Neoplatonic Henology as an Overcoming of Metaphysics

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The closure of metaphysics, which some audacities in the
Enneads seem to indicate by transgressing it . . .
Jacques Derrida*

It has often been noted that among the academic disciplines philosophy
is the one that depends most on its own history. This may be so because,
just as we learn to speak from our parents and society, so we learn to
think from our forebears and our culture. Our twentieth century may
furthermore place us in the peculiar position where reflecting upon the
historical situatedness of our reasoned convictions has become a major
element of the philosophical endeavor itself.

Whoever sets out to do philosophy, whether in the Middle Ages or
today, places himself within a lineage. He is situated diachronically. But
he is also situated synchronically, he places himself within a cultural
network of exchanges. This network makes for an interest that is
operative in philosophical works, an interest that turns the philosopher
into the spokesman for his times. One may describe this synchronic link
in psychoanalytical terms and speak of a desire that comes to the fore in
thinking. One may also describe it in structuralist terms and speak of
systemic rules that thinking obeys in every age. One may finally describe

*Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, transl. A. Bass (University of Chicago Press,
it in phenomenological terms and speak of epochal modes of being in the world. This last approach has the advantage of laying bare strategies in the history of philosophy, which obey a certain logic. Thinking these strategies through to the end, we may learn something about our own times, about where we come from and where we may be going. To me, tracing the transmutations that philosophical topics undergo through the ages, with the intent of clarifying our own topos, is the most fruitful way of doing philosophy today. Looking with one eye to the sequence of past epochs, and with the other to the potential that this sequence yields for our own age amounts to more than a mere history of concepts (Begriffsgeschichte). It consists rather in treating the cultural fluctuations as a phenomenon in the strict sense.

Borrowing a term from Heidegger, which occurs in his lectures from the mid-twenties on and which has since been used and abused particularly by contemporary French writers, one may call the method of reading our past for the sake of our present the “deconstruction” (Abbau) of history.' To suggest the potential that the discourse on loci, the topology, yields for present thought, I wish to follow—to “de-construct”—one such major strategy in the history of philosophy: that of henology, the doctrine of the One. More specifically, I shall try to see in what direction the transmutations point that henology undergoes from Plotinus to Meister Eckhart to Heidegger.

Reading the Henological Tradition Prospectively

At first sight, the henological strand in philosophy runs rather smoothly from late Antiquity to the Middle Ages to Modernity—at least in one respect, namely that the discourse about the One is ultimately a discourse about God, that henology is negative theology. In this one regard, its history is deprived of real ruptures, of breaks. Or so it seems when we read that tradition prospectively, as I shall briefly sketch, from the Neoplatonists to our contemporaries.

Plotinus is usually, and probably rightfully, considered the father of speculative mysticism. His teaching is speculative since it consists apparently in hypostasizing forms of thought into realms of the world, and it is mystical since by such hypostatization Plotinus wishes to account for an experience of transcendence that leads the mind beyond reason. Here is one well-known text from his Enneads that shows quite beautifully the link between cosmological speculation and inward experience: