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Thinking That Shatters Against the Unthinkable

Plotinus' Speculative Ascent According to Jaspers

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Abstract: This essay examines Jaspers' account of Plotinus with a specific focus on Plotinus' method of ascending to the summit of his philosophizing: the union with Intellect and the One, the second and first principles of his metaphysics. Jaspers' reading reflects the highest admiration for the ancient sage and exceptional enthusiasm for his inquiring philosophizing, but it contains also a central misleading interpretation bordering on distortion. Without providing textual evidence, Jaspers attributes a phrase to Plotinus, "thinking the unthinkable," whose paradoxical and self-destructive logic Jaspers interprets as Plotinus' pivot point for his ascent to Intellect and the One. Jaspers' sympathetic but slanted interpretation appears, to a large extent, to result from his tenacious propensity to identify different modes of cognition with a singular term: thinking. It is argued that distinguishing between different modes of cognition can resolve Jaspers' self-made perplexity.

Keywords: Ancient philosophy; discursive thought; intellect; the soul; meditation; thinking the unthinkable; the Good; the One; mystical union.

Introduction

"Plotinus is the purest and most exclusive of metaphysicians."¹ Jaspers' sublime praise permeates his entire account of this eminent thinker of late antiquity in Western civilization. Jaspers' admiration is not diminished by his list of stern critical remarks about the thinker who was born and raised in Egypt, and who lived and taught exclusively in Rome during his adult life. Despite his wide-ranging critique of Plotinus' teachings and extreme otherworldly mindset, Jaspers nonetheless deeply

admires Plotinus' philosophy, which is, in his words, "an eternal monument of Western culture" (PL 91). Jaspers' blending of high praise and fundamental reservations is a remarkable and rare balanced act of philosophical critique.

Plotinus based his philosophy on three metaphysical principles or hypostases: The One (also named the Good), Intellect, and the Soul. Jaspers names this trinity "the One, Spirit, the World-Soul" (PL 91). Plotinus' fifty-four treatises, despite covering diverse subject matters, are uniquely single-pointed in their objective, as for example one of Jaspers' subsection headers crisply indicates: "Philosophy is ascent to the One" (PL 77), or as he alternatively stated:

For Plotinus thought has no other purpose than such union with the One. [PL 56]

¹ Karl Jaspers, "Plotinus," in *The Great Philosophers, Volume II: The Original Thinkers*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World 1966, pp. 38-92, here p. 85. [Henceforth cited as PL]

This essay examines a problematic perspective that overshadows Jaspers' reconstruction of Plotinus' ascent to the intelligible world: Jaspers claims that Plotinus summons the power of thinking to grasp "the unthinkable," and that such thinking's persistent failure, in turn, provides a metaphysical ladder for the ascent to the One via the Intellect.

The "Beating of the other Wing"

In the 1955 Epilogue to his three-volume masterwork *Philosophy*, Jaspers states that his philosophizing can be properly understood only by a double-layered interpretive comprehension, which he calls the "beating of the other wing." Without both wings beating, the contents of philosophical speech or text "cannot bring about the upswing of fulfilled meaning."² Jaspers elaborates:

It is only if both work together that the conveyed attempt at rational illumination will prepare the reader for true philosophical flight. When the other wing fails, when a man's mere intellect would have or hear the whole in what he has read, he will have quotable contents but not the philosophy that lives in them. And when the wing of factual, textual comprehension fails, when the reader refuses to think because he wants to be overwhelmed by the mystery, to bask in a sense of being carried away rather than to soar in the flight of thinking—then the letter of what I say will not impress him, because in reading he will be insensitive to indirect movements of thought. He will take notice of it, without understanding, and will soon put it aside. Both types of readers show themselves unready to move the second wing. [P1 16-7]

Jaspers presents his hermeneutic requirement of the beating of the other wing as a necessary condition for properly understanding philosophical text or speech. This double-layered understanding is particularly crucial for fully comprehending texts or speech that uses words to express meanings that cannot adequately be expressed in words. Plotinus is certainly one of those philosophical authors whose works require Jaspers' two-pronged reading for adequate comprehension.

