

A stylized, light purple profile of a classical figure, possibly Plato, is visible in the background. The figure has a beard and is wearing a headpiece. Several five-pointed stars of varying sizes are scattered around the figure. A large, thin, light purple crescent moon is positioned behind the figure's head.

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PLATO AND PLOTINUS ON MYSTICISM, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND ETHICS

David J. Yount

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*To my parents,
Richard
and
Pauline*

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Preface

In this book, I argue that Plato and Plotinus do not essentially differ on many important claims in the areas of mysticism, epistemology, and ethics. I would like to acknowledge those who considerably improved this work. First, I would like to sincerely thank my colleagues and students at Mesa Community College (especially my first two Plato classes), who have heard me discuss this book's contents for years. I would specifically like to thank Dr. Debi Campbell and Dr. Barry Vaughan, who gave me excellent comments, and Kerry Leibowitz, Cathie Gagnon, Michael Yount, and especially my wife Elaine and my three sons Alex, Elliot, and Holden, for their moral support throughout the project. Hackett Publishing graciously permitted my use of most of the Plato quotations (all rights reserved), for which I am most grateful. (See below for a statement regarding my Harvard University Press permissions.) I would like to thank Jenn Neal for her invaluable assistance in the editing of this project. I greatly benefited from Lloyd Gerson's careful reading of the manuscript and excellent comments, though we still differ in our views. I am also in debt to Robert Price, who spurred my interest in and helped me better understand Plotinus. Finally, as a small token of my thanks for everything my parents Richard and Pauline have given me in my life, I dedicate this book to them.

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Introduction

There are two issues I should discuss before I lay out my argument that the mysticism, epistemology, and ethics of Plotinus do not essentially differ from Plato's view. First, I will examine and assess the "Unwritten Doctrines" or "Esotericist" interpretation of Plato's work (section I). Second, I will explain the methodology and plan of my project (section II).

I. The "Unwritten Doctrines" and Esoteric interpretations of Plato

There is an interpretation alternatively referred to as the Unwritten Doctrines, Unwritten Teachings, or Esoteric view of Plato's dialogues and, of course, there are those in favor and those against the idea.¹ I need to address this view because at least one commentator² argues that Plotinus is an adherent of it. Let us review what the interpretation holds, and then I will stake out a position to this effect: whether one accepts this view or not, one can still find the beliefs of Plotinus in the writings of Plato, which is all that my argument requires.

The Unwritten Doctrines or Esoteric interpretation of Plato may be defined as follows:

The modern "Esoteric" interpretation of Plato ascribes to him a more or less secret "esoteric" doctrine, consisting of a metaphysical system not to be found, at least not explicitly, in his written works, but propounded orally to his disciples in the Academy and constituting the real though hidden content of his philosophy.³

According to this view, we have evidence from Aristotle, Aristoxenus, Simplicius, Alexander, and Philoponus themselves that Plato had doctrines that he did not explicitly refer to in his writings, such as the Indefinite Dyad and/or the Great and Small.⁴

Witness the famous quotation from Aristoxenus on Plato's lecture on the Good Itself:

This, as Aristotle was always saying, was the experience of most of those who heard Plato's lecture *On the Good*. Each of them attended on the assumption that he

would hear about one of the recognized human goods—such as wealth, health, strength, and in general some marvellous happiness. When Plato's lectures turned out to be about mathematics—numbers, geometry, astronomy—and to crown all about the thesis that the good is one, it seemed to them, I fancy, something quite paradoxical; and so some people despised the whole thing, while others criticized it.⁵

Aristoxenus notoriously relates here that Plato gave an oral lecture on the Good, and more often than once. In Plato's *Republic*, the character Socrates says that he will only be able to discuss the offspring of the Good (presumably the sun in our perceptible world), and not the Good Itself.⁶

In *Physics* IV 209b11–6, Aristotle also explicitly mentions Plato's "unwritten teaching":

This is why Plato in the *Timaeus* says that matter and space are the same: for the "participant" and space are identical. (It is true, indeed, that the account he gives there of the "participant" is different from what he says in his so-called unwritten teaching. Nevertheless, he did identify place and space.) I mention Plato because, while all hold place to be something, he alone tried to say *what* it is.

This quote presents evidence that what Plato wrote in the *Timaeus* and what he said in his unwritten teachings were two different things.

Detractors of the unwritten doctrine view, such as Cherniss,⁷ argue that Aristotle should not be trusted in these matters, since he was not sympathetic to Plato's view and misinterpreted Plato elsewhere.⁸

Further, Brisson argues that Aristoxenus' account actually works against the Unwritten Teachings view, because:

According to Aristoxenus' testimony, this lecture recalled the doctrine of dialogues (*Republic* [VI and VII] in particular) and was directed towards an audience of amateurs rather than of initiated followers.

What, then, would have constituted Plato's unwritten doctrine?⁹

This is an excellent point. However, there seems to be something to the Unwritten Teachings view, since Plato does beg off giving a detailed account of the Good in the *Republic*, among other things, such as giving an account of the "father of the universe" in the *Timaeus* or the "king" in *Letter II*.¹⁰

Now to bring this to the forefront of the Plotinus-Plato issue: According to Tigerstedt, Neo-Platonists think that Plato holds an esoteric, *but written*, doctrine, which is not of the same kind as that of the "modern Esotericists":

The modern Esoteric interpretation of Plato cannot be found in any ancient Platonist, least of all in the Neoplatonists, to whom Plato's entire philosophy was an esoteric doctrine, revealed to the initiated, not in any oral tradition but in the Master's written works, if read according to the rules of Neoplatonic exegesis.¹¹

However, Tigerstedt argues against the modern Esoteric reading of Plato, claiming that instead of reviving the traditional Neo-Platonist (esoteric) reading of Plato, they use non-Platonic sources such as Aristotle, Aristoxenus, Simplicius, and others to try to understand Plato, and therefore fail to reach their goal:

What in any case [modern Esotericists] have not done, is precisely what they boast of doing, viz., restoring the “traditional,” i.e., Neoplatonic interpretation, for that had been destroyed once and for all in the eighteenth century.... The [modern Esotericists] have generally accepted the verdict of modern scholarship and refrained from systematizing the Dialogues, trying instead to depreciate their importance in favor of other sources—in direct contrast to the Neoplatonists.¹²

First, Tigerstedt initially sets up his definitions in such a way that one must be either an Esotericist (real doctrine is oral) or a non-Esotericist (real doctrine is written), but then he adds a third category (real doctrine is written and orally reinforced privately to the privileged few) and accuses the Esotericists of using non-Platonic sources to make their case. This argument is spurious because if Esotericists believe that Plato’s most important doctrine is oral, and Aristotle et al. discuss Plato’s oral doctrine, this does not disprove their case. More importantly, however, Tigerstedt seems to beg the question by denying that Plato’s dialogues contain a system, for which I argue.¹³

