

**RETURNING TO SELF AND LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS:
SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN NEOPLATONIC
SEMANTIC OF *EPISTROPHE***

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Abstract. In my paper I will discuss the reinterpretation of the Neoplatonic ‘epistrophe’ as a hallmark of description of subjectivity in the Patristics. The Plotinian theme of *epistrophe* outlined a new understanding of Self, centered on individuality and subjectivity. By affirming the existence of distinctive levels in Self, Plotinus brought a degree of complexity to the Platonic Self, by introducing levels of *epistrophe*, manifested in a continuum that extends from the sensitive to the intelligible. The intelligible Plotinian realm is ‘in us’, the one that can be reached on the way back to oneself. Converting transference means decisions made by the rational beings to move toward their cause and beginning or their own end, God.

Keywords: *self, subjectivity, reversion, levels of consciousness, Plotinus, Maximus the Confessor*

1. Introduction: A Couple of Hermeneutical Precautions

In this paper, I intend to analyze the constitutive process of the meanings of the term ‘*epistrophe*’, – and its consequent re-signification – a word that played a pivotal role in the late antique thought, opening at the same time the first horizons in patristic theology. Nevertheless, such an assessment is not exactly a facile one considering not only the diverse and complex conjuncture in which this concept was set in motion, but also the way of understanding its implementation: the grace of an experience that is in first instance lived and then covered by a terminological expression. In other words, the concept in question does not consist of a rational

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description, referring on the contrary to a living reality. Neoplatonists shared the conviction that wisdom cannot be expressed or transmitted via intellection or rational language, but despite this repudiation of discourse, their texts possess a rich doctrinal content, which functions along with these reservations. They believe there is a central metaphysical fact underlying this persistence in pursuing the nondiscursive way, and that is why the identity theory – the doctrine claiming the intellect is its own object and the very nature of the self-disclosure of intellectual activity – is at the core of Neoplatonic philosophy and dialectics.

This theory of truth is difficult to demonstrate and even if one does make the attempt, the main premise, that is the existence of a faculty capable of accessing the eternal nondiscursive truths (Rappe 2000, 13), will always be eluded. Such a conception about truth, which is by definition impossible to communicate to someone else, – as any representation would cut off the involved unity of the subject and the object – leaves the philosophical endeavor in predicament, which can only be solved using the paradox, a compromise or a contradiction. *Nous*, the faculty of intellectual intuition, is implicit in all Neoplatonic texts concerning self-presence and immediacy: an “auto-encapsulation” for the intellect makes known to himself his own content. But what kind of language can be utilized to transmit the truth comprehended by this faculty? If the answer is that the *nous* semantic must be thus metaphorical, it should be noted that both conceptual and metaphorical representations do not correspond to its intuitions, as Sara Rappe point out in *Reading Neoplatonism. Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius*. All truth affirmations become metaphors because their literal meaning has been from the start rejected for its uselessness. Neoplatonists refused to accept that truth could ever be entirely revealed; truth itself is a veil covering the source outside of any representation. The discursive strategies composing the Neoplatonic texts are a configuration of the nondiscursive truth, and this tradition in its entirety is an appeal to what can be known as *unwritten tradition*, Rappe insists (Rappe 2000, 14).

