



Existenz

Volume 19, No 2, Fall 2024

ISSN 1932-1066

Understanding Plotinus' Mysticism through Jaspers' Concept of *Existenz* and Śaṅkara's Concept of Pure Consciousness

A Meta-Ontological Approach

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Abstract: Plotinus, who adopted the main teaching of Plato's philosophy of ideas and his dialectical method of knowing reality, is widely considered a mystic. His mysticism is related to the Supreme One, that is, God and his divine attributes, through which there is *communio* (participatory communication) and *unio* (union) between the self of humans and the supreme self, and this is taken as a means of human salvation. In contrast, Karl Jaspers believes that humans are governed by reason, which is simultaneously how we invent ourselves. Focusing on Jaspers' critique of Plotinus' mysticism, I will raise three questions aimed at understanding the conceptual structure of the human soul, namely, first, are there similarities in the writings of Jaspers and Plotinus with regard to going beyond the physical realm; second, since Jaspers appears to believe in the transcendental human agency in the same way as Plotinus, what are his reasons for criticizing Plotinus' mysticism; and third, are there similarities in Jaspers' and Plotinus' understanding of pure existence or being as compared to the monistic philosophy of Advaita Vedānta in the Indian tradition? To answer these questions, I intend to explore Plotinus' mystical philosophy through the conceptual lens of Jaspers' *Existenz* and from Ādi Śaṅkara's Advaitic lens of monistic Brahman, that is, Pure Consciousness.

Keywords: Brahman; existence; reality; divine; godlikeness; mystical; salvation; spirituality.

Plotinus' Idea Regarding an Immanent Divine Unitary World

In *The Enneads*, Plotinus argues that the transcendental Reality is the primary source of the multiplicity of all worlds, both mental and physical, and he emphasizes the practice of intellectual contemplation and the recognition of the soul's transcendence of the material world. Plotinus is known as a mystic for two reasons: Firstly, he considered the world to be driven only by forces of inherent spirituality and divine qualities that

empower individual souls to purify themselves and rise to the realm of intellect, ultimately helping them to achieve unity with the Supreme, who is the source of all existence. This Supreme can only be known by enlightened, intelligent minds having attained godlike virtues. Secondly, divinity is present within humans, within the universe, and in every form of life; however, the divine nature of the world remains unknown to many, if not most, humans.

Plotinus regarded human beings as containing sparks of divinity, connected to an ultimate reality he referred to as "the One." Stephen Clark views

Plotinus' form of reality as something that itself is oriented towards the One. He argues that

Reality, as the united living being containing all living beings, is not its own explanation. It exists, coherently, because it is itself "oriented" toward the One.¹

Marije Martijn also argues that

Plotinus keeps the individuals in the universal, which is most clearly visible in his claim that individual or particular intellects are part of universal intellect.²

Evelyn Underhill observes that Plotinus, as a mystic, believes that all things emerge from and return to the One in one way or another. She argues that

All things, according to Plotinus, have come forth from the Absolute Godhead or One, and only fulfil their destiny when they return to their origin. The real life of the universe consists in this flux and reflux: the outflow and self-expression of spirit in matter, the "conversion" or return of spirit to the One.³

This One forms Plotinus' transcendental world which is the ultimate source of all existence and beings, both material and immaterial, of all goodness, divine qualities, and beauty. According to Plotinus, the material world originates and exists from God and ultimately merges with God, who is both transcendental and immanent. To know and realize God's transcendental world, one needs to have the meditative ability to grasp the divine unity. I agree with Zeke Mazur, who observes that

in order to attain the One – to 'grasp' it in some non-intellectual sense – one must reject even knowledge itself to achieve an unencumbered unity of the self that resembles the absolute unity of the One.⁴

Thus, it can be said that Plotinus' transcendental

world is unitary and divine; for in it, only God is the supreme power and the supreme principle of the existence of all other beings.

In Plotinus' mysticism, this supreme being possesses both absolute potentiality and absolute actuality, which can be understood in terms of the Supreme's power to exceed all beings and predicates, and can be known and realized by way of contemplation and meditation that is guided by one's intellectual vision. The kind of unity that Plotinus conceived between the transcendental world and the mundane world is established through his idea of existence, which is applied to both the intellectual and sensible realms, although not explicitly. This unity is attained in the philosophy of Plotinus through the idea of the Good. On one occasion, while answering the question of how all other things are related to the Good, Plotinus responds that

In fact, things without soul are related to Soul, and Soul is related to it through Intellect. And things have something of it by each of them being one in a certain way, and by existing in a certain way. And they partake of form, too. And as they, then, partake of unity, being, and form, so they partake of the Good.⁵

The things of the intellectual or transcendental world are considered original, for their existence is eternal and endless, while the things of the material world are deemed to be inferior as they are composed of finite and mortal things. However, for Plotinus,

whatever possesses [Pure] Existence is supremely free, dwelling, unchangeable, within its own peculiar nature.⁶

This implies that the material world is a manifestation of the transcendental world, whose existence can come to an end, while the existence of the transcendental world is pure and supreme, as it has neither a beginning nor an end.

The two primary features of Plotinus' unitary world include essential existence, which is thought of by him as substance and divinity. Plotinus employs

¹ Stephen R. L. Clark. "Plotinus and Godlike Virtues," in *Quietism, Agnosticism and Mysticism: Mapping the Philosophical Discourse of the East and the West*, ed. Krishna Mani Pathak, Singapore, SG: Springer 2021, pp. 159-76, here p. 172.

² Marije Martijn, "From Plotinus to Proclus," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, eds. Lloyd P. Gerson and James Wilberding, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press 2022, pp. 65-89, here p. 76.

³ Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays*, London, UK: J. M Dent & Sons Ltd. 1920, p. 119.

⁴ Alexander J. Mazur, *The Platonizing Sethian Background of Plotinus's Mysticism*, Leiden, NL: Brill 2021, p. 29.

⁵ 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. 106, 1.7.2

⁶ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, transl. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page, London, UK: Faber and Faber Limited 1956, p. 22, 1.1.2.

the term "existence" to refer to different levels and different categories of things, yet all arise from the supreme existence and lead to the same, namely, the supreme substance or God. Such a world of supreme existence in the transcendental form and such a world of the apparent existence in the material form is very similar to the worlds imagined by many other philosophers such as Plato, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Karl Jaspers, Ādi Śaṅkara, or Sri Aurobindo who can be said to be firm advocates of the spiritual cosmic world which includes every form of existence, that amounts to a transcendental aspect to the world and the material world. Plotinus argued that divinity is integral to the world, manifested through pure spiritual minds who have either realized their Godlikeness or are on the path to perfection. Paul Henry has explicitly highlighted this point when he writes that

all the forms and phases of Existence flow from the Divinity and all strive to return THITHER and to remain THERE. This Divinity is a graded Triad.

Its three Hypostases—or in modern religious terminology, "Persons"—are, in the briefest description:

1. The ONE, or First Existent.
2. The DIVINE MIND, or First Thinker and Thought.
3. The ALL-SOUL, or First and Only Principle of Life.

Of all things the governance and the existence are in these Three. [E xxiii-iv]

In answer to the question, "How do we possess the Divinity?" (E 26, I.i.8), Plotinus refers to moral and spiritual perfection as the highest path to divinity, through which the individual soul establishes unity with the supreme spirit, that is, God.

In *The Enneads*, Plotinus often uses the term existence to refer to the unitary world of existences, which are primarily either or all authentic existence, substance existence, existence beyond existence, and necessary or essential existence, and so on. In this unitary world, according to Plotinus, the individual essential soul must establish participatory communication and unity with the absolute essential soul, that is, with God, in order to realize its divine nature, which is identical with that of God. In fact, Plotinus' mysticism does not make room for sin and salvation, as, according to him, salvation is the state of unity with the Supreme, which can be attained and realized by the individual soul when all its internal and external differences from the Supreme are overcome. It is the state of pure unity, which appears to be like the Supreme One or being identical to him.

At this point, Plotinus appears to go beyond Plato to discuss spirituality and merges the world of ideas with the world of appearances to project the Supreme in a primarily mystical sense.

