

## From Plato's Good to Platonic God

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**Abstract.** One of the major puzzling themes in the history of Platonism is how theology is integrated with philosophy. In particular, one may well wonder how Plato's superordinate first principle of all, Idea of the Good, comes to be understood by his disciples as a mind or in some way possessing personal attributes. In what sense is the Good supposed to be God? In this paper I explore some Platonic accounts of the first principle of all in order to understand where the integration of the personal into the metaphysical is organic and where it is not. I conclude that the "ontological" and the "henological" construals of the first principle of all differ in their openness to "intellectualizing" that principle.

**Keywords.** Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, Numenius, Damascius, ontology, henology, Demiurge, Unmoved Mover, Idea of the Good

Plato characterizes the Idea of the Good as that which is the cause of the being and essence of the Forms and also as that which is the cause of their knowability.<sup>1</sup> This Idea itself is "beyond essence."<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the Demiurge, which is or has a life, ungrudging and in possession of goodwill and thinking, the Good does not appear to have any such "personal" attributes.<sup>3</sup> Plotinus, in his attack on Aristotle's metaphysics, argues that the first principle of all cannot be the Unmoved Mover precisely because the Unmoved Mover is complex owing to its possession of some of these personal attributes,

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<sup>1</sup> See *Rep.* 509B6-10: **Καὶ τοῖς γίγνωσκόμεσσι τοῖς μὴ μόνον τοῖς γίγνωσκέσσι φαῖναι ὑπολτοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρήται, ἀλλ' ἀκαὶ τοῖς ἐμῶν τε καὶ τῆς οὐσίας ὑπ' ἐκείνου αὐτοῖς προσηται, οὐκ οὐσίᾳ ὄντων τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ' ἐκείνῃ ἐπεκεῖνα τῆς οὐσίας προσβείη καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέκοντο.** Cf. (1) 505A3: ...the thing by which just things and the others become useful and beneficial; (2) 508E1-4: "So, the provider of truth to the things known and the giver of power to know to one who knows is the Idea of the Good. And though it is the cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge." (3) 533C8-D1: the Idea of the Good is the first principle [ἀρχή] of all.

<sup>2</sup> I do not take *Rep.* 534B8 to contradict 509B8. The first passage says that dialectic aims to give a λόγος of the οὐσία of each thing; the second, that one aims to do as much for the Good. But giving a λόγος of the Good does not, I would argue, entail that it has an οὐσία distinct from the οὐσία of which it is the cause. I explain this more fully below. Contra this interpretation see M. Baltes (1997) 8. And for a rebuttal of Baltes, see R. Ferber 2003) 127-49.

<sup>3</sup> See *Tim.* 29B-30C for the personal attributes of the Demiurge. *Phil.* 22C5-6 has been taken to imply that the Idea of the Good is a "true and divine intellect." But the following qualification, namely, that this intellect "is in a different condition" (ἀλλ' ἰδίᾳ ἐκείνῃ) can be taken to be completed by "in relation to the Good" not "in relation to the question of whether or not it is the Good." *Rep.* 526E4-5 could be read as claiming that the Good is the "happiest of that which is" (τοῦταίμων ἐστὸν τὸ ὄντων). Here "happiest" has roughly the same hyperbolic value as "divine" (θεῖον). See J. van Camp and P. Carnart (1956). Cf. Iamblichus, *De comm. math.*, 6.159, who refers to the text but does not take it to be a reference to the first principle of all.

in particular, thinking.<sup>4</sup> So, it is initially puzzling to hear from Plotinus that the Good or the One has some sort of life, in particular a cognitive life, including self-consciousness (**sunaisqhsij**), that it is God, that it has will in some sense, and perhaps most puzzling, that it not only is love but has love for itself.<sup>5</sup> I say this is puzzling because Plotinus, as we know, aspires to be no more than a faithful expositor of what Proclus later called “the Platonic revelation.” How may we suppose that Plotinus thought he was accurately presenting the Platonic position when, for example, he attributes **erwj** to the Good?<sup>6</sup> No doubt part of solution to the puzzle and part of Plotinus' justification for using such language is to be found in his frequent employment of the qualifier **oipn** as a preface to the attribution of properties to the Good or the One. But this could only be part of the solution for two obvious reasons: (1) he does not always use the qualifier; for instance, he does not use it when he speaks of **erwj**. For another, it is not clear how Plato's Good—which, we should recall, Aristotle practically identifies with “the One”—can be thought to be **oipn** anything.<sup>7</sup> We might suppose that a more straightforward solution to the puzzle is to be found in Plotinus' inference from the fact that Intellect is **ehergeia**, to the fact that the One must be **ehergeia**, too.<sup>8</sup> But this approach is at least apparently blocked by the fact that Aristotle reasons that the first principle of all must be unqualifiedly **ehergeia** and that it is *therefore* a subject of cognitive life, which is, however, precisely why Plotinus denies that the Unmoved Mover can be the first principle.<sup>9</sup> How could the One be **ehergeia** and not possess the complexity that Plotinus finds in Aristotle's Unmoved Mover? More to the point, how could Plotinus suppose that he was thus accurately representing Plato's unhypothetical first principle?

