

Benedikt Krämer: *Über das Unsagbare sprechen. Formen der Theologie in Plotins Enneaden*. Münster: Aschendorff 2020 (Orbis antiquus 55). X, 397 p. € 54.00. ISBN: 978-3-402-14465-7.

Benedikt Krämer's monograph adds to the broad, recurring interest in the scholarship on the Neoplatonic first principle, the One, of Plotinus and the ways in which one can refer to the One – an inherently ineffable entity which is simultaneously the identifiable origin of all reality. As Krämer well notes, Plotinus' theological exposition does not stand alone but rather fits well within the Platonic tradition, stretching back to the Middle Platonists. What distinguishes Plotinus' account is his new emphasis on the first principle's radical transcendence – which Plotinus' Middle Platonist predecessors largely subsumed within the language of Aristotle's unmoved mover from *Metaphysics* Λ – together with his retention of positive ways of referring to the first principle. This is especially striking in the well-known and controversial passages of *Enneads* 6.8 (esp. from 6.8.7 onward) and 5.4, when Plotinus refers to the One as possessing an activity ($\epsilon\nu\epsilon\rho\gamma\epsilon\iota\alpha$), traits similar to Intellect like a process of thought, being a cause of itself, and so on. Combined with the striking negative statements Plotinus makes on the One, such as its transcending all activity ($\epsilon\nu\epsilon\rho\gamma\epsilon\iota\alpha$), it not possessing any thought, not being a cause in any sense, and overall being entirely ineffable, one may wonder how Plotinus could reconcile these two, seemingly contradictory sets of claims.

Krämer provides a thorough study of the different ways in which Plotinus speaks about the One and ultimately argues for a consistent method beneath the apparent tension. He identifies three modes of theological discourse – the *via analogiae*, *via negativa*, and *via eminentiae* – whose use depends on the argumentative context of each treatise. Similar issues have been explored in the scholarship, most recently in Gwenaëlle Aubry's 2022 chapter on the One in "The New Cambridge Companion to Plotinus",¹ which connects negative language about the One to mystical experience. Yet even Aubry does not treat the more positive, and controversial, passages as extensively as Krämer, who also integrates the so-called mystical sections into his account of affirmative discourse. In this respect, Krämer's book stands out as

1 G. Aubry: The One as First Principle of All. In: L. P. Gerson/J. Wilberding (eds.): *The New Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*. Cambridge/New York 2022 (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy), pp. 90–112.

a major contribution, offering one of the clearest analyses to date of the tension – and, at the same time, continuity – between Plotinus’ negative and positive ways of speaking about the One.

Besides the first chapter introducing the problematic of Plotinus’ discussions around the One (“Einleitung: Thema, Forschungsstand, Aufbau der Arbeit”, pp. 1–10), Krämer opens his study in Chapter 2 (“Theologie’: Begriffliche Vorüberlegungen und philosophische Voraussetzungen”, pp. 19–24) with a discussion on the term “theology” in Plotinus and its pertinence for the kinds of speech Plotinus employs about the One. Krämer briefly discusses the core Platonic texts that were central for Middle Platonists in their attempt to articulate the first cause’s ineffability and its paradigmatic nature as the cause of the Forms and thus of all beings – especially, for instance, the Good’s status as ἐπέχειναι τῆς οὐσίας in *Republic* 6 and the Demiurge’s nature from the *Timaeus* 28c3–5 as “indeed difficult to find” (εὐρεῖν τε ἔργον) (28c4), and impossible to declare to all.

