

If language accompanies the ambiguity inherent in our condition, what is the exact way in which language and this condition go together? What is it about a being that is both sensible and intelligible and what is it about language that the two seem enfolded together? This is one of the driving questions behind *Ennead V 3[49]*, which is explicitly concerned with how something can think itself.

being involved in something thinking itself, is about whether it is an activity performed by something complex or by something simple. However, implicit in this concern is the question about the relation between language and our ambiguous condition, an implication we can see unfold as we follow the course Plotinus takes in his discourse. Let us follow along with him, then, while keeping our guiding question in view. In that way, we may work through it and see

We ask, then what is language,  
given its activity takes place within an ambiguous being; what is this being, given language takes  
place within it?

### V 3[49] 1

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

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<sup>1</sup> V 3[49] 1, 73.

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

However, before moving on, let us note a few deposits he left along the way. Namely, if something composite thinks only with clear distinctions between that which thinks and that which is thought, the object of its activity is always something other. This implies its activities are always about, in regards to, or concerned with something else. There is a type of being that can only think *about* things on the very basis of being composite. On the basis of being

## V 3[49] 2

Instead of leaping to the intellect itself, Plotinus opts to work from the way the human soul comes to know and what it comes to know, whether this includes knowledge of itself, towards the way in which intellect itself knows. Plotinus makes two moves in this chapter that are important both for thinking through our question and for showing Pl .



sense perception has immediate access to what is sensible. The image of receiving an imprint suggests this immediacy in that when a round object is imprinted on wax, the object interacts with the wax directly. The circular imprint in the wax results from the circular object being pressed on it. Yet, and two, the reasoning power does not simply stop at receiving these

<sup>4</sup> Presumably,

Plotinus means that just as the reasoning power combines and divides sensible objects through a

<sup>5</sup> There is not just a reception of impressions but a grouping and fitting of them together, which means there is an operation that must deal with these impressions in a mediated fashion. The operation that collects these impressions back together with ones already in the soul must work with the impressions, not with what impresses. If the objects of this recollection are the impressions, then its operation is distinct from the operation that immediately receives the impression

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

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V 3[49] 2, 77  
V 3[49] 2, 77

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

### **V 3[49] 3**

In this chapter, it is more obvious that Plotinus is inquiring into the nature of language,

However, language not only arises because we need to navigate between this particular sense perception and some general categories obtained through repeatable experiences. For

what is ascribed to it does not simply originate in sense perception but because we have a likeness to the good in ourselves.<sup>7</sup> Goodness is not like a category derived from repeated and

itself, to work with what is external and other than itself.<sup>9</sup> This power of reasoning and the



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

However, does this not imply that language and reason are confined to keeping its focus





<sup>17</sup> This mark of caution indicates there is more to be told, more to say and to think before we can know or possess what we are after. In associating unlike things, the metaphor not only insists on the likeness of the association but retains the disassociation and unlikeness. The metaphor does not contain the being as a content, does not *have it* but leans into or is drawn towards what it attempts to say.

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

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

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

#### Works Cited

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