In a recent essay on Plotinus, Christian Tornau echoes Jaspers' two-pronged interpretive approach and presents a rationale for it, that is at least pertaining

to the understanding of Plotinus. Tornau outlines Plotinus' philosophy as follows:

His philosophical writing in its entirety can be understood as an act of inquiry (*zēteîn*) of the rational soul...but the knowledge it strives for cannot be articulated by discursive means. Rather, the philosopher's soul seeks to transcend itself and the rational and to recover the supra-rational knowledge of its true noetic self.³

Tornau acknowledges here the two layers in Plotinus' philosophy, namely, rational inquiry by discursive means, and the soul's drive to surpass itself despite a limited range of discursive thought. In what follows, I will trace the efficacy of this bi-focal perspective by way of reviewing Jaspers' engagement with Plotinus.

Major difficulties in understanding Plotinus' writings as well as Jaspers' reading of them can be avoided or minimized when readers mind the difference between logical, sequential reasoning, and intuitive modes of thinking. Each type of cognition is quite distinct. Using merely one term, thought or thinking, for both kinds of cognition arguably can lead to misunderstanding, perplexity, and, as in Jaspers' account, to an excessive amount of conceptual pedantry. I argue that it is Jaspers, rather than Plotinus, who becomes entangled in a repetitive conceptual tussle about "thinking of the unthinkable" (PL 58), thereby creating an impression that Plotinus' writings are even more challenging and elusive than they indeed are.

Interpretive Challenges in Plotinus and in Jaspers' Account of Him

Plotinus' writings provide various challenges. After his death in 270 CE, Porphyry, Plotinus' most famous student, edited his teacher's fifty-four treatises by splitting them up, often quite idiosyncratically, to conform to his superimposed structure of six volumes, containing nine chapters each (hence called *The Enneads*). The fifty-four treatises generally read like summaries of seminars. Those summaries reflect a mixture of thematic presentation, answers

² Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Volume 1, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1969, p. 16. [Henceforth cited as P1]

³ Christian Tornau, "Plotinus on Knowledge," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, eds. Lloyd P. Gerson and James Wilberding, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2022, pp. 193-215, here p. 204. [Henceforth cited as PK]

to questions or objections from the audience, and acknowledgments of unresolved issues. Despite Porphyry's drastic editorial changes to achieve increased thematic unity, *The Enneads* do not provide a systematic philosophical structure. They retain much of the spontaneous and lively character of an engaged classroom.

Throughout his depiction of Plotinus, Jaspers is generally a very sympathetic and even enthusiastic reader and interpreter of Plotinus' writings. However, he frequently takes considerable liberty in interpreting them without providing textual evidence for his interpretations.

Jaspers' quotations from *The Enneads* in the German original and in the English translation of his text are without page references. For his original German version, Jaspers used several German and French translations without specifying the applicable translations or page references for his citations. The English translation of Jaspers' chapter on Plotinus identifies the translation by Stephen MacKenna as the source for Jaspers' quotes from Plotinus (*PL* vi). However, a sample comparison between a quotation in Jaspers' English text and MacKenna's translation reveals that the quote in Jaspers' monograph is not verbatim. The quote in Jaspers' English text appears to be a streamlined reformulation of the presumed MacKenna translation that was thought to be used for the translation of Jaspers' text into English.

By not indicating when a passage in his monograph is to function as a synopsis, comment, or an elaboration, Jaspers effectively blurs the distinction between Plotinus, the original author, and himself as analyst, interpreter, and commentator. Several passages of his monograph give the impression that Jaspers has stepped into the role of Plotinus' ambassador, who speaks for his superior with a shared understanding that the ambassador enjoys a generous leeway in phrasing his messages.

The English translation of Jaspers' original chapter on Plotinus does not acknowledge that it is an abbreviation, nor does it indicate the sources of the abbreviated text. Such an abbreviation occasionally leads to additional challenges in properly understanding the shortened text.