As Plotinus’ framework for discourse on the One draws on the Middle Platonist background, Krämer devotes Chapter 3 (“Die Theologie der Mittelplatoniker”, pp. 25–90) to this background, looking at Alcinous (pp. 29–54), Maximus of Tyre (pp. 55–73), and Apuleius of Madaura (pp. 74–90), all of whom broadly identify the first cause as Intellect (νοῦς). Krämer treats them as preparing the ground for the three *viae* later used by Plotinus. For Alcinous, Krämer highlights the first cause’s ineffability as a limitation of language, while its nature remains firmly νοῦς (pp. 43–47). Maximus, by contrast, describes the gap between human and divine thought as one of degree rather than kind: divine thought is thus constant and eternal, while human thought is contingent (pp. 63–65). This allows for a commonality of discourse, yet conditioned depending on the object of that discourse, which results in Maximus using negative discourse (i.e. Krämer’s *via negativa*) as a qualifier for *via eminentiae* discourse about the cause (pp. 65–70). Finally, Apuleius applies his restrictions to theological discourse in terms of profane vs. mysterious, or esoteric, descriptions about the first cause (pp. 89–90), aligning with his focus on the *via analogiae*, for instance, in his *De mundo* (p. 85). Although one might wish for engagement with other figures such as Numenius or Eudorus of Alexandria, Krämer’s focused treatment of these three offers a precise case study for the modes of theological language that Plotinus adopts.

This background sets the stage for Krämer’s main focus of the book, Chapter 4 (“Formen der Theologie in Plotins *Enneaden*”, pp. 91–349), where in the first few pages (pp. 91–93) Krämer shows how Plotinus responds to this Middle Platonist context when he detaches intellect (νοῦς) from the first cause – ultimately underlining the One’s unity. This greater dis-analogy brings into relief Plotinus’ emphasis on the first cause’s transcendence, not simply in discourse but in its very nature, in sharp contrast to the Middle Platonists’ first cause. On the one hand this seems to minimize one or two of the *viae* – especially the *via eminentiae* and perhaps the *via analogiae*. Krämer recognizes, however, that Plotinus retains these positive modes of discourse from the Middle Platonists, but radicalizes these modes with his notion of the One as the first cause. The apparent tension between affirmative and negative speech, he suggests, is resolved not by Plotinus contradicting himself or changing his mind, but rather by analyzing the contextual function of each *via* within its respective treatise.

Krämer opens his treatment of the *viae* in Chapter 4 with Section 4.1 (“Theologische Propädeutik – Plotins methodische Überlegungen zur Theologie”, pp. 100–132) on the pedagogical context of theological discourse. Plotinus links theology to ethics: discourse about the One both describes it and raises the soul toward it. Krämer identifies a dual function here – objective, in presenting the One, and inner-subjective, in shaping the soul (pp. 109–111) – which he correlates with Plotinus’ distinction between “necessity” (ἀνάγκη) in Intellect and “persuasion” (πειθώ) in Soul (pp. 111–113; cf. Plot. enn. 5.3.6.10). This framework underlies Plotinus’ mixture of positive and negative language. It also explains the role of ‘declarative speech’ for souls lacking vision of the One: though mediated and differentiated, such discourse remains an image of the One as the source of all being (pp. 131–132). In this way Krämer shows a continuity between pedagogical language and the soul’s eventual vision of the One.

This leads to Krämer’s analysis of the *via analogiae* in Section 4.2 (pp. 133–191), which examines Plotinus’ use of familiar images to speak of the One, such as the point relative to a line or the unit in a number series. These analogies, as Krämer notes (pp. 134–140), ultimately function as metaphors: while the point and unit are indivisible beginnings, they still imply plurality and mark a dis-analogy with the One, which transcends all relation. Even so, they serve a psychagogical role in orienting the soul to the One’s causal pri-

ority, a point Krämer develops with reference to Aristotle's theory of metaphor. He also highlights images like "root" and "source" (pp. 145–162) and "king" and "father" (pp. 162–168), which both affirm the One as origin and gesture towards the role of negation that will frame these statements. Krämer's treatment of Plotinus' phrase *δύναμις τῶν πάντων* ("power of all things") for the One (pp. 168–191) is especially of interest: for Krämer, Plotinus positions the phrase between analogy and eminence, ascribing to the One a perfection beyond all instances of *δύναμις* or *ἐνέργεια* in beings, while still marking the One's transcendence over every known instance of active power.

Krämer's analysis of the *via negativa* in Section 4.3 (pp. 192–216) reveals its purifying role: negative discourse situates the One beyond all things and does not destroy or nullify affirmative statements, but rather frames them within the One's ineffability. Krämer underscores a key distinction in Plotinus between apophasis (i. e. removing specific predicates, e. g. 'the One is not being') and apheiresis (i. e. withdrawing the subject itself from all attributes). The latter, as Krämer notes, allows a quasi-positive grasp of the One, akin to Plotinus' definitions of evil and matter in similar terms (pp. 197–199). Negation thus marks an intensification of the subject's transcendence, with ethical force: as the soul denies attributes tied to plurality, it is purified and prepared for its vision of the One.