Tigerstedt also criticizes the Esoteric reading as being a radical solution that disposes of the problems of the contradictions, obscurities, and gaps in Plato’s view:

Like all radical solutions of the problem of interpreting Plato, the Esoteric one ruthlessly disposes of the problem itself. There are, indeed, contradictions, gaps, obscurities, and ambiguities in Plato’s works. But they do not matter. For Plato’s written works do not contain his real doctrine which he taught to his disciples in the Academy and did not divulge. Fortunately, thanks to Aristotle and other ancient authors, earlier or later, this oral, esoteric doctrine can be reconstructed. It turns out [to] be a rigidly systematic, hierarchical metaphysics of Being, an “Ontology,” very similar to Neoplatonism, whose direct forerunner it was. For Plotinus was in fact what he claimed to be: Plato’s true heir and successor.¹⁴

Tigerstedt makes three main points here that should be addressed: First, I grant with Tigerstedt that it is a flawed hermeneutic to claim that there are no interpretive issues in the dialogues, and to wipe one’s hands of them by arguing that Plato’s real doctrine does not appear in the dialogues. But that is not my contention in this work.

Second, contrary to Tigerstedt, the Esotericist (and Neo-Platonic) view of Plato is rigidly systematic; I readily admit that I find a system in Plato’s work, and I will do my best to lay it out throughout this book. The reader should decide for him or herself if these elements are contained within the dialogues or not.

Third, Tigerstedt’s claim that Plotinus is Plato’s “true heir and successor”—the thesis of the Esotericist—is more or less what I am aiming to defend.

In general, Tigerstedt states that the Neo-Platonic and Esoteric readings are both out of favor these days (“At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the decline and fall

of the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato was an accomplished fact”);¹⁵ similarly, there are few proponents who currently advocate these readings; and it is futile to try to revive these readings of Plato. I concede Tigerstedt’s first and second points that there are in fact few writers with this take on Plato, and that the Neo-Platonic reading of Plato is out of favor; however, I do not agree that it is an “accomplished fact,” and will attempt to refute that notion in this work. As for the observation that there are few proponents, I myself am a current advocate of the Neo-Platonic reading of Plato, and the paucity of fellow defenders fails to prove the implausibility of that reading. Neither of these points—nor the bold claim that it is futile to revive this approach—implies that there could not be great merit in arguing for these readings of Plato. In fact, this is partly what fuels and justifies this project.

I am not an Esotericist using Tigerstedt’s criteria, since we can find plenty of concordance (or fail to find essential differences) with what Plato and Plotinus write, using Plotinus as someone who is more explicit than Plato about their ultimate teachings. However, I do agree with Tigerstedt when he notes: “Aristotle does not distinguish between an exoteric and an esoteric Platonic philosophy.”¹⁶ Thus, to boldly argue that the most important part(s) of Plato’s views are exclusively oral betrays Plato’s life work, as far as his dialogues are concerned. Surely there is something of doctrinal worth in the dialogues themselves.¹⁷

More needs to be said about Tigerstedt’s assessment of the Neo-Platonic reading of Plato. First, Tigerstedt interestingly puts the Neo-Platonists into the esoteric camp of interpreters:

The Neoplatonists properly speaking—Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and their disciples—do not distinguish between an exoteric and esoteric Platonism. To them, there is only an esoteric one. Plato’s philosophy is by them regarded as a mystery religion, revealed by the gods to Plato—and, indeed, before him to the “Ancient Theologians” . . . and through Plato to the elected few, as Proclus says in the First Book of his *Platonic Theology*. Nor do the Neoplatonists oppose Plato’s oral teaching to his written work. True, they occasionally refer to his lecture *On the Good*, i.e., his metaphysics—which is what really matters to the Neoplatonists—is to be found in them. Proclus even goes so far as to assert that this teaching penetrates virtually all the Dialogues, though to a varying degree. It is only a question of reading them in the right way.¹⁸

Speaking only on Plotinus’ behalf, this is not an accurate reading of the *Enneads*. At no time does Plotinus state that the Unwritten Teachings of Plato are more important than Plato’s writings, or that Plato’s writings are not important. In fact, Tigerstedt seems to contradict himself when he says that there is no difference between the exoteric and esoteric Plato, and then goes on to state that the Neo-Platonists are esotericists; that is, if Plato’s view is contained in the words of Plato, then the oral teachings are presumably superfluous or redundant. What I will grant is Plotinus’ belief that few people will have the vision of the Good, but Plato believes this as well, so this is not a concern. Moreover, it is not on account of Plato discussing his secret or real doctrine that Plotinus claims to have experienced the Good; it was because of dialectic and other requirements that

Plotinus met, along with his active search for the knowledge, that allowed him to experience this vision some 500 years later; thus Tigerstedt's points here are answerable.

Tigerstedt continues with the charge that Neo-Platonists found their own opinions in Plato, using metaphors, and reading Plato as Christians read the Bible:

This attitude of the Neoplatonists should not astonish us. A great part of their extant works consisting of commentaries on the Platonic Dialogues, they could hardly be expected to declare that the writings they were interpreting did not contain Plato's innermost thought. Nor did the Neoplatonists say so, but, thanks to an ingenious method of interpretation, which has wrung an unwilling admiration from modern scholars, they succeeded in finding their own opinions in Plato. In desperate cases, there was always the last resource of allegorism. For the Neoplatonists did not read Plato as the Alexandrian philologists had read Homer, but as the contemporary Christian theologians read the Bible. The Dialogues were to the Neoplatonists Sacred Books, full of divine revelation, intelligible only to the initiated.¹⁹

I take issue with Tigerstedt's view that the Neo-Platonists are *both* esotericists who downplay the importance of Plato's writings in favor of his oral teachings, *and* are also people who read Plato's works as Christians read the Bible. Why, per Tigerstedt's view, would they take much stock in the writings if all that mattered about Plato's thought was his oral teachings? As to his claim that the Neo-Platonists read their views into Plato's writings, the reader should make his or her own judgment after having read the rest of this book and seeing to what extent that seems to be true, given the extent of the parallels between Plato and Plotinus' writings. Nonetheless, I agree with Tigerstedt that Plotinus—due to his experience with the intelligible region (and beyond)—sees Plato's writings as confirming the truth of his experience, and that this experience can only truly be understood by “the initiated.”