The aforementioned interpretive challenges in Plotinus and in Jaspers' account of Plotinus result in part from Jaspers' overriding educational goals. Jaspers is not interested in producing mere history of philosophy, but rather he thinks with and against

the philosopher he is studying and encourages his readers to do the same, that is, being philosophically productive themselves. He details this interpretive focus and provides his rationale in the Introduction to *The Great Philosophers* as follows:

My direct quotations are not philologically exact. Omissions are not always indicated by dots. The word order has been modified where my context made it seem advisable. But it goes without saying that the meaning has never been changed in the slightest...What I am after is a reader absorbed in what the philosopher says, not a researcher bent on tracking a passage down. An appraisal of my book demands more than the looking up of a few passages; it demands independent devotion to a philosopher's whole work.⁴

Thinking the Unthinkable: The Ascent to Intellect and Beyond

In Section III, "Transcending as a Whole," Jaspers outlines what he takes to be Plotinus' method for ascending from the sensible world to Intellect and from there, potentially, to the first hypostasis, the One. Jaspers formulates the conundrum that he thinks Plotinus is facing as follows:

Thinking, we take a step which is no longer thought, for as thought it cannot stand up against the proposition that the existence of the unthinkable is thinkable. Thinking presses to the limit that it cannot transcend but, in thinking this limit, spurs us to pass beyond it.

What is Plotinus' goal? The unthinkable. [*PL* 48]

Jaspers does not explicitly claim that Plotinus equates Intellect and the One with "the unthinkable," a term which Jaspers believes names the intelligible world that Plotinus is seeking to partake in. Adhering to Plotinus' internal hierarchy within the three hypostases—the One, Intellect, and the Soul—Jaspers is partially justified in labeling all entities that are more exalted than the human soul, such as Plotinus' Intellect and the One, as unthinkable, for they cannot be comprehended by the kind of reasoning and logic that suffices for practical living and instrumental knowledge. But by characterizing the One as the unthinkable, Jaspers undermines his

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers Volume I: The Foundations*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World 1962, p. 10.

own reconstruction of what he takes to be Plotinus' view, which does not include the unthinkable as a synonym for the One.

In line with the soul's ascending drive, Jaspers argues, the thinking of the limit of thinking "spurs us to pass beyond it" (PL 48). Jaspers does not claim that "thinking that shatters against the unthinkable" (PL 57) is the cause that triggers the actual surpassing of the thought's limit. If it were successful, such pushing forward would obviously contradict Jaspers' characterization of the One as unthinkable. However, if thinking presses to its limit, it may be spurred, as Jaspers asserts, to pass beyond itself, but such an attempt at self-transcending must necessarily end in failure. Therefore, such failure confirms Jaspers' claim that Plotinus' goal, characterized as the unthinkable, cannot be reached via thinking, as the meaning of the unthinkable clearly implies.

What is the purpose of this deliberate exercise in experiencing thought crashing against its limit? At the point when thought experiences its self-destruction by thinking the unthinkable, Jaspers explains,

the thinkable becomes a jumping-off place...the thinkable is surpassed by the methods of dialectical speculation. [PL 58]

It is apparent that the twisting maneuver of thinking the unthinkable demonstrates the feebleness of thinking vis-à-vis the Intellect, and particularly vis-à-vis the even more transcendent One. Nevertheless, Jaspers considers this impasse as progress in the process of speculative dialectics, which allegedly lifts the thinker onto the next higher plateau. Jaspers sums up the result of this mental gyration, which he claims Plotinus is advocating:

When I confront the One, the failure of my thinking raises me above all thinking. [PL 61]

What is gained by the failure of thinking is a reevaluation of contingency, according to Jaspers. In the ordinary world,

contingency is an expression of failure to understand for want of the knowledge that is indispensable in the finite world. In transcendence it becomes a symbol for the fullest meaning of the incomprehensible. [PL 64]

As long as this failure of thinking tries to fix itself by finding ever more objects of thinking or more sophisticated cerebral schemes, such thinking remains stuck in a vicious circle. Finally, Jaspers reveals the

fulcrum of his reconstruction:

Only if...I effect a leap by transcending from object to nonobject, can I, without fixating an object, meditate my way into the source, dreaming as I think. [PL 68]

On the one hand, dreaming properly signals a shift in the type of prevailing mental activity yet it is not a suitable characterization of such a shift. Meditation, on the other hand, is an accurate approximation of such an alteration. At the beginning of his chapter, Jaspers had already acknowledged the contemplative character of Plotinus' thinking, which he is now explicitly highlighting in his appraisal:

This "inquiring" style also expresses meditative action, the presence of the thinking soul in the realm of the essential. [PL 39]

Over the span of several pages in Section V, called "Speculative Transcending," Jaspers consults, dissects, and reformulates Plotinus' alleged objective of thinking the unthinkable. Rather suddenly, Jaspers abandons there his protracted preliminaries and identifies Plotinus' essential pragmatic points:

This is what Plotinus does: his First [his first principle, the One] is not an object, it is without predicate and cannot be thought. It is not the first member of a series. To think it is not to think it. Thus in the pursuit of each category it becomes necessary to effect a leap into the realm where thinking ceases. The thinking of the understanding leads to the endless. But transcending thought arrives at the source or goal where it finds rest. [PL 68]

One must caution that using the word "understanding" is a serious mistranslation in this context, as the original German word *Verstand* means "conceptualizing reasoning." A corrected translation of this pivotal sentence may read as follows:

The path of thought of conceptualizing reasoning leads to endlessness.⁵

At this stage of contemplation, the self-defeating undertaking of thinking of the unthinkable has exhausted itself, and the thinker finds respite in the realm where thinking ceases. Nevertheless, Jaspers continues to engage with thinking which, according

⁵ "Der Gedankenweg des Verstandes führt ins Endlose." Karl Jaspers, *Die Grossen Philosophen. Erster Band*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1957, p. 691. [Henceforth cited as GP]

to his account, allegedly morphs, via non-thinking, into an inability to think. He explains it thus:

The dialectic of this thinking that aspires to become nonthinking results in: a shift of thinking into inability to think; a thinking that negates itself and so transcends itself as thinking; a nonthinking which in ceasing to think something, does not think nothing, but thinks the nonbeing that is not Being or Above-Being. This dialectic that continually transcends itself is a specific kind of thinking, meaningless as long as objectivity and intuition are the conditions of meaning, but essential for the elucidation of the consciousness of Being and its limit. [PL 68]

Here again, the German word *Anschauung*, which is the process of primarily visual or metaphorical perception, is rendered with "intuition," which is another unfortunate mistranslation. The sentence could be more appropriately translated as follows:

This dialectic that continually sublates itself is a specific kind of thinking, void as long as being an object and sensory perception are the conditions of meaning, which is essential for the illumination of the awareness of Being and boundaries. [PL 68]⁶

Contrary to Jaspers' claim, Plotinus does not identify an inability to think as a requirement or an asset for the ascent to Intellect or the One. Rather, the opposite is the case. Plotinus' writings are filled with direct quotes from, or oblique references to, previous thinkers, especially Plato, as Plotinus sees himself firmly embedded in the extensive tradition of Greek thinkers.

According to Jaspers, Plotinus teaches that a thinker is on the right path of ascending intellection either by thinking the unthinkable, non-thinking, or by experiencing one's inability to think. Therefore, Jaspers concludes that Plotinus' speculative dialectic "achieves a meaningful failure in the failure of discourse" (PL 68). Jaspers sees the value of this failure in developing a heightened receptivity to anything that cannot be grasped as a thinkable entity. Additionally, experiencing such a failure of discourse is meaningful according to Jaspers since one then faces the thinkable entities

in such a way as to free ourselves from them and overcome our tendency to find an ultimate and absolute in any object of thought. [PL 69]

In my reading, the renunciation of finding a verbal expression for the supra-rational contemplation experienced in Plotinian intellection is akin to the function of a koan in Zen Buddhism, namely, the experience of the limits of logical reasoning. Jaspers' phrase "thinking the unthinkable" probably aims at the same insight; however, I find his explanations of this process to be unnecessarily convoluted. Likely prompted by modern philosophical concerns, Jaspers seems to have foisted an intricate subject matter into Plotinus' philosophizing. The issue of "thinking the unthinkable" was not a central topic for Plotinus. Yet Jaspers' tenacious engagement with Plotinus exemplifies a productive dialogue with a principal philosopher.