It is undoubtedly true that in calling the first principle of all “God,” Platonists did not mean to cast this principle among the anthropomorphic deities of Homer and Hesiod. On the other hand, it is I think unfair to maintain, as Eric Dodds famously did, that the Platonic Gods resided “on the dusty shelves of [a] museum of metaphysical abstractions.”<sup>10</sup> When in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, Proclus refers to the deductions in the First Hypothesis of the second part of *Parmenides* as “raising up to the

<sup>4</sup> See e.g., *Enneads* 5.3.10.

<sup>5</sup> For cognitive life see 6.8.16.12-29; 5.1.7.2; 5.4.2.12-26; 6.7.39.1-2; 6.8.18.26; for the Good or One as God see 5.1.11.7; for will see 6.8.13.1-8, 53; 6.8.21.1-5; for love of itself see 6.8.15.1. Cf. J. Rist (1964) 71-87, who discusses the “anthropomorphizing” of the Idea of the Good by Plotinus. Rist, though, traces this to Plotinus' misinterpretation of *Tim.* 39E, taking this passage to indicate that the Forms are inside the mind of the Demiurge. According to Rist, this led Plotinus to argue that since the Good is the cause of the Forms, it is inevitable that “quasi-lifelike terms” be applied to it.

<sup>6</sup> Assuming the authenticity of *Ep.* II (312E), Plotinus does indeed take the “king of all” to be equivalent to the Good. Cf. 5.1.8.1-5. The issue is surely not that this text provides justification for “personalizing” the Good but rather *why* Plotinus takes this passage to warrant this personalization.

<sup>7</sup> On the Good as the One see *Meta.* N 4, 1091b13-14; cf. A 9, 990b17-22 and *EE* 1218a24-8.

<sup>8</sup> 6.8.20.13-15: **Ei'ouh tel eioteron h(ehergeia thj ousiaj, tel eiotateon de\to\prwton, prwth ah ehergeia ein.** See 6.8.16.15-18, where the term **eherghma** is used. For my purposes, I take this as synonymous with **ehergeia**. But cp. 6.7.17.9-10 where the One also is said to be **epekeina ehergeiaj**.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Porphyry's *Sententiae* 43, in which we find an argument for the priority of the One to Intellect because of the latter's complexity. This is also why Proclus, *Platonic Theology*, 2.4, p.31 Saffrey-Westerink rejects the Platonist Origen's argument that a first principle cannot be absolutely simple and, accordingly, must be identified with a first intellect.

<sup>10</sup> E.R. Dodds (1963) 260.

One a single theological hymn by means of all these negations,” we may legitimately wonder how Platonic ascent to the unhypothetical first principle of all was to be transformed into theology.<sup>11</sup>

That the above is not a pseudo-puzzle is I take it indicated by the fact that it is perfectly possible for a philosopher to acknowledge the Good as first principle of all without thereby investing in it any personal attributes. It is true, for example, that Iris Murdoch understands “the sovereignty of Good” in a way that is probably unlike the way Plato understands it, but nevertheless she can insist that “Good, not will, is transcendent,” and “it makes sense to speak of loving God, a person, but very little sense to speak of loving Good, a concept,” and, “the highest love is in some sense impersonal.”<sup>12</sup> In this paper I am going to explore some of the historical and philosophical elements in the divinization of Plato's Good, the first principle of all. Some of the parts of this story will be familiar to most readers; some of the more speculative parts may not be, at least insofar as they are put to use here.

## 1.

It is well to begin with the scant but interesting evidence regarding Plato's successors in the Old Academy regarding their reading of the Idea of the Good and its putative personality. The testimony on Speusippus is unambiguous; that on Xenocrates less so. Speusippus held that that which is best is not in the first principle but in that which comes from it.<sup>13</sup> So, for him the Good is not the first principle. Xenocrates, by contrast, identified the first principle as the “first God” and the One but he also called it “intellect.”<sup>14</sup> It is not clear whether Xenocrates does this under the influence of Aristotle or not.<sup>15</sup> At any rate, he is evidently unable to see how one could maintain the separation of intellect and all that that entails from the primacy of the Good.<sup>16</sup> And it is also not clear whether Xenocrates is intentionally conflating the intellect of the Demiurge with the Good or the One as Plato describes it. To do the latter is, among other things, to prepare the way for the Middle Platonic view that the Forms are thoughts in the mind of God.