Tigerstedt's understanding of the Neo-Platonist reading of Plato is that unless one takes Plato in the Neo-Platonistic way, one's view of Plato is wrong. If one applies the Neo-Platonic reading of Plato, there is unity to the interpretation and hermeneutical problems vanish; if one rejects the Neo-Platonic reading, the hermeneutical problems reappear:

Thus, the interpretation of Plato ceases to be a problem. There is one and only one way of understanding him, and that is to study the Dialogues as interpreted by the Neoplatonists. Neoplatonism being a metaphysical system, founded by Plotinus and brought to its perfection by Proclus, the difficulty of combining Plato's various often divergent statements into a unity disappears. Only when the Neoplatonic interpretation becomes questionable or is openly rejected, the problem of Platonic interpretation emerges again.²⁰

First, it is not the case that Plotinus' reading of Plato contends that there are no issues whatsoever in Platonic interpretation. There remain problems about exactly how one should take the Indefinite Dyad, if at all, in Plato's work (just to name one among many

other detailed issues of interpretation laid out in the ancient philosophy journals) and it would be silly for anyone to claim otherwise. With his comment, though, Tigerstedt seems to favor leaving Plato's work disunited, especially given how he seems to delight in the challenge of the Neo-Platonic interpretation (more than one thousand) years later; he ends his commentary by stating that the Neo-Platonists' reading of Plato truly deserves the appellation "classical" or "traditional."²¹ Having argued that Plato already had in place the very metaphysical system that Tigerstedt claims Neo-Platonism has (but only that this is true for Plotinus),²² I hope to show, leaving Neo-Platonists in general aside for the present work, that Plotinus has the best reading of Plato in the areas of mysticism, epistemology, and ethics.

Admittedly, Findlay discusses Plato's "Unwritten Doctrines."²³ However, Findlay mainly argues—as Tigerstedt's Esotericists do not—that we have evidence from others around Plato at the time (especially Aristotle),²⁴ who can shed some light on what he was teaching "in the classroom" that did not necessarily appear in the Dialogues; for instance, the "Great and Small" and "Indefinite Dyad."²⁵ More importantly, Findlay believes that we can find parallels directly in Plato's writings, so he is not an Esotericist by Tigerstedt's definition, since he believes that we can read Plato's view right from the dialogues just as Plotinus does. Though I have no qualm with Findlay's use of Aristotle and others to aid in our understanding of Plato and what he may have said outside his extant writings, I will confine my project in the subsequent chapters only to what we actually find in Plato's texts, and to what we actually find in Plotinus' texts.

In sum, the Esoteric doctrine, as defined by Tigerstedt, and *not* necessarily as defended by some commentators (Findlay and Miller), is not assumed in this work because doing so is not necessary to make my argument.

II. The methodology and plan of my argument

Due to space constraints, I must ignore similarities between Plotinus' views and Aristotle, and the Pythagoreans, Stoics, Gnostics, Middle Platonists, and post-Plotinian Platonists.

To defend my view that Plato and Plotinus do not essentially differ on mysticism, epistemology, and ethics, I will use the Compatibility Principle:

Plato and Plotinus' views are compatible or consistent in principle if Plotinus (or Plato) writes on some subject that does not appear in Plato (or Plotinus), unless there is written evidence in a particular case that one author writes something to the effect that 'A is true' and the other author writes that "A is false."

I aim to address and counter virtually every commentator whom I have read in English, who attempts to argue that there is an essential difference between these philosophers on the issues of mysticism, epistemology, or ethics; my argument will only be as strong as the number and quality of my responses to opponents of my thesis.

Lastly, I am trying to show that Plato and Plotinus do not have *essentially different* views, that is, differences on philosophically significant matters. For instance, they do

not disagree (but in fact agree) that wisdom leads to or implies happiness, contemplation, and purity, ultimate knowledge is of the Good or One (and Forms), we gain knowledge by recollection and dialectic, we can only have opinion of perceptibles, happiness is a state of the soul, no one errs willingly, and so on, for many other epistemological and ethical claims, not the least of which is the mystical claim they each make: the most important experience a person can have is to see or know the Good or One. To hold these views is what would make one *the*, as opposed to *a*, Platonist. Again, to be clear, by claiming that there are no essential differences between their views, I am not arguing that they have identical views, since I admittedly cannot find every claim of each philosopher in the other's work. Thus, on my reading, the views of Plato and Plotinus are so similar on the issues examined here, that I cannot find an essential difference between them.

I have used the translations of Plato from Cooper's *Plato: Complete Works*, unless otherwise noted. Moreover, for the Platonic quotations, I have started them with the character or principal interlocutor who represents Plato—usually Socrates, but also the Athenian, the Stranger, Diotima—first, and then put the responses second, unless otherwise noted. For Plotinus, I have used A.H. Armstrong's translation, unless otherwise noted. I will use the standard method of referencing the *Enneads*: Ennead, treatise, chapter, and line (sans the chronological number of when a treatise was written), as follows: VI.9.1.12–13, which refers to the twelfth and thirteenth lines of the sixth Ennead, ninth treatise, and first chapter. For secondary source quotations of both works, I have taken the liberty of italicizing the names of Plato's Dialogues and the word "Enneads," as well as converting Oxford English to American English ("colour" to "color," and so on) if necessary to maintain continuity throughout the work.

In chapter 1, I describe in as much detail as possible Plato and Plotinus' view that we can have an ultimate experience or vision that amounts to knowledge of what exists, how we should live, and even the nature of knowledge itself. The requirements for the experience will also be reviewed, according to both philosophers. I will also show that, assuming that Plotinus is a mystic, Plato is best read as a mystic as well.

In chapter 2, I will analyze Plato and Plotinus' views of wisdom, knowledge, dialectic, recollection, prayer, and opinion, and show that none of these issues violate my Compatibility Principle above, and that none of these comparisons yield an essential difference between their views.

In chapter 3, I will examine Plato and Plotinus' views on ethics, that is, their takes on happiness, love, purification, and reverence, how to live (including philosophy, virtue, justice, and temperance), and how not to live (including vice, ignorance, impiety, and attachment to the body), music, art, desire for the good, not erring willingly, and pleasure and pain, showing that they do not have essentially different views thereon as well.

The Ultimate Experience: The Evidence of Mysticism in Plato and Plotinus

1.1 Introduction

I use the phrase “ultimate experience”¹ to designate an occurrence that transmits to its experiencer knowledge of what exists, of how we should (not) live, and even of the nature of knowledge itself; this experience is alternatively described by both Plato and Plotinus as a vision, and is purported not only to provide knowledge to its experiencer, but also to be the source of wisdom, true happiness, and virtue.

Plato and Plotinus commentators rarely address the nature of this experience—the everlasting, self-sustaining, ineffable, difficult, and rare aspects—in both philosophers’ views, nor the requirements for such an experience. None of the Plotinian literature, at least in English, has a comparison of these aspects with Plato. A healthy minority of Platonic scholars believe that Plato is not a mystic; so, given that Plotinus is nearly unanimously taken to be a mystic,² if I can demonstrate the harmonious features of the ultimate experience for both philosophers, then we have more, if not sufficient, reason to believe that Plato is a mystic—at least in the same way in which the term applies to Plotinus.