Jaspers' Transcendental *Existenz* and Plotinus

Jaspers' philosophy of transcendental *Existenz* incorporates both Plotinian and Kantian elements, yet his philosophy is closer to Kant than to Plotinus. As seen earlier, Plotinus believed in an underlying immanent world where the divine trinity of the One, Divine Mind, and All-Spirit is inseparably one in the sense that everything is essentially the same, as exemplified in the Spinozian philosophy of *Natura Naturata*. Cosmically seen, there is indeed no duality of reality in Plotinus' immanent world, which is often presented as an image of Plotinus' mysticism, although there has been some criticism of this. For example, Alan Olson has attempted to critically outline Jaspers' views on mystical philosophers such as Plotinus when he writes:

Jaspers's relation to mysticism is both fascinating and frustrating. On the one hand, Jaspers seems to be never more himself than when he is providing extended commentary and exposition on such spiritual giants as Jesus, Socrates, and the Buddha. And when he provides a monograph or book-length treatment of mystical philosophers such as Plotinus, Cusanus, and Spinoza, one has the distinct impression that Jaspers finds himself mirrored almost perfectly in these thinkers—so much so, in fact, that it is sometimes very difficult to ascertain who is speaking, Jaspers or his subject.⁷

On the other hand, Kant and Jaspers (who has been called by some the last Kantian) both have departed from the Plotinian-Spinozian view by holding that the cosmic world has a dual character. The higher one is transcendental, rational, and intelligent; and the lower one is immanent, material, and unintelligent or less intelligent. The transcendental world (*noumena*) exists independently of one's experience, while the material world (*phenomena*) is the world of one's experience. According to Kant, the *noumena* are the foundation of the phenomena. Ralf Bader argues that

⁷ Alan M. Olson, "Jaspers's Critique of Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51/2 (June 1983), 251–266, here p. 251.

noumena are the grounds of phenomena...Phenomena are derivative entities that owe their existence as well as their determinations to noumena...Phenomena are matter-form compounds that depend on noumena for their matter, but depend on us for their form.⁸

Similarly, Jaspers also considers the physical world to be the realm of empirical experience and objective knowledge by humans, while the transcendental world exists beyond these experiences and is inaccessible to scientific inquiry. The transcendental world, according to him, encompasses both *Existenz* (referring to an individual's authentic self) and Transcendence (referring to the ultimate source of being and existence). Citing Jaspers' *Reason and Existenz* to highlight the connection between *Existenz* and Transcendence, Hans Schelkshorn argues that human beings' existence "is inseparably tied to transcendence, that is, absolute being" in the sense that the former springs from the latter.⁹ Undoubtedly, it is true that despite being a Kantian, Jaspers' existential philosophy was strongly influenced by Plotinus' philosophy of existence, transcendence, intersubjectivity, and the human condition, but not entirely so, as Plotinus and Jaspers differ in their interpretation of transcendental reality. A major difference is that while Plotinus considers transcendental reality in the religio-theological sense of divine union with God or God-like positions, Jaspers regards it in a non-theological sense and ethically advocates in a Kantian manner that it is pure or transcendental freedom and rational self-legislation.

Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Jaspers found more material for criticism than for a defense in Plotinus, although the difference is primarily conceptual. To understand the unique difference between Plotinus and Jaspers, one needs

to explore the idea of (rational) existence or *Existenz* as it has been used by the latter to denote the inherent rational capacity of the individual soul to transcend or go beyond the world of existence or the empirical realm. Thus, the same entity or agency in Jaspers' philosophy, which scholars sometimes identify as the Heideggerian *Dasein*, has two basic characteristics, namely (1) *Dasein*'s existence as lived experiences without any trace of engagement with transcendental experiences, and (2) *Dasein*'s emergence as *Existenz* that relates to the transcendental world without a single trace of empirical existential content. In this sense, Jaspers suggests that *Existenz-Dasein* is more elevated than *Existence-Dasein*, and therefore, I argue, it is incorrect to say that Jaspers' view of existence is entirely existential in nature.