2. Doctrinal Configuration of Neoplatonism and the Semantics of *epistrophe*

A.C. Lloyd, in *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*, sees that *epistrophe* is granted with the significance both of a returning/inclination to self and the significance of a turning back/orientation to a superior source, and that because this term is one of the Plotinian Triad – *emanation*, *reversion* and *remaining*, receiving in this case a rather technical sense, as an element of the Neoplatonic theory of reversion. In the Neoplatonic tradition, the soul's ascension is rendered by the term *epistrophe*, translated as "reversion". One can however sometimes meet this Greek term in its strict sense of "being oriented toward something", referring to a certain inclination, and other times in a much more complete sense of "returning" or "turning back". But when the term refers to superior levels of existence and the sole activity or the relevant activity of a subject is the conscience or thought, "being inclined to (do) something" rather signifies *having the attention directed towards...*, and if this is necessarily accompanied by thinking, the subject must reflect upon that and nothing else. But at this stage, saying literally that the Soul and the Intellect "return" does not mean that they changed their place, but rather that the content itself of conscience or thought has been changed. As shown and made explicit in the Proclus' *Elements* (Proclus 1932, 13), the procession gives existence to the subject, while the reversion adds "something" to its existence (Lloyd 1990, 127). In Plotinus, this process is repeated analogously every time a new entity is produced. Proclus denotes a special type of reversion, *i.e.*, the *epistemic reversal*, signifying "the consciousness of causation by goodness", the presence of an image of the Good and of a form of self-consciousness. The best act of the Intellect, says Plotinus, is the thought of everything that has preceded it, "because turning back to itself, it's moving toward its origin" (Plotinus 2018, VI. 9. 2. 33-6). Damascius is aware of the difficulties raised by this theory, but his position is fundamentally the same: the alternative types of *epistrophe* are involved in each reversion case. So, in every situation, *to return*, *to remain* and *to proceed* are, in his formulation, one single aspect of two relations (Damascius 1964, I. 170. 16-171. 7R). For practical reasons, Neoplatonists did not need, though, to distinguish between *epistrophe* and the general notion of the Soul's Ascension as One (Lloyd 1990, 128).

Should be put then into question a second problem with regards to understanding the semantics of the Neoplatonic *epistrophe*. How does one distinguish between the inversion of cause and the cause remaining within itself? Reverting to the cause seems to restore *the status quo ante*, but then everything that was unfolding will be losing its identity. A first issue arises at this point: it appears to be clear that the reversion function, establishing the identity of something undetermined, is incompatible with the reverting to cause and thus it belongs only to the auto-reversion. It is true that the Neoplatonists could have seen that as unsatisfactory, but if they had asserted that the ascending reversion usually entails a prerequisite auto-reversion, they were not forced to come into conflict with their own theses. So, it would be more appropriate to presume that the issue is not called into question because, as a universal law, “inversion” does not mean “turning back”, but only “inclination”. This is surely the case with Plotinus whereas it does not explain how the Intellect, “turning back to itself”, is actually “returning to its origin” (Plotinus 2018, VI. 9. 2. 33-6). The self-reflection in the sense of existence/beingness is to see itself as a single existence/being. Having this conscience means to be indirectly conscious of the One since a direct conscience of the One is impossible. Plotinus names this conscience “indirect” because it “looks toward the One”. The reason is that “the One”, who is itself and has a direct self-reflection, is both an effect and an image of its cause, which is “the One”. That is why Plotinus can affirm that being self-conscious is to be in the presence of the One.

The nature of the Intellect must be unified with *this* One to that extent because if “the One who is” would not exist, as well as the multiple categories and forms, the Intellect would not either exist. A similar argument can be deduced from the narratives on genesis, which replace “good” or “object of desire” with “the One” (Lloyd 1990, 129). If procession is considered to be the generation of new entities, it is easy to understand that *epistrophe* can also be considered as one of its necessary conditions. Proclus describes this pair as a continuous circular movement, and hence excludes a priority order (Proclus 1932, 33). It can be suspected that this persistent simultaneity was seldom meant to forestall the emphasis on the generation process, literally, that is *in time*, but Plotinus’ “pre-intellect” suggests that he actually wanted to say more because

imagining a process whose each “moment” must be accomplished before another moment related to the function that we consider at a certain point, one has to attribute to one or several moments, an undetermined or potential stage before that would become determined or real.

3. Subjectivity as Returning to Self. Plotinus’ Concept of Subjectivity

Reviewing the academic debate on the theme of *Self* in Greek and Roman philosophy made in the last decades, Hutchinson says that was a subject of intense debate, due to some opinions according to which the idea of *returning to Self* has first emerged within the Roman Stoicism. The theme, developed as well by the Neoplatonists, will lead to a new conception of *Self* based on *individuality* and *subjectivity*. Plotinus is following Plato in the affirmation of some of the *Self’s* layers, the latter identifying the human being with the soul, given that the soul directs the body, using it as an instrument. Furthermore, he identifies – like Plato – the *Self* with the rational soul because this is the part possessing the knowledge of what is good, allowing us to pursue what is good for the soul. But nonetheless, Plotinus adds a certain degree of complexity to the platonic *Self* by introducing some of the *Self’s layers*. The main feature of these layers is that their manifestation is a continuum extending from the sensible to the intelligible world. *The Self* is a way of consciousness that differs throughout these layers, fluctuating according to their level of reality. The Plotinian intelligible realm is not a super-cosmic kind of place separated from Humanity to which man cherishes the hope (as Plato does) of coming back in the afterlife (Hutchinson 2018, 11). It is rather “within us” and accessible through the way of *returning to Self*, and from there in the vertical direction moving upwards (Plotinus 2018, III.4.3.21-24).