If I pass over much suggestive material in order to focus on Alcinous, it is primarily because I take as thoroughly unoriginal his account of the first principle as a conflation of the Good with Aristotle's Unmoved Mover. I do not doubt that in some respects Alcinous is in accord with the traditional view going back at least to Antiochus of Ascalon that Aristotle's philosophy is in harmony with Plato's. Perhaps it is also unrealistic to expect that, well before Plotinus raised the issue, Alcinous should have appreciated that the essential complexity of thought precluded the proposed conflation. In the famous chapter 10 of his *Handbook*, Alcinous does seem to be aware that

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<sup>11</sup> See Proclus, *In Parm.* 7.1191.34f.

<sup>12</sup> See I, Murdoch (1970) 69, 72, 75.

<sup>13</sup> See Aristotle, *Met.* 12.7.1072b32ff. Cf. 14.4.1091a29ff. Also see Ps.-Alexander, *In Met.* 699, 28 Hayduck; Aetius, *Plac.* I.7.20 Diels = Fr 58 Tarán.

<sup>14</sup> See Fr. 213.4 Isnardi Parente.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Dillon (2003) 107.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Theophrastus, *Met.* 6a1-2: **τογαρ διηρωτων και ποιητων πατα τα αριστα  
boul omenon.**

“attributes” (**sumbebhkōta**) must be excluded from the first principle.<sup>17</sup> I take it that Alcinous here means both accidents and properties, that is, **kaq )auḗa** **sumbebhkōta**. It is perhaps because the first principle is absolutely simple that it is supposed to be “more or less beyond description” (**mikrou-deiḥ kaii aḗrrhton**).<sup>18</sup> The identification with the Unmoved Mover becomes explicit a bit later in the chapter when the first principle is said to be “everlastingly engaged in thinking of itself and its own thought, and this activity of it is Form.”<sup>19</sup>

Since the first principle is simple, the many things said about it—that it is “everlasting” (**aḗdioj**), “self-perfective” (**auḗtotel hj**), “always perfect” (**aḗitel hj**), and “all perfect” (**pantel hj**), “divine” (**qeiothj**), “essentiality” (**ouḗsiothj**), “truth” (**aḗ hqeia**), “symmetry” (**summetriḗ**) and “good” (**aḗgaqoh**)—cannot be supposed to compromise its simplicity.<sup>20</sup> The three ways of “thinking about” (**nohsij**) the first principle—abstraction, analogy, and “preeminence” (**uḗperoxh**)—are not clearly equally compatible with the assumption of absolute simplicity.<sup>21</sup> In the case of the first two, there is no danger of compromising simplicity in deducing all the things that the Good is not nor in comparing it with the Sun, as Alcinous does. But to infer that the Good is eminently all that the intelligible world contains seems to make it more like the “Living Creature” of *Timaeus* than like the first principle of all. And this takes us back to our original problem: if the Good is beyond the complexity of the intelligible paradigm, in what sense is it personal?

Numenius of Apamea together with Philo of Alexandria have an especially crucial role to play in the development of our story, but I am going to ignore the latter for the simple reason that it is quite a bit easier for a proponent of Biblical religion and its representation of a personal deity to assimilate or incorporate Platonic metaphysical insights into his world view than for a Platonist like Numenius to do the opposite. And yet we find Numenius in the first book of his *On the Good* saying that Brahmins, Jews, Magi, and Egyptians have “teachings” (**ta\doḗmata**) that are in agreement with Plato.<sup>22</sup> There can be little doubt that among these approved teachings is one referring to the incorporeal first principle of all, which certainly in the case of the Old Testament is

<sup>17</sup> See *Didaskalikon* 10.4.2-3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.1.1. Plato does not actually use the word **aḗrrhton** in reference to the Good or to the Demiurge. The fact that the “father and maker of this universe” is hard to find and even that “having found him it would be impossible to declare him to all mankind” (*Tim.* 28C3-5) hardly amounts to a claim that he is “beyond description.” And in *Rep.* 505A2 despite the transcendence of the Idea of the Good, the fact that the “study” (**maḗhḡma**) of it supremely desirable also seems to preclude indescribability. Plato does say of the One of the first hypostasis of the second part of *Parmenides* that **ouḗ' oḗhomazetai aḗra ouḗle\ I egetai ouḗle\docazetai ouḗle\gignwsketai, ouḗle\ti twḗ oḗitwn auḗtou=ai'sqahetai** (142A4-6). If Alcinous is thus presuming that this One is identical with the Idea of the Good and the Demiurge, then he is representing an interesting “pre-Neoplatonic” tradition. See J. Dillon (1993) 108-9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.3.2-4: **eḗautoh aḗh ouḗh kaii taleḗautou=noḗmata aḗiinoiḗh, kaii auth h(e)erḡeia auḗtou=ideḗa uḗparxei**. Cf. *Met.* 12.7.1074b33ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.3.4-7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.5-6.