I will review and comment on the literature regarding whether or not Plato and/or Plotinus are mystics; argue that a definition of mysticism is not required to proceed with this argument; and show the evidence for the claim that, assuming Plotinus is a mystic, both philosophers describe an experience that is sufficiently similar to classify them as mystics.

Plato and Plotinus believe that the ultimate experience:

- (1) Gives the ultimate answers to the most significant philosophical questions;
- (2) Is everlasting or self-sustaining;
- (3) Is difficult and rare;
- (4) Is ineffable; and
- (5) Has at least four requirements.

I will show how my “ultimate experience” theory explains Plato’s attitude toward what the multitude of non-philosophers think and would say about his philosophy and argue that interpreting Plato as a mystic can be made by an argument to the best

explanation. I will also address A.H. Armstrong's and Gerson's assessments of the relative lack of importance of mysticism in the philosophy of Plotinus, objecting that interpreting Plotinus as a mystic is essential to understanding his philosophy.

Plato, Plotinus, and mysticism

Commentators—allowing them to define “mysticism” however they wish—have taken many, if not all, possible major stances on this issue (with the number of advocates for each position in parentheses):

- (1) Plato is a mystic (33);³
- (2) Plato is not a mystic (18);⁴
- (3) Socrates is a mystic (2);⁵
- (4) Socrates is not a mystic; (3)⁶
- (5) Plotinus is a mystic; (48)⁷ and
- (6) Plotinus is not a mystic. (1)⁸

Obviously, the question of whether Plato and Socrates are mystics is much more controversial than the question of whether Plotinus is a mystic. I will focus on Plato's mysticism, or lack thereof, and whether what he discusses is similar to Plotinus. It is noteworthy, however, that the majority view—Plato is a mystic—does not show up in introductory philosophy texts.⁹

In his introduction to *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, Huntington Cairns claims:

Plato was a philosopher and a poet, but not a mystic. . . . He has been a source of inspiration to many types of mysticism but his writings have been repeatedly misread. This misunderstanding has been greatly promoted and popularized by the writings of Philo and Plotinus.¹⁰

Apparently, Cairns' conception of mysticism is that a mystic denies “rational order”¹¹ and exalts “feeling above reason.”¹² I disagree with this, but first let me object here to three other points he makes.

First, referring to Plato as a poet would effectively be an insult to Plato himself, given what he claims about poets in the *Republic*; namely, that poets stir up the passions—lust and anger—instead of quelling them (*Republic* X 606d; and see the *Ion*). Cairns could be speaking of Plato's pleasant writing style and use of metaphor; however, the truth would be still more important to Plato and undoubtedly he would at least prefer “philosopher” to “poet.” For instance, it does not matter how poetic one's speech is if one is not speaking the truth.¹³ Also, Plato characterizes poets as having a sort of divine inspiration, without really possessing knowledge about their work (see, for example, the *Apology*, *Ion*, and *Republic*). Therefore, Plato is not a poet but a philosopher.

Second, I agree that Plato is not a mystic *if and only if* Cairns' conception of mysticism—that a mystic denies rational order and exalts feeling above reason—is correct. But here is a partial refutation of Cairns' conception of mysticism: Since, generally speaking, Plotinus is taken to be a mystic and Plato is not as universally so

taken, Cairns' conception should at least pick out Plotinus as being a mystic, while also excluding Plato. However, Cairns' conception does not pass this test. In many places, Plotinus refers to "Reason-Principles" of which everything in the universe is an image; presumably these Reason-Principles ascribe a rational order to the universe. In addition, Plotinus frequently urges us to use our reason and intellect and in fact *identify with* Intellect. Moreover, he constantly gives rational arguments for his positions and never writes that emotion should take the place of reason, which one would presumably not expect from someone who exalts feeling above reason. In fact, Plotinus claims that the just soul is analogous to elders at the assembly who sit in quiet consideration, ignoring the tumult of the disorderly populace, which is itself analogous to those who are not in control of their bodies and Spirit part of their soul (VI.4.15.18–32). I will argue that there are the three parts of the soul and discuss how humans are essentially the Reason part of their soul, happiness occurs when Reason guides one's soul, philosophers follow their Reason, and that justice is a well-ordered soul where Reason rules. Someone, as Cairns alleges of Plotinus, who believes that emotions are to be exalted above reason should not make any of these claims. Furthermore, Plotinus holds that the One is beyond thought (V.3.14.18–19). Thus, Cairns' conception of mysticism is incorrect, at least as a characterization of Plotinus' view.

Third, I would argue that for any given definition of mysticism, either Plato and Plotinus both are mystics, or both are not mystics. By showing that each experience discussed by both philosophers is similar, we see that Cairns is mistaken in accusing Plotinus of misreading or misunderstanding Plato.¹⁴ Since it is nearly unanimous that Plotinus is a mystic, I will argue that Plato is a mystic using their writings to show the similarity.

Before arguing that Plato is best construed as a mystic in a Plotinian sense, let us review some other significant statements that have been made against the view that Plato is a mystic:

- (1) Some Neo-Platonists depart from Plato by insisting that knowledge of the [One] can only be acquired through a mystical vision. Neoplatonic literature is replete with detailed accounts of the [One] and its various emanations. But unless we have had such a mystical vision or are willing to trust the authority of those who claim to have had such a vision, this aspect of the world-view of the Neoplatonists is unappealing. Mysticism often leads to the opposite extreme from relativism—to an absolutism that is antithetical to the dialectical philosophy of Plato.¹⁵
- (2) A short cut would have been mysticism—the contemplation of the inexplicable, the adoration of the unknowable. But that would have been losing “the eye of the soul.” Plato is looking for the intelligible, not for an emotional intoxication.¹⁶
- (3) In this paper it has been argued that Plato shares with the traditional mystics many features, but that it is difficult to say with confidence that his system culminates in a *nonrational* or “*emotional*” *apprehension of ultimate reality with which one becomes united*. . . . [I]t is evident that Plato is a thinker too multifaceted and fertile to be easily bound by our imperfect but nonetheless useful categories. He was first and foremost an exponent of philosophic reason.

His method is intuitive at its highest point, but intuition alone does not establish the claim of “mystic.” Inspiration, intuition, reason: these odd companions are all aspects of Plato’s method of philosophizing.¹⁷

- (4) What is new about the Plotinian experience is that it is, first and foremost, mystical. Plato had described, in poetic, rhetorical terms, a lover’s amorous agitation for his beloved: love starts out being carnal, but then, with the ascent of the soul, it serves as the motor force for an intellectual, almost scientific process. Platonic love is thus not, properly speaking, “a mystical transport.”¹⁸
- (5) The willingness to use traditional symbols for the faith that there is something more than mechanism in the universe, explain them all. But they have been and still are endlessly quoted in the literature of superstition and mysticism by the mob of incredible twaddle-churners, fanatical and hypocritical ascetics, maudlin mystics, and table-tipping thaumaturgists who have made Platonism a byword with rational men.¹⁹
- (6) The [Neo-Platonists] doubted in the last instance the possibility of theoretical knowledge of the ultimate basis of all being and sought a remedy in revelation received in a state of mystical ecstasy. . . . Neo-Platonism with its need of revelation instead of independent investigation . . . thus completed the suicide of philosophy.²⁰

Re: (1): We will see that each philosopher describes the experience of the Good or One both as a vision and as knowledge of the Good. Moreover, I have always read Plato as an objectivist who claims that there are Forms that are eternal beings, existing whether or not we acknowledge their existence, along with souls, the World-Soul, and many others. Here I will confirm that Plotinus’ statement, among others, that dialectic is the most important part of philosophy and performs the same functions in his philosophy as they do in Plato’s.