Like Plotinus, Jaspers does not advance the thesis of an immanent world where the divine or spiritual spirit is seen to exist within and permeate the material world; rather, he suggests that the individual spirit by its very nature is a being that is separate from or transcendent to it. Jaspers, in fact, conceives of a hierarchical reality where *Existenz* reality is superior to *Dasein* reality, or puts forward that transcendental reality is likewise superior to material reality. Filiz Peach correctly captures this duality when she observes that, according to Jaspers, *Dasein* and spirit are modes of existence in which humans perceive themselves as existing in the world and participate in worldly events as potential *Existenz* without any transcendental experience. She writes:

For Jaspers, *Dasein* is a mode of Being which manifests itself as one's empirical self in the world with a temporal dimension. In other words, *Dasein* is man's everyday concrete mode of being among other entities. *Dasein* is embedded in the world of experience, involved in practical aspects of everyday life... Empirical existence, i.e. *Dasein*, represents one's self as a concrete, physical and sociological being...Jaspers' concept of *Dasein* has a transcendent aspect.¹⁰

This is to say that at the existential level, the being is *Dasein*, yet at the transcendence level, the being is pure Spirit or pure *Existenz*. Also, all three fundamental modes of Being—empirical being (*Dasein*), pure existence (*Existenz*), and spiritual metaphysical realm (Transcendence)—are inseparably connected

⁸ Ralf M. Bader, "Noumena as Grounds of Phenomena," in *The Sensible and Intelligible Worlds: New Essays on Kant's Metaphysics and Epistemology*, eds. Karl Schafer, and Nicholas F. Stang, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2022, pp. 279-295. here p. 279.

⁹ Hans Schelkshorn, "Karl Jaspers: Philosophical Faith and the Vision of an Intercultural Democratic Global Order," in *Religious Experience, Secular Reason and Politics around 1945: Sources for Rethinking Religion and Spirituality in Contemporary Societies*, eds. Hans Schelkshorn and Herman Westerink, Leiden, NL: Brill, Schöningh 2024, pp. 91-115, here pp. 95-6.

¹⁰ Filiz Peach, *Death, "Deathlessness" and Existenz in Karl Jaspers' Philosophy*, Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press 2008, p. 33. [Henceforth cited as *DDE*]

to Being, that is, the inner spirit of an individual (DDE 35). It is evident that the Jaspersian notion of spirit or soul, or the concept of Being, is involved in both worldly and transcendental matters. Yet this more or less also applies in the case of the Plotinian notion of soul in the immanent world.

Ontological Affinity between Plotinus and Śaṅkara

There is also a close ontological affinity between Plotinus' mystical philosophy and Śaṅkara's monistic concept of the Absolute Reality, that is, Brahman and the world as its manifested form. The graded Divine Triad of Plotinus can be understood from the perspectives of the three states of the same conscious reality, namely, *prātibhāsika* (being in one's complete subjectivity, that is, an apparent reality such as a dream-state), *vyāvahārika* (being in the world psycho-physically, that is, the material reality of worldly humans) and *pārmārthika* (being in the transcendental reality, that is, pure consciousness that is also described as Brahman or Ātman). In *Vivekachudamani*, Śaṅkara maintains that

Dream is a state of the soul distinct from the waking state, where it shines by itself. In dreams Buddhi, by itself, takes on the role of the agent and the like, owing to various desires of the waking state.¹¹

Śaṅkara explains:

This gross body is produced by one's past actions... That is its waking state in which it perceives gross objects. [VC 37, 88]

The soul (Ātman) is identical to Brahman, that is, the Absolute Reality. In this sense, Ātman or Brahman is nondual and transcendence and is metaphysically omnipresent. Referring to the I-ness as Ātman or Brahman, Śaṅkara writes that

I am the Universal, I am the All, I am transcendent, the One without a second. I am Absolute and Infinite Knowledge, I am Bliss, and indivisible. [VC 224, 516]

In his commentary (*bhāṣya*) of the *Gauḍapāda Kārikā*, emphasizing the eternity of the Ultimate Reality, that is, Pure Being or Pure Existence, Śaṅkara

holds that the Ultimate Reality does not change its nature, while material reality, which is unreal at the *pārmārthika* level, does constantly undergo changes in it. Verse 2.6 is as follows:

That which is non-existent at the beginning and in the end, is necessarily so (non-existent) in the middle. The objects are like the illusions we see, still they are regarded as if real.¹²

The triune reality described in Śaṅkara's monistic philosophy is perceptibly significant only for those ordinary beings who have not realized their pure essence of being identical to Brahman, which is understood as being the only Reality. Plotinus also has a similar view that the world appears God-like only to those who have realized their divine essence of being identical to God. Such is the conceptual similarity between Plotinus' world of pure existence and Śaṅkara's world of pure consciousness.