Plotinus identifies the true *Self* with the *Noetic Self*, meaning that the Intellect is the *Hypostatic Intellect*. To comprehend why it is so, we need to have a brief synthesis of Plotinus’ psychology. The superior soul is our intellect, that gives form to the form-matter compound, which is though separated from the composite. The form from the form-matter composite is also composed by the activity of two souls, a soul urn, and

an inferior soul. The “soul urn” is an image of the smallest capacities of the *anima mundi* (soul of the world). The inferior is an image of the superior soul. Plotinus does not always show clearly which of the world-soul’s (*anima mundi*) and inferior soul’s capacities contribute to the functioning of the body. However, as Hutchinson indicates, the incarnated human beings primarily own capacities associated both with the life of plants (nourishment, reproduction, growth, and passive power of perception) and with the life of animals (pleasure and pain, appetency and passion, sense perception, imagination, and memory), but also with a level of life proper only to humans – discursive reasoning, belief and language (Hutchinson 2018, 12). Incarnated human beings have two sources of perception. On the one hand, we can receive impressions which “descend” from the Intellect by virtue of our superior soul, on the other hand we can receive, however, the sense perception coming from the inferior soul. Together with our imagination – accountable for the integration of these two entrance sources and to produce unitary experiences – the discursive reasoning processes evaluate and pass judgments on these impressions, expressing them with the help of language. We may therefore say that the Rational Self has two levels: a superior one in the intelligible world, and an inferior one in the sensible world.

The superior Self is the true Self because it represents that part within us remaining always in the Intellect, which makes the inferior Self capable of reasoning (Plotinus 2018, V.I.10.11-32). Hutchinson points out that the superior Self, who is actually the same as the Intellect, allows the inferior Self to put reason into practice. Forms constitute a holistic system in which all of them are interconnected and transparent to each other. The Intellect has infallible knowledge about the eternal truths contained in this holistic system. The certainty of its knowledge is self-evident because Forms are intrinsic to it, sharing the same actuality. The principles of judgment, deriving from Forms through Intellect, enable the latter to understand the eternal truths, present also in our intellect, that at its turn gives the *Dianoetic Self* the capability of discursive reasoning (Hutchinson 2018, 13).

4. The Instruments for “Sculpting our Self” and the Experience of Authentic Self

A critical aspect is that, according to Plotinus, there are instruments that we can use to sculpt our Self, they are in fact *virtues*; nevertheless, a virtuous life does not simply lie in moderating our irrational desires, as we see in Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophy. It rather lies in a complete self-detachment and the experience of their emotional impulse only when it is necessary, and that is because irrational desires originate in the *soul urn*, that provides information to the body and all its affections, and being external to the soul does not truly constitute the ego, insist the author of *Plotinus on Consciousness*. The detachment process involves three hierarchically-ordered degrees of virtue: *the civic virtues* (they are setting the limit and the measure of our irrational desires); *the purifying virtues* (separating soul from the body, removing all that is extraneous, allowing it that way to operate independently from the desires and irrational opinions), and the *contemplative virtues* (they are held by the soul, which is purified by its involvement with the body, accomplishes its nature intellectually and absorbs itself wholly by contemplating the forms). Practicing virtue expels all desires and irrational opinions originating from the compound and leads to the final experience teaching us that the authentic self is our Intellect, in which lies true virtue. As Plotinus says, “so, when the soul is purified, it becomes form and forming power, intellectual and completely bodiless, belonging entirely to the Divine” (Plotinus 2018, I.6.6.13-15).

But even though we have come to identify ourselves with the Divine, realizing that the One is an intelligible universe, we can be only partially integrated in this intelligible world, and that sets bounds to our knowledge. Due to this restriction, our Intellect gets to know the intelligible world from a mere perspective, which is limited, defined, and represented only under a certain aspect. This perspective thus particularizes the experience of the intelligible world, individualizing our Intellect in relation to other intellects just like a theorem subjected to critical analysis is individualized by other theorems (Hutchinson 2018, 27).