Krämer's final and longest section (4.4, pp. 217–349) turns to the *via eminentiae* and addresses Plotinus' most disputed passages, especially *Enneads* 5.4 [7] and 6.8 [38], where the One is described as intelligible (*νοητόν*), self-causing, and willing its own being – seemingly at odds with its ineffability. Krämer argues that these are not literal predicates but "quasi-intellektuelle[...] Prädikate" (p. 218), either revoked immediately or serving to mark the One's difference from everything else (pp. 218–219). On this basis he contends that the later treatises (such as *enn.* 5.3 [49]) refine, rather than contradict, the earlier treatises, lending greater consistency to Plotinus' theology of the One across the *Enneads*.

In the first main sub-section, 4.4.2 ("Positive Zuschreibungen in *Enneade* V 4", pp. 241–263), Krämer focuses on the attributes of self-awareness (*συναισθησις*) and thinking (*κατανόησις*) attributed to the One. On initial inspection, these appear to conflict with passages such as *enn.* 5.3.13, where Plotinus explicitly denies both thinking and self-awareness to the first principle. Krämer, drawing especially on *enn.* 5.6 and 6.7 (notably 6.7.39), argues that

the denial concerns the strict sense of these terms, which presuppose plurality – between thinker and object of thought, or among multiple objects such as the Forms. At the same time, Plotinus’ refusal to attribute ‘thinking’ does not imply ignorance for the One. This recalls Plotinus’ use of negation to indicate rather a higher intensification, such as the soul’s greater level of being, as not-body, compared to the living body itself: it is in this sense, Krämer suggests, that enn. 5.4 can speak of συναίσθησις and κατανόησις, and of the One as νοητόν for Intellect.

The second main sub-section, 4.4.3 (“Die ‘positiven’ Zuschreibungen der *Enneade* VI 8 – gibt es eine Kontinuität der positiven Theologie?”, pp. 264–303), contained for this reviewer some of Krämer’s more stimulating discussions on the One. Alongside the ascriptions of substance, will, activity, self-causation, and “super-thinking” (ὑπερνόησις), Krämer (pp. 272–279) begins by setting 6.8 against Plotinus’ critiques in enn. 5.6 of Aristotle’s account of the unmoved mover as ἐνέργεια directed to itself – a “thinking of thinking.” Plotinus questions whether such a predication is necessary, seeing in it a tautology, and contrasts it with the example of an eye in actuality, which is able to see without reference to a specific object. In this qualified sense the One itself can be called active, an ἐνέργεια without implying duplication. Plotinus’ language in 6.8 reinforces this, describing the One as a state of awakening (enn. 6.8.16.31–34; ἐγρηγορότος, “always already achieved”). Krämer thus reads 6.8’s claims – that the One causes and wills itself, and is a κατανόησις and ἐνέργεια without delimitation – as persuasive speech (πειθώ) suited to souls not yet possessing vision of the One. He situates this within a threefold movement: first the denial of all predicates (enn. 6.8.8–9), then qualified affirmations marked with “as if” (ὡς), and finally the lifting of attention beyond even these by way of apharesis, purifying the soul for union.

Krämer’s analysis seems to bring Plotinus strikingly closer to Aristotle than one might expect, even as Plotinus critiques and surpasses Aristotle. Plotinus’ argument on ἐνέργεια brings to mind Aristotle’s claim from *De anima* 2.7 (417b2–28) that perception is not a motion (κίνησις) but rather an actuality (ἐνέργεια), complete all at once. Plotinus thus seems to expand on this with his re-construal of the One as an ἐνέργεια which does not imply a separate, delimited object in relation to the subject, as in the Aristotelian case, but simply is the subject. One can see Plotinus’ project as both a critique of Aristotle (i.e. in making the first cause ἐνέργεια, hence as intellect [νοῦς] thinking itself as thinking) and a refinement of Aristotle in the direction of a Platonic

position (i.e. in making the One the first cause, as an indefinite ἐνέργεια – which cannot be articulated in literal speech, inasmuch as this implies plurality).