<sup>22</sup> See *On the Good*, Fr. 1a Des Places. Platonists repeatedly return to the idea of the harmony of Plato with both Greek and non-Greek theological traditions. See H.D. Saffrey (1992) 35-50.

robustly personal. Nor can there be any doubt that this first principle is for Numenius absolutely simple because of its being present only to itself.<sup>23</sup> This simplicity is in explicit contrast to the second and third divinity, the Demiurge and the World Soul.<sup>24</sup> What makes these (or this divinity) other than simple is that in giving unity to matter, it itself is divided by matter.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the transcendence and simplicity of the first principle are mutually implicating. As we shall see, this fact might be thought to provide a reason for *divesting* from the first principle of all personal attributes, rather than *investing* it with them.

So, we wonder what the **bi**bj**** of the first God, the Good itself, is supposed to be. We do not have to wait long for an answer: the first God is “concerned with intelligible” with an “inherent motion” (**kihhsin sumfuton**).<sup>26</sup> So, we are obviously once again in the presence of a simulacrum of the Unmoved Mover. But far from being transcendent, in its inherent motion it is “that from which is derived the order of the kosmos and its everlasting permanence, and preservation is poured forth on all things.”<sup>27</sup> This description coheres nicely with Aristotle's account, but once again it seems to compromise the simplicity of the first principle.<sup>28</sup> For if the order of the cosmos is somehow derived from the first God, this order does not come from nothing; therefore, it is somehow already *in* the first God. If this is the case, then it is puzzling why Numenius insists that the first God is “completely unknown” (**pantapasin agnoumenon**).<sup>29</sup> Since the first God is an intellect thinking about that which is contained in it, and since the second God is an “imitator” (**mimhthj**) of the first, and since the universe is an imitation of the second, one would not have been surprised to see Numenius claim that the first God is in some way knowable through creation.<sup>30</sup> But he does no such thing.

Numenius seems to be responding to these problems in calling the first principle of all **autoo**h**, o(w**h****, and following Aristotle and apparently despite Plato, **ousia**.<sup>31</sup> Though we have little to go on by way of argument, I am assuming that at least the **ousia** that is the first principle does not imply the sort of complexity that Numenius means to exclude by calling it absolutely simple. Hence, it does not have the complexity,

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Fr. 11.11-13 Des Places: **Ο γεο**j** ο(meh prw**koj** eh e(autou=wh**h** estin ap**l** ou**j**, dialto**l** e(aut%**l**suggignomeno**j** diol ou mh/pote einai diaireto**j** :**

<sup>24</sup> I shall ignore the evident problem of distinguishing the Demiurge and the World Soul in the fragments of Numenius. Cf. Fr. 21 where Proclus (*In Tim.* I.303.27ff) describes Numenius' three Gods as: (a) father of creation; (b) creator; (c) creation (**poihma**).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Fr. 11.14-16 Des Places.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Fr. 15 Des Places. The “inherent motion” is obviously Plato's **kihhsij nou**= Cf. *Soph.* 248E6-249A2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Fr. 15.14-15 Des Places: **α**f** h**j** h**l**te tab**j** tou=ko**smou** kai h(monh\b(a)g**ioj** kai h(swthria**h** a**h**axeitai e**j** ta**l**o**l** a.**

<sup>28</sup> See *Met.* 12.7.1072b14-30; 10.1075a11-23.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Fr. 17 Des Places.

<sup>30</sup> See Fr. 16.8-16 for the **nou**j**—mimhthj—mimhma** sequence. By contrast, in the anonymous commentary on Plato's *Parmenides*, Fr. 1 Kroll/Hadot, the attribution of the name “God” to the One is taken to imply the unknowability of the first principle of all. It must be added, however, that in Fr. 2. the author adds that God must be distinguished from the “concept of the One” (**h(tou=e**hoj** e**h**noia**).

