this *one* function, which means if the movement downward were removed from the human soul, it would be a different being. But what does it mean to be one function such that there is a movement inclined downward, a movement inclined upward, and a movement tending between the two? Since the movement down and away is associated with earth and corporeality, since the movement upwards is associated with the incorporeal, since the charioteer is linked to both, we can say it is a being simultaneously in tune with sensible beings and incorporeal being. The function must be able to navigate this simultaneity of occupying both realms.

But this leaves the soul with two primary ways of being this one function hinged between two immediacies, which is exemplified in the soul's reaction to a beautiful person. When the soul sees beauty radiating out of someone, it is reminded of being such that the tightly bound corporeality begins to loosen and melt, making way for wings to sprout. It can attempt to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 247b

corporeally unite with that thing, seeking the immediate pleasure and gratification of this fusion.<sup>14</sup> Or, the soul can resist this immediate fusion and, letting the beauty continue its outpour and feed the wings, allowing itself to regain its former lightness. The soul can relate to sensible, beautiful things by possessing them, confined to immediate gratification. Or, it can draw on the way the beauty reminds it of being, of its true place in revolving around it, thereby feeding the wings. Each option relies on language, or rather manifests language in a different way. Imagine someone oriented to a beautiful person in the first way. The objective is to gratify one's pleasures by the immediacy of the bodily union, which means you will want to persuade the beautiful one to hand over what one seeks. Language becomes a means to convince this other person and to devise ways of doing so, which means it is prone to conceal one's true being if that is what it takes. The person will take on likenesses and perceive likenesses that do or do not fit either person but still offer the pleasure of possession. This person speaks the language of persuasion and influence. Language is useful. In busying itself with the immediate pleasure of fusing with the beautiful thing, it forgoes nourishing the lightness that would make it possible to ascend back to its true home. This person loads and burdens himself with likenesses that help achieve immediate inclinations but keeps it from saying or seeing anything itself—including himself.

Now, the charioteer and the light horse speak to the heavy horse in terms of putting off consummation with the beautiful being until tomorrow.<sup>15</sup> They speak in terms of holding off and deferring until later the union with what draws the soul. We see this especially in the fact that this metaphor of the soul is marked by two expressions of caution—at the beginning of it,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 250e-251a

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 254d

Socrates says “[I]t is not true, this story,”<sup>16</sup> and later on, he calls it a “possible true though partly erroneous myth.”<sup>17</sup> This mark of caution indicates there is more to be told, more to say and to think before we can know or possess what we are after. In associating unlike things, the metaphor not only insists on the likeness of the association but retains the disassociation and unlikeness. The metaphor does not contain the being as a content, does not *have it* but leans into or is drawn towards what it attempts to say.

We see this clearer as Socrates continues to say the beauty of the beloved overflows the lover such that, like an echo, it reflects back onto the beloved who receives this reflection without necessarily understanding what has occurred.<sup>18</sup> Imagine if the beloved and the lover were looking-glasses. Each tend to go around reflecting light onto things, ordering and grouping things within the sphere of its illumination, having its reflections be *about* those things. However, when it happens to directly face something reflecting its own light out, the lover will experience the effluence and confluence of light. Since neither looking-glass is angled to reflect the source of its light directly back on the source, it can only reflect something that is itself reflecting that same light. The light pours out of the beloved, bends within the lover back towards the beloved. The light source that both reflect sustains a sort of reunion between the two and so the true source of light, true being indirectly reflects back on itself via these two looking-glasses. Thus, the two looking-glasses become more like their source by not using it to have a reflection *about something* but to *reflect light itself*. However, if they were to physically touch, the act would be over, and the mutual reflection would be interrupted by the attempt to immediately fuse. Only by putting off such union and holding out for this indirect reunion, each

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 244a

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 265c

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 255c-e

soul has a possibility of communion and communication that does not confine them to reflections about something.

### **A Return to Plotinus**

We can now make sense of Plotinus when he says we can accord with the intelligible itself “either by having something like its writing written in us like laws, or by being as if filled with it and able to see it and aware of it as present.”<sup>19</sup> Because Socrates will go on to claim there is “the word of knowledge that is inscribed in the soul of the learner,”<sup>20</sup> we can see how much this dialogue is in Plotinus’ mind. Both texts assert that there must be a living, internal word or inscription in the soul itself that all phonetic and/or graphic words would be dead without. Returning to our looking-glass example, it is as if the reflection from the light source inherent in each looking-glass is the inscription from the intelligible by which we can group, divide, and order or with which we can recollect its shining in sensible beings. In both ways, it is in accord with it by virtue of having that illumination inscribed within it, using it to reflect and have reflections *about* something.

Yet, it is in accord with it in stronger sense when it happens upon another looking-glass, becomes aware of, sees the presence of the source as light illuminates light. It is not a reflection about something but reflects light itself, the operator behind reflection. Yet this does not imply a complete fusion, which would terminate light reflecting light. Reflecting the operation of reflection itself—in other words, *saying something*—paradoxically as it sounds, implies not getting hold of it completely. Still, it is when the living logos of each being comes into confluence that the possibility of breaking from the confinement of the sensible is opened up. But this means that language can either keep one confined or open one to the possibility of

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<sup>19</sup> Plotinus, *V 3[49] 4, 83*

<sup>20</sup> Plato, 276a

ascent. Language functions in both ways and one cannot negate either aspect without changing what language is. *Like* our condition, language is ambiguous.

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