Re: (2): There is evidence in both Plato and Plotinus that the Good is unknowable as well as knowable, but mysticism is not seen as a shortcut to anything; it is the culmination of years of mathematics and dialectic. Plotinus is looking for the intelligible as well in Nous and not merely emotional intoxication; lastly, as will be shown, they each claim that true happiness is a direct result of nothing other than wisdom and/or knowledge.

Re: (3): The issue of whether the ultimate experience is rational or irrational is a difficult one to settle. Plato and Plotinus each claim that dialectic is the chief way—among other requirements of the soul—for one to achieve knowledge of the Good, but also acknowledge that this is the greatest ineffable experience that anyone can have.

Re: (4): Plato and Plotinus both have the same view of love as we will see; more specifically, they agree on the details of the Ladder of Love in Plato’s *Symposium*, where love moves from being physical, to intellectual, to a vision of Beauty, and they are committed to the view that one can have a transformative vision of Beauty.

Re: (5): First, I sincerely hope that I do not fit any of the ad hominem arguments Shorey uses against his opponents here, and instead urge careful consideration of Plato and Plotinus’ writings before siding with Shorey on this issue. Plato is certainly saying more than merely using *symbols* for the belief that there is something more than

mechanism in the universe, and this is not enough, in my view, to explain what Plato is relating in all of the “mystical” passages. He is urging us to have that experience that he describes as being ultimate, even arguing that we *desire* it. He is arguing that God and gods exist, among many other things, and not merely stating a faith, but adamantly believes (if I am not permitted to say, “know”) it, and argues for gods’ existence in the *Laws* (886c–99d). All of what I have said applies to Plotinus as well, of course. To briefly rebut Shorey’s ascetic point, both Plato and Plotinus state the importance of asceticism in one’s being a good philosopher, as will be shown.

Re: (6): As stated in my first two responses, Plotinus and Plato hold that the highest knowledge is knowledge of the Good, while at the same time referring to it as a vision, and claiming that the Good is in some sense unknowable as well, as we’ll see. However true Zeller’s words may be about Neo-Platonism causing the suicide of philosophy, I hope to show that Plato stressed the need for the ultimate experience no less than Plotinus. In response to Zeller, my retort is *either* that Plato destroyed philosophy—if I can show that he believes what Plotinus believes—or Plotinus is not one of the Neo-Platonists who destroyed philosophy.

A definition of mysticism is not required

One might demand a definition of mysticism, but there are several reasons why I wish to avoid doing so.²¹ First, my definition would almost certainly not satisfy everyone; for instance, a very broad definition would include every kind of mystic²² and hence would only beg the question in favor of my case and be useless.

Second, I trust Bussanich,²³ who argues that Stace’s²⁴ and Zaehner’s (two of the foremost experts on mysticism) definitions have been shown to be lacking. If experts in mysticism have not done an excellent job of defining mysticism, I presume I will not be successful either.

Third, defining mysticism is not necessary for this project since, regardless of the definition, Plotinus is taken to be a mystic. If I can show that Plato describes the experience in the same way as Plotinus, then the precise definition of mysticism is moot.²⁵

Thus, I will try to show that Plato and Plotinus each describe the experience in similar terminology, with similar characteristics. In this work, I will not address the possibility that Plato believes that one can have a non-dual experience, such that the seer of the Good becomes one with the Good, so there is no distinction between the Good and its experienter,²⁶ because I have dealt with this issue elsewhere.

Plato and Plotinus describe a similar experience

Both Plato and Plotinus describe the effects of this ultimate experience in terms that make any possible sense experience pale in comparison. Since these kinds of passages occur in both Plato and Plotinus, we are faced with the choice of either viewing both philosophers as mystics, or as non-mystics. But because Plotinus is nearly universally taken to be a mystic, the case I am making is that Plato and Plotinus describe effects of the same ultimate experience.

Plato: In a letter to the friends of Dion:

This knowledge ["knowledge of the problems with which I am concerned" at 341c1–2] is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself. (*Letter VII* 341c5–d2)

I read Plato as saying that unless you have had the experience of this knowledge being generated in your soul—and though “joint pursuit of the subject” may be nothing other than dialectic—words will not suffice to acquire such knowledge.

Socrates agrees with what Simmias says about having firsthand experience of divine things. Simmias says:

I believe, as perhaps you [Socrates] do, that precise knowledge on that subject is impossible or extremely difficult in our present life, but that it surely shows a very poor spirit not to examine thoroughly what is said about it, and to desist before one is exhausted by an all-round investigation. One should achieve one of these things: learn the truth about these things or find it for oneself, or, if that is impossible, adopt the best and most irrefutable of men's theories, and, borne upon this, sail through the dangers of life as upon a raft, *unless someone should make that journey safer and less risky upon a firmer vessel of some divine doctrine*. . . .

Said Socrates: “You may well be right, my friend.” (*Phaedo* 85c1–d4, e1–2; emphasis added)

Socrates is agreeing with Simmias that one must “learn the truth about these things or find it for oneself,” using the most irrefutable human theories, if we cannot have “some divine doctrine” (a divine word or account, implying revelation, as Fowler and Tredennick translate *logou theiou tinos*), which is a stronger vessel than the best human doctrine. Socrates, the same character that grilled the priest in the *Euthyphro* about the definition of piety, and argued that Piety was a nature that was independent of the gods, and questioned the benefits of sacrificing and praying, seems now in the *Phaedo* to simply accept Simmias' statement that we should have a divine revelation if we can. Why would he quickly agree with Simmias and not doggedly question him about that view as he did in the *Euthyphro*? My argument to the best explanation, given this and other passages in Plato, is that Socrates agrees with Simmias because Plato thinks it possible to have such a revelation. But there is more textual evidence.

In the *Symposium*, for instance, Socrates describes the vision of what Beauty is, as told to him by Diotima:

All of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labors:

“First, it always *is* and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one

time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. . . .