Solving Jaspers' Enigma: A Differentiation between Modes of Thinking

Several of Jaspers' statements regarding the centrality and characterization of thinking in Plotinus' writings are problematic, for they may give the impression that Plotinus is an aloof theorist who seeks to force thinking into a cognitive cul-de-sac and then celebrates the shattering of thought as a meaningful failure of thinking. Such a misleading interpretation of Plotinus likely results from Jaspers' elaborate parsing of the paradoxical phrase "thinking the unthinkable," which Plotinus did not use. More fruitful insights into Plotinus' subtle and supple thinking can be gained by distinguishing between different kinds of mental activities.

Tornau offers a terminology that distinguishes between the main kinds of cognition used by Plotinus and other comparable contemplative thinkers. He highlights the pivotal difference between discursive thought (*dianoia*) and non-discursive thought as follows:

Discursive thought...is the activity of the reasoning or calculating faculty of the embodied soul. It is called "discursive" because it temporally moves from one object of thought to another and because it reaches its insights by proceeding from premises to conclusions. This is the ordinary way of thinking rational beings experience in everyday life; it mirrors the temporal structure of at least the embodied soul, if not soul as such. [PK 201]

⁶ "Diese sich stets wieder selbst aufhebende Dialektik ist ein spezifisches Denken, nichtssagend, solange Gegenständlichkeit und Anschauung Bedingung eines Sinns sind, wesentlich für die Erhellung des Bewußtseins von Sein und Grenze." [GP 691]

In contrast, non-discursive thought is thinking and knowing in the modus of Intellect. Tornau explains:

Intellectual knowledge (*noēsis*) differs from discursive thought in that it does not move from premises to conclusions. Thanks to its being one with the Forms, it grasps the latter – the totality of real Being – intuitively, atemporally and "all at once." [PK 206]

According to Plotinus, rational human beings partake in Intellect (*noūs*). Therefore, the human intellect is "undescended," that is, not part of the fragile material world. Additionally, Plotinus suggests that "intellection is a vision in which seeing and what is seen are one."⁷ Realizing this unity of the contemplating subject and the contemplated object requires, and simultaneously enhances, a specific conduit of access. A pithy gloss indicates the direction of this new English translation of *The Enneads*, further clarifying this central point:

Intellect is the second hypostasis; intellect is the true identity of rational living beings. Our intellects are undescended and engage in the same activity that Intellect does. The mode of cognition of Intellect and all intellects is non-discursive. [E 917]

In Table 1 below, I combine germane terminology from Tornau's essay with this new translation. The table cross-references two distinct modes of cognition, namely, philosophizing and intellection, with two different types or stages of thinking that Plotinus discusses. The correlated kinds of temporality may further clarify the main modes of cognition Plotinus is elucidating. This rudimentary table may also indirectly assist readers in better understanding Jaspers' pioneering conceptual exploration into the contemplative cosmos of Plotinus.

	MODE OF COGNITION	
	Discursive thought (<i>dianoia</i>)	
Philosophizing		
Ascent to Intellect / The One		Intellection (<i>noēsis</i>), non-discursive, intuitive thought
Temporality	stepwise, consecutive	atemporal and immediate

Table 1: Mode of Cognition in Philosophizing vs. Intellection

⁷ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, transl. George Boys-Stones, John M. Dillon, Lloyd P. Gerson, R. A. H. King, Andrew Smith, and James Wilberding, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2018, p. 539, 5.1.5.19-20. [Henceforth cited as E]

In response to his rhetorical question, "What, then, is that inner way of looking?" (E 101 I.6.9.1), Plotinus lists essential interior transformations that result from experiencing this inner way of looking. Such changes include becoming

entirely yourself, true light alone...unmeasured everywhere. [E 102 I.6.9.18-21]

In words that are reminiscent of the learning occurring in a close-knit group consisting of teacher and students, Plotinus then describes, referring to those inner transformations, a beatific panorama to his listeners or readers:

If you see that you have become this, at that moment you have become sight, and you can be confident about yourself, and you have at this moment ascended here, no longer in need of someone to show you. Just open your eyes and see, for this alone is the eye that sees the great beauty. [E 102 I.6.9.22-25]

Jaspers invokes a double-winged approach that is necessary for the comprehensive understanding of a profound philosophical text. Plotinus goes a step further and asserts the presence of a corresponding double-winged constitution of those who possess true self-knowledge:

One who knows himself is double, one part knowing the nature of the discursive thinking of the soul, the other knowing that which is above this, namely, the part which knows itself according to the Intellect that it has become.