In order to understand this intellectual similarity between Plotinus and Śaṅkara, it is helpful to look at what these two philosophers have said about Ultimate Reality. On the one hand, Plotinus writes:

The Existent—rightly so called—is that which has authentic existence, that, therefore, which is existent completely, and therefore again, that which at no point fails in existence. Having existence perfectly, it needs nothing to preserve it in being; it is, on the contrary, the source and cause from which all that appears to exist derives that appearance. [E 207, III.vi.6]

For Śaṅkara, on the other hand, the real is the pure existence that is unchanging, immanent, nondual, and what is changing is only an appearance. From the perspective of the ultimate reality, the cosmic world is immanent pure consciousness which appears as many to those who are ignorant of it. The material world is unreal since it has a beginning and an end. From this meta-ontological perspective, the cosmic world is monistic, and it is the all-pervading Brahman, comparable to the all-pervading God in Plotinus. However, there is one significant difference between their visions of reality, namely, while Plotinus firmly holds that the material world emanates from the Supreme Existence, Śaṅkara, on the contrary, believes that the world is only an

¹¹ *Vivekachudamani of Sri Sankaracharya*, transl. Swami Madhavananda, Mayavati, IN: The Advaita Ashram 1921, p. 41, verse 98-99. [Henceforth cited as VC with page number, verse number]

¹² *The Māndukyopaniṣad with Gauḍapāda's Kārikā and Śaṅkara's Commentary*, transl. Swāmi Nikhilānanda, Mysore, IN: Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama 1949, p. 97, verse II-6.

appearance of the manifestation of Brahman, and that it is therefore not a true emanation. Anil Sarkar has attempted to show the intellectual affinity between Plotinus and Śaṅkara, making a reference to Jaspers, when he writes that

To Plotinus, the *One* is self-sufficient, perfect and undivided. Hence the *One* looks upon itself, it has nothing other, but is itself alone. All questioning into the ground of the *One* takes place in the shattering category of the ground that is groundless.¹³

This is very helpful in substantiating my points that, on the one hand, the transcendental and immanent ultimate Reality as One and Brahman can be easily discovered in Plotinus and Śaṅkara, while on the other hand, the duality of the Transcendental or the Absolute reality and the material or the restricted reality can be discovered in Śaṅkara and Jaspers.

A Concluding Remark

From the philosophical similarities shown above between Plotinus, Jaspers, and Śaṅkara, one can conclude that although the three philosophers have certain conceptual similarities on the matter of what kind of reality they believe in and how far they can go to hold a solid meta-ontological position on the issue of pure and perfect existence, Plotinus who appears to mystify the cosmic world with the idea

of human being's divine identity or unity with God, believes that the ultimate source of all reality is a single, simple, and ineffable principle, that is, the Good or the One, which is transcendental or beyond existence and non-existence, and is the source of all that exists. The empirical world, however, is believed to be the divine realm of the realization of one's divine essence and moral perfection via the practice of divine godlike virtues.

According to Śaṅkara, the entire cosmic world is Brahman, and at the meta-ontological level, there is no duality or multiplicity; thus, the empirical world is akin to an illusion as it is temporarily real, or in other words, it is not eternal. However, at the material level, the world humans inhabit is real and serves the purpose of fostering the spiritual and divine evolution of humans, for here the non-dual Brahman is perceived as being God who takes care of the world. Jaspers, on the other hand, emphasizes that the individual soul is an independent rational entity that acts as an existential agent (*Dasein*) to realize its authentic existence, in addition to realizing its transcendental existence, by engaging in whatever it must do to live up to its desired aspirations in the world. So, even though Jaspers may seem to be an existentialist due to his idea of an active-*Dasein*, meta-ontologically considered, he believes in transcendental existence as well. And this is what brings him closer to both Plotinus and Śaṅkara.

¹³ Anil K. Sarkar, "Plotinus and Sankara: Where do they meet?," *Triveni Journal* (January-March 1980), [https://www.trivenijournal.org/Web%20\(1978%20-%202008\)/plotinusandsankarajan80.htm](https://www.trivenijournal.org/Web%20(1978%20-%202008)/plotinusandsankarajan80.htm).