And there in life, Socrates, . . . there if anywhere should a person live his life, beholding that Beauty. If you once see that, it won't occur to you to measure beauty by gold or clothing or beautiful boys and youths—who, if you see them now, strike you out of your senses, and make you, you and many others, eager to be with the boys you love and look at them forever, if there were any way to do that, forgetting food and drink, everything but looking at them and being with them.” (*Symposium* 210e4–1a5, 211d1–8)

Plato is relating several things about this experience: First, the vision of Beauty is the soul coming to an understanding of the Beautiful Itself, or the Form of Beauty. Second, the vision is something that “neither waxes nor wanes”; that is, it neither increases nor decreases in intensity. It is as if your soul is a light switch that is either in the “on” (had the experience) or “off” (have not had the experience) position. Third, if two people were to have the vision of Beauty, they would agree about what was truly beautiful. Fourth, Plato urges us that our lives should be lived (“if anywhere”) in beholding that Beauty, implying that life is not worth living unless one has this vision. Lastly, the knower of Beauty learns how and in what ways the beautiful physical objects are merely copies or cheap imitations of the Form of Beauty, so she would find it ridiculous to call physical things truly beautiful and hence, would not urgently pursue them.

I will show that both philosophers seem to describe the awesome nature of seeing/knowing the Good, as well as seeing/knowing Beauty.

Plotinus:

So we must ascend again to the Good, which every soul desires. Anyone who has seen it knows what I mean when I say that it is beautiful. It is desired as good, and the desire for it is directed to Good, and the attainment of it is for those who go up to the higher world. . . .

If anyone sees it, what passion will he feel, what longing in his desire to be united with it, what a shock of delight! The man who has not seen it may desire it as good, but he who has seen it glories in its beauty and is full of wonder and delight, enduring a shock which causes no hurt, loving with true passion and piercing longing; he laughs at all other loves and despises what he thought beautiful before; it is like the experience of those who have met appearances of gods or spirits and do not any more appreciate as they did the beauty of other bodies. (I.6.7.1–4, 12–21; adapted from A.H. Armstrong²⁷)

Plotinus agrees that the experience of seeing the Good²⁸ makes one realize that every physical beautiful thing pales in comparison. It is also clear that Plotinus is talking about an experience that one can have, and that he is agreeing with Plato's description of Beauty in the *Symposium*.

Plato: Diotima—whose account Socrates is retelling, and with whose account he agrees—also states in Plato’s *Symposium* that this appearance or vision of the beautiful is *not* one kind of knowledge:

Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea [logos] or one kind of knowledge [tis epistēmē]. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change. (Symposium 211a5–b5; emphasis added)

Plato uses the phrasing “the beautiful appear[s]” to one, implying a “vision,” as opposed to a “knowing experience,” because while one is experiencing the Form of Beauty, one is not experiencing “knowledge” per se, but an object of knowledge. Paradoxically, however, before (*epistēmēn* at 210d7) and after (*gnōi* at 211c8) this passage, Plato admittedly also describes this experience as knowledge of Beauty.

Though I do not intend to imply that Beauty is identical to the Good on Plato’s view, we can compare a similar passage about the Form of the Good in *Republic* VI, where Plato states that the Good is the source of truth and knowledge, though the Good itself is neither truth nor knowledge (*Republic* VI 508d–9a).

To sum up, I agree with Bussanich: “Plato’s ultimate aim, like his predecessors, is to provide guidance toward an ultimate experience of the truth.”²⁹ I further concur with him on the following:

The *epopteia* is presented in *Symposium* . . . and *Phaedrus* as the culmination of an erotic, visionary ascent, but these aspects of the path are complementary to the *Phaedo* which also refers to seeing the truth and the forms (66d7, e1) and it speaks, albeit quietly, the language of desire (65c9, 66b7, 66e3). The communion of the soul with the forms in the *Phaedo*, the eroticized version of *Republic* 490b, and the vision of the forms and the Good in the cave simile all depict the *epopteia*, the transcendent experience recounted by Diotima and by Socrates himself in the palinode: “beauty was radiant to see at that time when the souls . . . saw that blessed and spectacular vision and were ushered into the mystery that we may rightly call the most blessed of all . . . and we gazed in rapture at sacred revealed objects that were perfect, and simple, and unshakeable and blissful. That was the ultimate vision, and we saw it in pure light because we were pure ourselves, not buried in this thing we are carrying around now, which we call a body, locked in it like an oyster in its shell.” (*Phaedrus* 250b5–c8³⁰)

Plotinus: Three passages from Plotinus confirm his view that we can have an ultimate philosophical experience. First, he describes his experience:

Often I have woken up out of the body to myself 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 identify with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, 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. (IV.8.1.1–11)

So Plotinus claims that the experience is frequent, that he is more his soul than his body, and that the experience involves seeing beauty as a nonphysical entity. After the experience is over, Plotinus describes it:

One should not enquire whence it comes, for there is no “whence”: for it does not really come or go away anywhere, but appears or does not appear. So one must not chase after it, but wait quietly till it appears, preparing oneself to contemplate it, as the eye awaits the rising of the sun; and the sun rising over the horizon (“from Ocean,” the poets say) gives itself to the eyes to see. (V.5.8.1–7)

In the sentence before this quotation, Plotinus relates that the experience is a vision of truest seeing, and in several sentences after this quotation, he states that the object of this vision is above Intellect. In the present passage, he warns that we should not think of the Good in any physical terms such as existing in time or space, or even—as he claims elsewhere—being a being at all. Plotinus also tells us that we can only prepare for this experience and wait for something to happen, which I find parallel to Plato’s claim in the *Meno* that virtue is a gift from the gods.

Further, according to Plotinus we need to have this vision in order to truly realize ourselves as human beings:

It is enough if the intellect comes into contact with it; but when it has done so, while the contact lasts, it is absolutely impossible, nor has it time, to speak; but it is afterwards that it is able to reason about it. One must believe one has seen, when the soul suddenly takes light: For this is from him and he is it; we must think that he is present when, like another god whom someone called to his house, he comes and brings light to us: for if he had not come, he would not have brought the light. So the unenlightened soul does not have him as god; but when it is enlightened it has what it sought, and this is the soul’s true end, to touch that light and see it by itself, not by another light, but by the light which is also its means of seeing. It must see that light by which it is enlightened: for we do not see the sun by another light than his own. (V.3.17.25–37³¹)

Plotinus thinks the soul that is unfulfilled and does not have what it sought is “unenlightened,” and once it achieves its true end is “enlightened.” He also claims that we cannot use our reason during the vision.

Lastly, in his biography of the life of Plotinus, Porphyry states that Plotinus united with God—the One—four times while Porphyry was with him.³² This experience certainly does not appear to be a mathematical proof or a philosophical argument.

In summary, Plato and Plotinus seem to be describing a similar experience given their writings, and thus we seem to be warranted in referring to Plato as a mystic—given that we are already referring to Plotinus as one.