Further, in thinking himself again, due to Intellect, it is not as a human being that he does so, but as having become something else completely and dragging himself into the higher region, drawing up only the better part of the soul, which alone can acquire the wings for intellection, in order that there be someone who could be entrusted with what he sees in the intelligible world. [E 557 V.3.4.7-14]

Revisiting Jaspers' advice to apply a double-winged interpretive stance may have alerted philosophical readers at this point in time to an analogous double-winged approach in Plotinus' ascent to Intellect and beyond, that are, discursive thought plus intuitive intellection.

As quoted above, Jaspers states that true philosophical flight requires the simultaneous beating of two wings. One wing, "the wing of factual, textual comprehension" needs to be complemented by the "beating of the other wing," that is, the reader's

sensitivity to "indirect movements of thought" in order to "bring about the upswing of fulfilled meaning" (P1 16). Jaspers' hermeneutic instruction regarding the beating of the other wing may be understood as a counterpart to Plotinus' metaphysics in which the wings for intellection provide transport to becoming something else completely. Jaspers' discursive counsel to activate the beating of the other wing finds its non-discursive ontological counterpart—its other wing—in the lived fulfillment of Plotinus' advice to activate

the better part of the soul, which alone can acquire the wings for intellection. [E 557 V.3.4.13-14]

Conclusion

Jaspers is using a considerable portion of his Plotinus interpretation to demonstrate that the themes of "thinking the unthinkable" and "thinking that shatters against the unthinkable" are keystones of Plotinus' metaphysical edifice. However, Jaspers does not provide pertinent evidence from *The Enneads* to substantiate his crucial claim. In my reading, Jaspers' insistence on the central significance of his argument is a misleading interpretation that amounts to a substantial distortion of Plotinus' teachings.

Jaspers' questionable construal of Plotinus' method of ascent to the One via Intellect, appears, to a large extent, to result from his tenacious propensity to identify different modes of cognition with a singular term, namely, thinking. This essay has shown that, by distinguishing between different modes of cognition, Jaspers' self-made perplexity can be resolved.

Failing to distinguish between different modes of cognition (discursive vs. non-discursive thought) is one cause of Jaspers' misinterpretation. Additionally, his misconception of the function of thinking in Plotinus' metaphysics can be construed as an attempt to ground his own philosophical view by attributing it to the writings of the venerated ancient philosopher.

Jaspers' metaphysics of foundering, or of failing, may provide an explanation for his misreading of Plotinus regarding Intellection, the non-discursive mode of thinking conducive to ascending to Intellect and the One. Twenty-three years after the publication of his main systematic three-volume work, *Philosophie*, Jaspers writes in 1955:

Of all my books, *Philosophy* is the closest to my heart.
[P1 5]

It is noteworthy to observe that the last section of Volume 3 is titled: Vanishing of Existence and *Existenz* as the Decisive Cipher of Transcendence: Being in Foundering. This final part of Jaspers' trilogy highlights the centrality of foundering in his philosophy of *Existenz*. Jaspers writes:

Foundering is the ultimate; according to an inexorably realistic world orientation. More yet: it is what ultimately comes to mind in thinking of all things... In transcendence, thought will founder on nocturnal passion.

The question in the diversity of foundering, however, is whether it means outright destruction—whether that which founders is perishing in fact—or whether it reveals a being. In other words, whether foundering can mean not merely foundering but eternalization.⁸

These two references regarding the centrality and double-faced character of foundering may suggest that Jaspers' interpretation of the function of thinking in Plotinus is motivated by his inclination to harmonize Plotinus' teaching with a core tenet of his own philosophy, which upholds the importance of scientific reasoning without falling prey to religious faith.

Irrespective of agreeing with or challenging specific lines of argument, Jaspers' chapter, as part of his series of philosophical portraits, comprising his *The Great Philosophers*, continues to be an important link in the effort to keep the relevance and collective memory of Plotinus alive.

⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 3*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1971, pp. 193, 194-5.