5. "First-Person" Subjectivity and the Different Levels of Consciousness

It takes a presumed inner forum to reflect on one's own experience, and that can only be accessed personally. Likewise, in order to represent the intelligible world under a certain aspect there has to be a perspective accessible only from the contemplating person's view. For the last several years there has been a debate on the existence or non-existence in ancient philosophy of this notion of first-person subjectivity. The description and the understanding of Plotinus' subjectivity requires the distinction between three levels of subjectivity: At the first level, subjectivity refers to a subject, and that is to be *the kind of being to whom mental states can be attributed in a valid manner*. On the second level, subjectivity refers to a first-person view, that is *the experience of the world from the perspective of his/her own beliefs and desires, and the reflection upon his/her own experience from that point of view*. On the third level, subjectivity refers to the self-consciousness of a *conscious thinking subject in certain relations with its own conscious states*, whose relations with its own conscious states or with the conscious states themselves play a fundamental role in shaping the ethical worldview.²

Cristopher Gill argues that the use of subjectivity in the Classical Greek and Hellenistic thought as a criterion of subjectivity is anachronistic because it means importing all modern European notions of Self, modeled by the European thought ever since Descartes. Gill criticizes Charles H. Kahn, A.A. Long, and Michel Foucault especially, who claim that, in the Hellenistic period, the focus was on self-consciousness, which presupposes an individual or personal perspective (Gill 2006, 334). Hutchinson does not agree with this interpretation of the Hellenistic theories about Self and disagrees as well with Gill's criticism of the aforementioned authors. He is however on the same page as him when it comes to being cautious about attributing modern theses about Self to ancient philosophers, and

² The modern continental philosophers, from René Descartes to Jean Paul Sartre, can be considered as situating at the third level, since they treat their own subjectivity as being decisive in the knowledge of the Self and of the World, but also some of the contemporary analytical philosophers, who characterise Mind in terms of a group of notions derived from the Cartesian tradition, such as *immediacy, transparency and authority*, as indicates Hutchinson.

that of course to avoid the distortion of the original/classical theories. *Enneads* contains a theory of conscience that indicates a powerful sense of subjectivity without involving the modern notion of self-consciousness. The importance of studying the Plotinian theory of conscience is that it allows to analyze its nature outside the post-Cartesian framework and define at the same time new understandings of the notion of conscience that stem from this framework, indicates Hutchinson (2018, 39). In arguing that the American author point out that Plotinus utilizes four terms to refer to cognitive activities: *antilepsis*, *parakolouthesis*, *sunaisthesis* și *sunesis*. Each of these terms express a different way of even if they all could be translated as “consciousness”. *Sunaisthesis* is the most present type of consciousness, and it appears at each of the levels of Plotinus’ ontology and at every level of the human self. On the level of the physical self, it refers to the internal awareness of our corporeal parts and all embodied activities. Its function is to unite the body in a subject, enabling it to recognize that the parts and the respective activities belong to it and at the dianoetic and noetic levels, it refers to the internal awareness of our psychic and noetic activities. The fundamental role of *sunaisthesis* is to produce unity by constituting the subject as a structured coherent whole. *Antilepsis* is a type of consciousness that emerges in the *Dianoetic Self*: imagination (*phantastikon*) is one of the two principal powers of this Self, who is responsible for the awareness of sensible and intelligible objects. Unlike *sunaisthesis*, *antilepsis* is indirect and mediate because the *Dianoetic Self* becomes conscious of the sensible and intelligible objects through images. The role of *antilepsis* is to generate activities which take place in the soul-body compound or in certain parts of the soul. *Parakolouthesis* is a type of consciousness that appears in the *Dianoetic Self*, in the *Noetic Self* and the *Intellect*. It is a higher order consciousness involving a second-order state directed toward a first-order state. At the level of *Intellect*, the second-order state (one thinking that is thinking) is included in the first-order state (thinking). As Hutchinson indicates:

“Plotinus admits that incarnated human beings can think or act without being conscious that they are thinking, or they are taking action, and even draws attention to the fact that being conscious of

our thoughts and actions can actually be an impediment to thinking and action.” (Hutchinson 2018, 39)

Bearing these coordinates in mind, we see how all this indicates an approach with a high degree of complexity, due mostly to the expanded vision of reality based on the emanation doctrine. In such a way that the (modern) notion cannot be translated by a single term and it takes four concepts to cover the Plotinian semantics of consciousness. That, combined with the description of the existence of three levels of self-awareness, provides a surprising picture of the complexity of Plotinus’ doctrine, impossible to be framed in a modern description as it includes aspects related to ontology.