1.2 The ultimate answers to the most significant philosophical questions

Both Plato and Plotinus believe that we can have a single experience of the ultimate entity of the universe that tells us what exists (answering the ultimate question of metaphysics), that gives us ultimate knowledge (answering that we can know and what we can know—the ultimate questions of epistemology), and that tells us how we should live (addressing the ultimate question of ethics).

Plato: It is worth noting that not all commentators agree that the Good is, for Plato, the ultimate metaphysical, epistemological and/or ethical principle.³³ Let us start with a passage from the *Republic*, where Plato, summarizing his Cave Allegory, says what this experience—the vision of the Good—tells you:

In the knowable, the last thing to be seen yet hardly seen is the Idea of Good, and, having seen it, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is right and beautiful in everything, having brought light and its master in the visible, and having provided authoritative truth and reason in the intelligible; and that one who is to act wisely in private or public must have seen it. (*Republic* VII 517b8–c5; my translation³⁴)

Plato claims that the Good is the cause of everything that is good, right and beautiful, true, and rational, and even of the perceptible sun. So if the Good is the source of rightness, and if one is to act wisely, then one must see the Form of the Good.

Plato asserts that the Good is the cause of truth and knowledge, but is not itself truth or knowledge:

So that what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the Form of the Good. And though it is the cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the Good is other and more beautiful than they. In the visible realm, light and sight are rightly considered sunlike, but it is wrong to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to think of knowledge and truth as goodlike but wrong to think that either of them is the Good—for the Good is yet more prized. (*Republic* VI 508d4–9a5; adapted from Grube/Reeve)

For Plato, the Form of the Good is the source of knowledge and truth. He also states that one cannot truly know goodness until one knows the Form of the Good:

Then the same applies to the Good. Unless someone can distinguish in an account the Form of the Good from everything else, can survive all refutation, as if in a battle, striving to judge things not in accordance with opinion but in accordance with being, and can come through all this with his account still intact, you'll say that he doesn't know the Good Itself or any other good. And if he gets hold of some image of it, you'll say that it's through opinion, not knowledge, for he is dreaming and asleep throughout his present life, and, before he wakes up here, he will arrive in Hades and go to sleep forever.

Yes, by god, I'll certainly say all of that. (*Republic* VII 534b8–d2; adapted from Grube/Reeve)

More importantly, Plato says that we cannot benefit from any knowledge we may have if we do not have knowledge of the Good. Socrates says:

You have often heard that the Form of the Good is indeed the greatest thing learned, and that it is by their relation to it that just things and other things become useful and beneficial. And now you are probably aware that I am about to speak about this Form and say in addition to this, that we do not know this Form adequately; and if we do not know this Form, even if we should know especially well the other things [that is, the just things and other things] without knowing this Form, you are aware that there would be no benefit to us, just as there would be no benefit if we should possess something without the possession of the good. (*Republic* VI 505a2–b3; my translation)

So, from the earlier passage, Plato holds that the Good is the source of knowledge, and from the latter that the Good is the greatest thing to learn, without which all other knowledge, if one has any, is useless and not beneficial. For Plato, benefiting oneself is living well, and living well is happiness, and the goal of ethics is living well and being happy, so this passage entails that knowing the Good is necessary for being happy. Thus, the Good is necessary for ethical behavior; it is not merely the reason that all good things exist.

Plato also relates that one must go beyond assumptions such as are made in geometry and other deductive arts and sciences—arguably logic and deductive reasoning are meant to be included here as well—until one arrives at the unhypothetical first principle (*Republic* VI 511b–d, VII 532a–b, 533c–d), which he implies is the Good.³⁵ Thus the Good is the cause of knowledge, truth, and every good thing that exists, and the entity that one must know in order to know both what goodness is, and also to be a good person.

In the *Meno*, Plato says that virtue is “a gift of the gods,” which is consistent with the idea that a vision or knowledge of the Good is not acquired deductively; its acquisition is attained or not, and its attainment is not assured by any means:

If we were right in the way in which we spoke and investigated in this whole discussion, virtue would be neither an inborn quality nor taught, but comes to

those who possess it as a gift from the gods which is not accompanied by understanding, unless there is someone among our statesmen who can make another into a statesman. If there were one, he could be said to be among the living as Homer said Tiresias was among the dead, namely, that “he alone retained his wits while the others flitted about like shadows.” In the same manner such a man would, as far as virtue is concerned, here also be the only true reality compared, as it were, with shadows.

I think that is an excellent way to put it, Socrates.

It follows from this reasoning, Meno, that virtue appears to be present in those of us who may possess it as a gift from the gods. (*Meno* 99e4–100b4)

In addition, the *Meno* excerpt may make sense of the Divided Line passage in the *Republic*, where it is said that one must proceed beyond one’s assumptions in order to have knowledge.

Moreover, Plato states that one’s happiness is connected to the ordered rule of philosophic life, and that having the power of goodness is the noblest prize:

If the victory goes to the better elements in both their minds [Reason], which lead them [that is, the lower parts of the soul—Appetite and Spirit] to follow the assigned regimen of philosophy, their life here below is one of bliss and shared understanding. They are modest and fully in control of themselves now that they have enslaved the part that brought trouble into the soul and set free the part that gave it virtue. After death, when they have grown wings and become weightless, they have won the first of three rounds in these, the true Olympic Contests. There is no greater good than this that either human self-control or divine madness can offer a man. (*Phaedrus* 256a7–b5)

These passages show Plato’s belief that we can have an experience that will entail our happiness, that is the highest achievement of human life, and that involves knowing or having a vision of the Good.

Plato sums up the study of virtue and vice in a letter, stating that long and earnest labor is involved, and that knowledge that truly illuminates an object’s nature is at the extremity of human effort, analogous to attempting to light a fire by rubbing sticks together:

In short, neither quickness of learning nor a good memory can make a man see when his nature is not akin to the object, for this knowledge never takes root in an alien nature; so that no man who is not naturally inclined and akin to justice and all other forms of excellence, even though he may be quick at learning and remembering this and that and other things, nor any man who, though akin to justice, is slow at learning and forgetful, will ever attain the truth that is attainable about virtue. Nor about vice, either, for these must be learned together, just as the truth and error about any part of being must be learned together, through long and earnest labor, as I said at the beginning. Only when all of these things—names, definitions, and visual and other perceptions—have been rubbed against one

another and tested, pupil and teacher asking and answering questions in good will and without envy—only then, when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort, can they illuminate the nature of any object. (*Letter VII 344a2–c1*)

Plotinus: Plotinus concurs with Plato that the Good is the ontological³⁶ source of all good things including knowledge,³⁷ as well as the entity that we must experience in order to be truly virtuous:³⁸ He agrees with Plato that the Good is the greatest thing to learn:

