There is a mildly annoying habit in which some writers indulge. They calmly deny the possibility of knowing some important matter; and then later on give a definition of knowledge which is so narrow that it becomes clear that they did not mean to deny all cognition of that matter, but only ‘knowledge’ in their own restricted sense of the word. The matter to which this treatment is applied is usually the existence, activities or nature of one’s own self, or the existence and nature of God.

One instance of this occurs in Bertrand Russell’s *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. He writes in Chapter 3, ‘I prefer to use the word “know” in a sense which implies that the knowing is different from what is known, and to accept the consequence that, as a rule, we do not know our present experiences.’ This consequence, which sounds so serious, is of course a merely linguistic one, the result of an arbitrary definition. When we ask what is lacking in awareness of our present experiences that justifies the withholding of the name ‘knowledge’, Russell shows some hesitation in answering. ‘Any very exact definition of the more that is needed’, he remarks, ‘is likely to mislead by its very exactness, since the matter is usually vague and one of degree..... What is wanted may be called “attention”... Such occurrences, we shall say, are “known” when they are noticed.’

Another instance is to be found in A.J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*. This writer is more exacting than Russell. Russell would not say that we knew something when we know it only peripherally, without giving it our full attention. Ayer will not allow that we know something until we can put it into words, or at least supply experimental evidence of it:

“We were often told that the nature of God is a mystery which transcends human understanding. But to say that something transcends the human understanding is to say that it is unintelligible... It is no use the mystic’s saying that he has apprehended facts but is unable to express them. For we know that, if he really had acquired any information, he would be able to express it. The fact that he cannot reveal what he “knows”, or even devise an empirical test to validate his knowledge, shows that his state of
mystical intuition is not a genuinely cognitive state.’ (pp.114-120).

In adopting this position Ayer was probably influenced by David Hume, who wrote in his *Dialogue concerning Natural Religion* (Part IV), ‘How do you mystics, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from sceptics and atheists, who assert that the first cause of all is unknown and incomprehensible?’ I think that this difficulty can be sufficiently met by quoting a masterly phrase of the Baron von Hügel. ‘God’, he said, ‘is incomprehensible but indefinitely apprehensible.’

It is my purpose in this essay to defend the occurrence of a knowledge which is above knowledge, if the latter word is understood in such restricted senses as those instanced above. And I am speaking here particularly about the knowledge of God. I contend that there is a genuinely cognitive state which may not be the fruit of reasoning, nor make its object fully comprehensible, nor even succeed in forming clear ideas about it or putting it into plain words. It is even possible that such knowledge may be present without being reflexively conscious of its object or of its own occurrence at the time it occurs.

I believe that this kind of cognition may throw some light on the so-called ‘negative theology’ of the pseudo-Dionysius and of Aquinas and St John of the Cross, and of the 14th-century ‘Cloud of Unknowing’. I believe too that it may supply a corrective to the caricatures of the aims of Buddhism with which we are sometimes presented. The Buddhist is said to aim at emptying the mind of all thought of world or self or being of any kind, and coming face to face with nothingness.

I shall study this cognition in the writings of the great neo-Platonic philosopher, Plotinus. Those who comment on him sometimes fall into a similar misunderstanding of his doctrine. They describe as a non-cognitive state the union with the supreme Divinity which he praised, and according to his disciple Porphyry achieved on a number of occasions during his life. There is a valuable Mentor Book published by the New American Library entitled *The Essential Plotinus*. Its editor, Elmer O’Brien, expresses this view in his introduction to the book. The last words of the introduction are:
'The soul as desire becomes wholly unfettered and is caught out of itself. Ecstasy — it is not knowledge, for the faculty of knowledge is stilled. It is union of soul with the One. It is, Plotinus hoped, desire fulfilled.'

It seems to me that such a view cannot be maintained if one ponders carefully the actual words of Plotinus. I shall briefly outline the ascent to the state of ecstatic union, as Plotinus describes it, and then make a close analysis of his nuanced descriptions of that state.

Plotinus holds that every act of knowledge involves increase of real, ontological union with the thing known as its basis. As knowledge of the things of this world increases, the human soul becomes more closely united with the World Soul from which it emanated in the beginning (*Ennead* 3, treatise 4, paragraph 3).

Next, the soul attempts a higher flight of thought, occupying itself with such abstractions as mathematics and the laws of science and of music; while doing so it withdraws into that divine principle which is higher than the World Soul, and is called the Intelligence. It ceases to dwell upon memories of human events— 'the good soul is the forgetful' (4,3,32); consciousness of self dwindles— 'we are continuously intuitive, but we are not unbrokenly aware' (4,3,30). This second journey ends in a simple, reposeful intuition of the principle of all thought (1,3,4); the soul is united with the Intelligence as 'light with light'.

But there is a still loftier journey to undertake, the journey of the mind towards the highest divine reality, which Plotinus calls 'The One', which involves a reunion of the soul with the first principle of all things. In the soul's intuitive acts on the second level, there was still a duplicity, a polarity of subject and object (5,6,1). This is true even when the intellect takes itself for its object. And further, 'Intellection itself does not exercise the intellective act; this belongs to some principle in which intellection is vested'; and so 'any intellection implies multiplicity in the intellective subject' (5,6, pars. 3 and 6). But on the highest level this multiplicity must disappear.