6. Proclus and Origen: *epistrophe* versus *apokatastasis*

In Proclus, the use of *epistrophe* is parallel to that of *apokatastasis*, as part of the triadic movement of *mone*, *proodos* și *epistrophe*. Proclus attributes the theorizing of this movement to Iamblichus, according to whom the Monad is the principle of identity and the moment of immanence, the Dyad introduces the procession, and the Triad is the origin of reversion. *Procession*, according to Proclus, is a movement from better to worse, while *reversion* describes the reversed process from worse to better (see Hutchinson 2018, 36-37).

Ilaria Ramelli sees that for Proclus, only the bodiless and partless, as soul itself, can return to wit can have an *epistrophe*. The body does not have an *epistrophe*, which also implies that there is no resurrection of bodies. Origen excluded, as well, the resurrection of the material, *ipokeimenon*, of a body, which is in unceasing flux, and admitted only the resurrection of *eidōs* or of the metaphysical form of the earthly body, transformed into a spiritual body; and Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius of Pontus make similar assertions. For them, resurrection is part of the restoration, which involves soul and intellect, as well as body, that will be elevated at the level of the soul, and the latter at the level of the intellect. The connection between *epistrophe* and *apokatastasis* is well-defined especially for souls: the *Decade* indicates the inversion (*epistrophe*) of all the beings in the Cosmos toward the One; and the *Ninety*, the

restoration (*apokatastasis*) to the monad next to the procession (*proodos*). The restoration is posited, like the reversion, next to the procession. Dionysius, who was strongly influenced by Proclus, regards restoration as a reversion (Ramelli 2017, 107). Proclus observes that the reversion of soul, which is parallel to Origen's notion of *apokatastasis*, "is achieved by virtue of likeness" with the highest principle. *Apokatastasis* is common both to "souls" and to "mortal animals", but in different ways because for souls alone depend on life "according to virtue". Proclus states this general principle:

"Each return is perfectly accomplished by means of the likeness of those returning to the principle to which they return." (Proclus 1932, 32)

Proclus was relying on Plato's *Homoiosis Theou* (see *Theaitetos* in Plato 1997, 176 B), Origen on Plato and Scripture (*Genesis*, 1: 26-27), but none of these sources includes the specific idea that the return/restoration will be through likeness. This is rather found in Origen and Proclus. The latter noted that in Plotinus, likeness was a fundamental presupposition of all knowledge (Plotinus 2018, 1.8.1), meaning that he interpreted knowledge as a type of reversion. Dionysius, who knew well the writings of Origen and Proclus, asserted as well that likeness is the motor of reversal, which in his opinion is associated with *apokatastasis* (see Ramelli 2017, 108).

7. Between Plotinus and the Horizon of Christian Thinking

As John Rist says in *Plotinus and Christian Philosophy*, where two doctrines apparently have a common basis, as it is the case with the Christian and platonic notions about the ultimate perfection of man (or of the human soul), confusion it is most likely to occur. Throughout the history of Early Christians there was an obvious tension and antagonism between those who considered the platonic self-perfection theory to be a sort of anticipation of Christianity, and those who dismissed it firmly as a deceiving, or maybe even blasphemous parody of the Christian truth.

Sometimes, both types of reaction can be seen at the same author, as in the case of Augustine. In such a (prolonged) history of interaction between Platonism and Christianity, we must first grasp the degree of influence that the Plotinian version of human perfection had over the perspective of Christian authors (Rist 1996, 393). What really mattered for this presence of platonic concepts in the Christian discourse was that any form of Platonism which supported Arius' Subordinationism became after Nicaea unacceptable, so a part of the Neoplatonic discourse was excluded, and the Christians who had read Plotinus, but wanted at the same time to remain Orthodox (as the vast majority of them did), had no other way but to reject the Plotinian Hypostases of the One (Rist 1996, 395).