The knowledge or touching of the Good is the greatest thing, and Plato says it is the “greatest study,” not calling the looking at it a “study,” but learning about it beforehand. We are taught about it by comparisons and negations and knowledge of the things which come from it and certain methods of ascent by degrees, but we are put on the way to it by purifications and virtues and adornings and by gaining footholds in the intelligible and settling ourselves firmly there and feasting on its contents. But whoever has become at once contemplator of himself and all the rest and object of his contemplation, and, since he has become substance and intellect and “the complete living being,” no longer looks at it from outside—when he has become this he is near, and that Good is next above him, and already close by, shining upon all the intelligible world. (VI.7.36.3–15; adapted from A.H. Armstrong³⁹)

For Plotinus, the Good is “next above him,” that is, the intellect or intelligible world, just as Plato claimed—the Good is the source of knowledge and truth, but is not itself knowledge and truth. Plotinus thinks that in “[running] up beyond beauty” and going “beyond all,” (that is, seeing the Good) one sees the source of virtue:

He was one with himself, with no distinction in himself either in relation to himself or to other things—for there was no movement in him and he had no emotion, no desire for anything else when he had made the ascent—but there was not even any reason or thought, and he himself was not there, if we must even say this; but he was as if carried away or possessed by a god, in a quiet solitude and a state of calm, not turning away anywhere in his being and not busy about himself, altogether at rest and having become a kind of rest. He had no thought of beauties, but had already *run up beyond beauty* and gone beyond the choir of virtues, like a man who enters into the sanctuary and leaves behind the statues in the outer shrine; these become again the first things he looks at when he comes out of the sanctuary, after his contemplation within and intercourse there, not with a statue or image but with the Divine itself; they are secondary objects of contemplation. But that other, perhaps, was not a contemplation but another kind of seeing, a being out of oneself and simplifying and giving oneself over and pressing towards contact and rest and a sustained thought leading to adaptation, if one is going to contemplate what is in the sanctuary. But if one looks in another way, one finds nothing. These are images; and this, therefore, is how the wise among the expositors of holy things express in

riddles how that god is seen; and a wise priest who understands the riddle may make the contemplation real by entering the sanctuary; and even if he has not been there, and thinks that this sanctuary is something invisible, and the source and the principle, he will know that he sees principle by principle and that like is united with like. And he will neglect none of the divine properties which the soul can have even before the vision, and will seek the rest from the vision; and the rest, for him who has *gone beyond all*, is that which is before all. (VI.9.11.8–35; emphasis added⁴⁰)

We glean that Plotinus holds that there is a source of beauty and virtue, and that it is possible to know one's source and principle, which is what we crave.⁴¹

Taken together with the Platonic passages, the last two Plotinian quotations make Anton's claim about Plotinus faulty: "He could only use Plato to borrow a ladder to climb above Beauty, above all Forms, including the Form of the Good, and finally touch the One . . ." ⁴² While Plotinus certainly claims that a person can come to see or touch the One that is beyond being (that is, the One is beyond the Forms) we saw that Plato makes the same kinds of claims about the Good: The Good is the source of the Forms, Beauty, and knowledge, and the ultimate goal is to have a vision or gain knowledge of the Good.⁴³

Lastly, Plotinus states that the vision of the highest is the greatest experience that the soul can undergo,⁴⁴ since no other experience can really compare:

When the soul has good fortune with it, and it comes to it, or rather, being there already, appears, when that soul turns away from the things that are there, and has prepared by making itself as beautiful as possible and has come to likeness (the preparation and the adornment are clearly understood, I think, by those who are preparing themselves) and it sees it in itself suddenly appearing (for there is nothing between, nor are there still two but both are one; nor could you still make a distinction while it is present; lovers and their beloveds here below imitate this in their will to be united), it does not still perceive its body, that it is in it, and does not speak of itself as anything else, not man, or living thing, or being, or all (for the contemplation of these would be somehow disturbing), and it has no time for them nor wants them, but it has been seeking it, and meets that when it is present, and looks at that instead of itself; but it has not even time to see who the soul is that looks. There, truly, it would not exchange this for anything in the world, not even if someone handed over the whole universe to it, because there is nothing still better, and nothing that is more a good; for it does not run up higher, and all the other things are on its way down, even if they are in the realm above. So then it has the ability to judge rightly and to know that this is what it desired, and to establish that there is nothing better than it. For there is no deceit there; or where could it find any thing truer than truth? What it speaks, then, is that, and it speaks it afterwards, and speaks it in silence, and in its happiness is not cheated in thinking that it is happy; and it does not say it is happy when the body tickles it, but when it has become that which it was before, when it is fortunate. But it says it in contempt of all the other things in which it delighted before, offices or powers or riches or

beauties or sciences, and it would not have spoken if it had not met better things than these; it is not afraid, either, that anything may happen to it, since it does not even see it while it is with that; but if all the other things about it perished, it would even be pleased, that it might be alone with this; so great a degree of happiness has it reached. (VI.7.34.8–38⁴⁵)

This vision is the key to the soul's happiness for Plotinus, just as Plato stated in the earlier excerpts. These passages taken together leave me wondering about Meijer's⁴⁶ claim that contemplation of the Ideas is the Platonic ideal, whereas experiencing the One is the ideal for Plotinus, as well as Mayhall's⁴⁷ claim: "Much that is central is not, in its Plotinian form, to be found in Plato at all." It is best to postpone evaluation of Mayhall's statement until the claims concerning epistemology (especially dialectic) and ethics have also been reviewed.

In sum, Plato and Plotinus are committed to there being an experience that tells us what exists, what we can know, and how to live. We also saw that not all commentators agree on what the Good is for Plato, or that Plotinus describes the experience in the same way as Plato does.

1.3 The everlasting and self-sustaining experience

Plato and Plotinus both claim that the ultimate experience is everlasting—neither increasing in knowledge nor decreasing from knowledge to forgetfulness—and is self-sustaining. In short, one does not lose the fruits after undergoing the ultimate experience. (Few commentators even mention this aspect of the experience.)

Plato: First, Plato says that knowledge comes about from an experience, which is best interpreted together with what is described in the *Republic* as a vision of the Good:

This knowledge ["knowledge of the problems with which I am concerned" at 341c1–2] is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself. (*Letter VII* 341c5–d2⁴⁸)

Given that Plato devoted himself to the study of philosophy, and argued that knowledge of the Good was the most important thing to learn, we can safely infer that Plato has in mind by "the subject" the Good or knowing the Forms, and he implies candidly outside of his usual dialogic form that the experience is a self-sustaining one: the Greek for "straightway nourishes itself" (Post translates it "at once becomes self-sustaining") is *auto heauto ēdē trephei*.

A good number of Platonic scholars have questioned the authenticity of *Letter VII* (and others), so we might wonder if there is anywhere else in the certainly authentic⁴⁹ dialogues where we find Plato claiming that one can have a self-sustaining or everlasting experience of the Forms. Indubitably there is, which should give support to the