To arrive at the One, it is necessary to make negation of all the things that we know; for it is not like any of these. It is also necessary to relinquish the attempt to know it in the ordinary way of understanding a thing. When we pronounce his name, or think
of him, we must make abstraction from all the rest, and let the simple word, 'He', remain. We should not seek to add anything, but on the contrary ask ourselves if anything remains in the mind which we have not discarded from our thought of Him (6,8,21). Is it any wonder that Plotinus confesses that the soul often grows weary of grasping at nothingness, as it were, and fearing that it does indeed embrace nothing, gladly slips downwards again to other objects? Yet in spite of this weariness, he continues, we must never cease to philosophise about the One, but always energetically leap up towards it till we reach the state of reposing in it without motion. (6,9,3).

One wonders whether this union is considered to be a union in being only, and not a cognitive union. Plotinus does assert that being drawn towards the One is not properly called thinking. We rise by powers native to our being, and implanted in us by the One, other powers than those properly called the laws of thought. 'Our way then takes us beyond knowing; knowing and knowable must all be left aside' (6,9,4). Yet in this very same passage he uses the words 'awareness' and 'vision':

'Awareness of this Principle comes by a presence overpassing all knowledge. ...To those desiring to see, we point the path. There are those who have not attained to see. The soul has not come to know the splendour there; it has not felt and clutched to itself that love-passion of vision known to the lover come to rest where he loves.'

It must be remembered that the soul is not a material thing, capable merely of physical and spatial union, but spiritual and intellectual in its being.

'Since the souls are of the Intellectual, and the Supreme is still loftier, we understand that contact with the Supreme is otherwise procured, that is by those powers which connect Intellectual agent with Intellectual object; indeed soul is closer to the Supreme than Intellect to its object – such is its similarity, identity, and sure link of kindred' (6,9,8).

The union is then, in his own words, a thoughtful union, 'οἰντέος συναφῆ'.

For Plotinus the supreme Principle is not properly to be called Being, or Good, or Intellect. But the Supreme is the principle from which all these proceed, and so is sometimes named by him
'Super-essence' and 'super-good' and 'super-intellection'—ύπερνοήσις. Would it not be in keeping with this to explain the soul's dark awareness of the Supreme as a super-cognition, rather than a failure of cognition?

Another solution of the problem concerning the nature of this asserted union is that proposed by Elmer O'Brien, and supported by such phrases as that just quoted: 'the soul has felt and clutched to itself that love-passion'. Some psychologists say that ordinary reflection on God awakens a strong sentiment of love and desire, which on occasion wells up suddenly, and the soul which feels its beating and throbbing, is convinced that it feels God. The truths known about God rise up at the same time, so that one believes that one is being taught by God thus present. But this is a self-deception. The soul has only felt its inner love, and identified it with the Loved One. Some mystics, for this reason, claim that love brings us more close to God than thought can do.

There is indeed a strong element of love and desire in the philosophy of Plotinus; but it is spoken of as the love of Beauty, and beauty is perceived by consciousness. 'The primal Good and the Primal Beauty have the one dwelling-place' and Eros and Noesis go hand in hand. 'He that has known the Apart, the Unmingled, the Source of Life and Intellection and Being, must hunger for it as for all his welfare, must love and reverence it as the very Beauty' (1,6,7).

The treatise which Porphyry rightly placed last in his collection of the writings of Plotinus, the treatise 'On the Good or the One', is the loftiest of all. And in this treatise occurs phrase after phrase suggestive of a union that is in a way cognitive, though in a transcendent fashion. 'They are enabled to see in so far as God may at all be seen.' 'It is scarcely vision unless of a mode unknown — it is a reaching towards contact, a meditation towards adjustment' (περιμόνησις πρὸς ἑφαρμογήν). 'The soul raised to Godhead, or better, knowing its Godhead', has 'a vision beyond discourse..... an awareness of that life that is beyond.' (6,9 pars. 4,9,11).

The proposal here made that we should accept the reality of a knowledge beyond knowledge can be supported from many other religious writers. Even the calm mind of Thomas Aquinas recognises the loftiness of God above all other being, and hence the difference of our knowledge of Him compared with all other knowledge.
‘All existents are contained under being in general, but God is not; rather is being in general contained under His power’ (*In Div. Nom.* 5,2). Consider too the solemn declaration of the First Vatican Council, ‘God is incomprehensible, essentially different from the world, and unspeakably exalted above everything else which can be thought of.’ (Session 3, ch.1).

But I shall turn for support in this essay principally to an article published in the *International Philosophical Quarterly* of March, 1969. In this article, ‘Some Basic Misconceptions of Buddhism’, Kenneth Inada writes:

_Sunya_ is variously translated into English as the void, empty, nothing, etc. and this leads one to conclude that if _sunya_ is the goal then everything is leading to the realm of absolute nothingness. But Buddhist _sunya_ is far from this; it is only a descriptive term depicting the true, pure nature of the enlightened state, which is full and significant rather than empty and meaningless. Thus the real character of _sunya_ is fullness of being rather than emptiness; and moreover, in the Buddhist scriptures there never is an allusion to a life without content, which by the way is a contradiction in terms. In this connection, it might also be pointed out that the concept of _anatman_, generally translated as non-self, has led many an unprobing mind astray, simply because of a literal or linguistic analysis and acceptance which connotes the negation of the empirical self or of life itself. It is not so. When the _sunya_ state is achieved, it is nothing but a synonym for buddhahood, the state of the perfected one whose essence is beyond all forms of defilements.’

The author, Michael Volin, of a little book popularising the practice of Yoga drives the lesson home in these words:

_Samadhi_ is the superconscious state in which minds are submerged. In this state the mind plays no part... it is left behind by the spirit as the launching tower is left when the rocket takes off. Complete absorption... an absolute knowing, in which reason, thought and logic play no part... it has sometimes been described as Bliss. Those who know it are changed for ever, serene and assured.’