8. Maximus The Confessor and the Re-signification of *epistrophe*

Maximus the Confessor used and adapted the Neoplatonic philosophical concepts of *proodos* (procession) and *epistrophe* (conversion) when expressing the central theme of his thought, the *Incarnation of God*. In an excellent study, Vladimir Cvetković points out that to portray the union between God and Creation, Maximus utilizes the revised form of the Neoplatonic dialectical pair of procession and reversion (*proodos-epistrophe*) (Cvetković 2015, 197). Maximus asserts that the only *Logos* is a multitude of *logoi* on the ground of creative and conservative procession, while many *logoi* coexist in *Logos* due to the transfer and providence of conversion. Procession, according to Maximus, is made up of two elements: a *creative element* and a *conservation element*: creative procession can be identified with the creation of the world in agreement with the divine wills concerning the created beings. We can distinguish two types of *logoi* or divine wills: the universal *logoi* vs. the individuals' *logoi*. The structure of the *logoi* can be presented graphically, in the exact same way we find it ordered in the Porphyrian tree, all these *logoi* are unseparated from their participation with the *logoi* of the superior hierarchies. Yet, the *logoi* of each being maintains beings undivided in the general order, keeping them at the same time unblended among themselves (Cvetković 2015, 198).

The natural *logos* of every being is defined and circumscribed not only by the *logoi* of its essence, nature, or species, but also by the *logoi* of

the relation, blending, position, quantity, and quality, which preserves the particularity unconfounded with the other beings. In the process of creative procession, God predetermines every being through its *logos*. The term "predetermination" needs to be understood in a broad sense because the level of likeness that created creatures have with their *logoi* depends on its character. The converting transfer process commences with the decision taken by the rational being of moving toward the cause, beginning or actual end. In both cases, the destination of this movement will be God. While it returns to its cause, moving toward the actual end or the final union with God, and finding eventually the purpose of its existence or its own *logos*, the rational being will also learn the way to fulfill this purpose. Through Incarnation, Christ showed the way that every man must assume to divinize himself. Christ did not only convert (*epistrophe*) human nature toward God, but also lead it step by step. The *epistrophe* process should be the divinization process of the entire humanity, which is not over. Therefore, Maximus states that God divided the whole History in two periods: a preparing stage in which God had to become man, and another stage in which Humanity can ascend into God. The dividing event, but also unifying, for these two periods, that gave at the same time History meaning, is the Incarnation of Logos in the Person of Jesus Christ and His saving work, which culminated with His Passion, Death, and Resurrection.

The terminological novelty of Maximus was of replacing *epistrophe* with the more precise term *antistrophe*. While the term "conversion" (*epistrophe*) describes only the returning process of the human being to God, the "reversion" process (*antistrophe*) refers rather to the divinization of the human being. The latter is not only a term that expresses the mutuality and correspondence between them, but also describes their outcome. Whereas the outcome of the humanization of Christ was the hypostatic union between His divine and human nature, the outcome of the divinization of the human being should be the hypostatic union between divine and human, result that is potentially present in every human being (Cvetković 2015, 200).

9. Conclusions

A fluid semantic of *epistrophe* came into play in the speculative frameworks of the authors who constituted the Neoplatonic tradition, from Porphyry to Damascius. In each of these authors, different emphases appeared regarding human's ability to travel the path of reversion, *epistrophe*. Late Neoplatonic authors favor the role of theurgy in the possibility of reversion, since the self, in all its aspects and layers, is completely lowered. The act of contemplation no longer signifies the connection to *Nous*, due to the inexistence of a continuum with it. In many cases, the adaptation of the Neoplatonic notions was accompanied by the invention of certain terms meant to capture all the complexity when expressing the Christian message. Maximus the Confessor refines the Neoplatonic concept *procession* by using attributes like "creative" and "conservative" to stress the permanent presence of God in the world, also by replacing the term "conversion" with the term "reversion", Maximus shows how the Incarnated God ended the process and initiated the conversion process. And by expressing in different terms the *returning process*, it is shown that God and His creation contribute equally to this process.

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