

PHILOSOPHIC SILENCE AND THE 'ONE' IN PLOTINUS

Plotinus, the greatest philosopher of late antiquity, discusses at length a first principle of reality – the One – which, he tells us, cannot be expressed in words or grasped in thought. How and why, then, does Plotinus write about it at all? This book explores this act of writing the unwritable. Seeking to explain what seems to be an insoluble paradox in the very practice of Late Platonist writing, it examines not only the philosophical concerns involved, but the cultural and rhetorical aspects of the question. The discussion outlines an ancient practice of 'philosophical silence' which determined the themes and tropes of public secrecy appropriate to Late Platonist philosophy. Through philosophic silence, public secrecy and silence flow into one another, and the unsaid space of the text becomes an initiatory secret. Understanding this mode of discourse allows us to resolve many apparent contradictions in Plotinus' thought.

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Preface

The present volume is a study of a recondite aspect of Plotinus' philosophy: his use of tropes of secrecy and silence in his discussions of the nature of his ineffable first principle. Recondite and perhaps obscure, but not unimportant: because Plotinus tells us that the One cannot be spoken of – writes that the One cannot be written about – the tropes of secrecy and silence cast a kind of shadowy paradox over his entire project. Plotinus tells us many things about the One, only to contradict them later, often denying that he can tell us anything about it at all, and if one were to arrive at a clear-cut conclusion from all this, it ought to be that Plotinus, by his own admission, should not be writing. The One, for Plotinus, is utterly 'silent' and the philosopher should seek to emulate this silence. And yet, were Plotinus to have kept silent, there would be no one to tell us of the need to keep silent about the One.

It has been noted that reading apophatic language or 'negative theology' can be a fairly agonising process, and any work which has apophysis as its theme tends to be agonising in direct proportion to its fidelity to the subject matter. The present work, it is hoped, treads an elusive middle path between self-negating obscurity and facile 'explanation' which enables some new insights into Plotinus' practice of written silence but is also somewhat readable. The goal has been to explore and describe some of Plotinus' techniques of written silence in an intelligible way without straying too far from the intrinsically mind-bending difficulty of the subject matter. The author craves the reader's indulgence for the many points at which the text falls too far in one direction or the other.

This book also treads a line between over-specialisation and general treatment. The discussion inevitably covers quite a bit of ground which has been treated elsewhere, in the interests of giving a reasonably complete overview of the subject matter. Plotinian specialists may thus find themselves frustrated by a certain amount of well-discussed material being

covered (not the three primary hypostases *again!*), while there is still a danger that novices will find themselves adrift in a strange thought-world. My reading of Plotinus militates for a strong connection between Plotinian ontology and epistemology, which necessitates more metaphysics than one might expect in a book primarily about Plotinus' writing practice. It is hoped that experienced readers will know where to skip judiciously ahead, and that newcomers to Plotinus' philosophy will be inspired to seek further rather than put off by any bafflement they experience in the course of reading this book.

Thanks are due to a host of benevolent people and institutions, but I limit myself to citing the most crucial. First and foremost, thanks are due to Katya for her inexhaustible forbearance and inspiration, and to Lulu for her daily demonstrations of what Plotinus must have meant by *noêsis*. The original thesis from which this book evolved was deftly shepherded into existence by Professor Christopher Gill, whose approach combines a rare balance of lightness of touch and incisive criticism. To scholars and friends who offered comments and inspiration, whether intentionally or by accident, my thanks are heartfelt even if I do not name you here; to name some would be inevitably to overlook others, to the detriment of all. Such errors and omissions which remain in this book are of course my own.

Abbreviations

CH	<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i>
DK	Diels-Kranz, <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i>
H + S 1	Henry and Schwyzer, eds., <i>Plotini opera, editio maior</i> (Paris/Brussels 1951–1973)
H + S 2	Henry and Schwyzer, eds., <i>Plotini opera, editio minor</i> (Oxford 1964–1983)
LSJ	Liddell, Scott and Jones, <i>Greek English Lexicon</i>
NF	Nock and Festugière 1947
NHC	Nag Hammadi Corpus
OLD	<i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i>
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> , Migne 1857–1866
SVF	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> (Arnim 1905–1924)
W	Wehrli, <i>Die Schule des Aristoteles: Texte und Kommentar</i>

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