At the same time, Krämer (in pp. 318–333) argues that Intellect’s structure, though an effect of the One, is not reproduced within the One itself. The positive terms ascribed to the first principle – such as *κατανόησις*, anticipating Intellect’s ἐνέργεια and νόησις – show the One as a paradigm of Intellect, albeit as a paradigmatic principle whose unity precedes and grounds these later structures precisely by not sharing their characteristic plurality. Krämer’s discussion in the final Section 4.4.7, on Plotinus’ metaphysics of light and its (at least partial) applicability to the One, further underscores this point (“Lichtmetaphysik in den *Enneaden*?”, pp. 336–349). Although he does not discuss her, a similar line has been taken up by Cristina D’Ancona, who compares the One’s causality to that of the Forms: just as the Form Beauty generates beautiful things by being itself undetermined, lacking any particular instantiation of beauty, so the One produces the Forms and Intellect without assuming their determinate features.² While it is not entirely clear whether Krämer would endorse this precise analogy, his overall argument in Section 4.4 seems to point in the same direction.

Krämer’s overall argument helps confirm that we have a very different discourse for the One in Plotinus compared to what comes after Plotinus, especially in Proclus and Syrianus. In the latter cases, it seems that one finds a desire to delegate the different discourses for Plotinus’ One to separate principles: in Proclus’ case, for instance, the henads below the One take over the function of *via eminentiae* and perhaps the *via analogiae*, while for the One in itself, only the *via negativa* is allowed – perhaps an attempt to restrict discourse on the One to Plato’s Parmenides’ first hypothesis, in only allowing negative statements. One sees this in D’Ancona’s argument that Proclus’ One possesses a fundamentally different kind of causality compared to the Forms.³ The advantage of Plotinus’ approach, as Krämer affirms in the book’s conclusion (pp. 354–355), is that it simply affirms the One’s principial character

2 C. D’Ancona Costa: Plotinus and Later Platonic Philosophers on the Causality of the First Principle. In: L. P. Gerson (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*. Cambridge/New York 1996 (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy), pp. 356–385, pp. 361–362.

3 Cf. esp. D’Ancona Costa (note 2), pp. 365–366, 376–380.

(“Prinzipiencharakter”), as both transcendent over all beings and the direct cause of all beings – a tension that later Neoplatonists try addressing in their own way, at least as I argue in my book.⁴

The only critical, but very minor, remark to make on Krämer’s work is that the chapter structure could have been somewhat simplified: for instance, the discussion of the distinct *viae* could have been perhaps clearer if they were separate full chapters rather than sub-chapters of one chapter. However, this is certainly only a cosmetic issue. Krämer’s work is a solid, thorough study of Plotinus’ positive and negative approaches to the One that, for this reviewer, makes Plotinus’ approach more consistent and persuasive with understanding his One. Krämer’s “Über das Unsagbare sprechen” will be an essential work for current Plotinus scholars.⁵

- 4 See J. Greig: *The First Principle in Late Neoplatonism. A Study of the One’s Causality in Proclus and Damascius*. Leiden/Boston 2021 (*Philosophia Antiqua* 156), esp. pp. 10–12.
- 5 The reviewer wishes to thank for their support the VolkswagenStiftung, within the scheme of the project “Visions of the History of Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity and in the Greek and Arabic Middle Ages”, as well as the Institut für Klassische Philologie (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin). The reviewer would also like to expressly thank the editors of Plekos for their immense patience and support, especially in relation to a period that involved family tragedy which delayed the finish of this publication.

Jonathan Greig, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
 Institut für Klassische Philologie
 Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter
 jonathan.greig@hu-berlin.de

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Jonathan Greig: Rezension zu: Benedikt Krämer: Über das Unsagbare sprechen. Formen der Theologie in Plotins *Enneaden*. Münster: Aschendorff 2020 (*Orbis antiquus* 55). In: Plekos 27, 2025, S. 625–631 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2025/r-kramer.pdf>).

Lizenz: Creative Commons BY-NC-ND