<sup>31</sup> See Fr. 17.4, 13.4, 16.15 Des Places. On the appellations of the first principle, see M. Burnyeat (2005) 143-69, esp. 149-55.

as Plato argued in *Parmenides*, of that which participates in **ousia**.<sup>32</sup> So, the words **o(w)h** cannot be intended to indicate that which is because it participates in **ousia**. A similar conclusion must be drawn for **autooh**. What is Numenius trying to tell us?

I think we must suppose that at least part of what Numenius is getting at is that participation in the first principle does not follow the rule—later articulated by Iamblichus according to Proclus' testimony—that when there is participation that which is participated in must be complex.<sup>33</sup> That is, we must be able to distinguish within it the unparticipated “part” from the participated “part.” This rule works fine for Forms; it hardly seems to work for that which is absolutely simple.<sup>34</sup> Thus, by participating in the first principle the Demiurge has whatever the first principle is, but that cannot be distinct from it. Because goodness, unity, and being are not distinct in the first principle, whatever nature anything has must ultimately find its explanation in the simple being that is the first principle. In short, “beingness” itself must be an **ousia**.

How does this shed light on our original problem regarding the attribution of personal properties to the Idea of the Good? Most straightforwardly, participation in the first principle of all follows alone from the fact of being. If, though, for any being, to be is to be *something*, how are we to look to the being apart from the something that it is in order to discover the supposed personality of that which is being itself? If, for example, part of what it is to be a human being (as opposed to part of what it is just to be) is to have will or **boulhsij**, what is the basis for inferring will in the first principle of all? Or, to take Numenius' explicit identification of the first God as intellect, or as “primary intellect,” we would like to know whether this is inferable from an analysis of being alone or whether we need to look elsewhere. In the latter case, we shall once again run the risk of inferring the existence of a first God that possesses intellect or is otherwise composite.

I should like now to suggest one possible strand in our developing story that will probably not have occurred to readers as particularly relevant. That is the role of Epictetus. As is well known, Epictetus was well regarded in the Platonic tradition. Simplicius wrote a massive commentary on his *Handbook*. Plotinus certainly knew his *Discourses* and evidently held him in high respect. I am particularly interested in Epictetus' account in his *Discourses* of the relation of the divine and human intellects. In Book 1, Epictetus has Zeus respond to a query about how it is possible for embodied human beings not to be bothered by external circumstances.<sup>35</sup> Zeus replies that since he was not able to give us bodies that were impervious to external depredations, he gave us “part of himself,” namely, the faculty by which we choose, desire, and in general make use of external impressions. This is what Epictetus called the faculty of **proairesij**. In

<sup>32</sup> See *Parm.* 142B-C.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* II.105, 15ff; 240, 4ff; 313, 15ff.

<sup>34</sup> At Fr. 20 Des Places, Numenius infers that the Demiurge must participate in the Good analogous to (**wšper**) the way sensibles participate in Forms. We need not thereby draw the implication that the Good is complex, such that part of it is unparticipated and part of it is participated.

<sup>35</sup> See *Discourses*, 1.1.10-12. Cf. Cleanthes' remark: **Ek sou-gar genomesqa, qeou-miqhma I axohtej mouoi, ohsa zwei te kaii erpei qnht' epii gairan**: Also, Chrysippus' claim that “our natures are parts of the nature of the universe.” Right reason in us is identical with Zeus (**o(au)toj w(h) t%=Dii**) See D.L. 7.87-8.

Simplicius' closing hymn in his commentary on Epictetus' *Handbook*, he says, “I implore you, Lord, father and guide of the reason in us, remind us of our noble origin, which we were thought worthy to receive from you. Act with us, since we are self-movers, for our purification from the body and its irrational states, so that we may be superior to them and to rule them, and that we may use them as instruments in a fitting manner. Act with us, too, for the precise correction of the reason in us and its unification with the truly existent things through the light of truth. And the third request to the Savior: I implore you, completely remove the mist from the eyes of our souls, so that we may clearly know, as Homer says, both God and man.”<sup>36</sup>

Simplicius' remarkable hymn recalls one of the central texts in the entire Platonic tradition: Socrates' exhortation in *Theaetetus* to “assimilate oneself to God” (ομοιωσις θεῷ).<sup>37</sup> It is not so difficult to imagine Simplicius' implicit reasoning as follows. To assimilate oneself to the divine is at once to become what we are really and at the same time to become something other than what we are, where “what we are” refers in the first instance to an intellect and in the second, to a soul-body composite, the ἀψυχρῶς. We can confidently say that here Simplicius will be following Aristotle and Plotinus in characterizing the highest achievement of an intellect as identifying itself with an intelligible object. He will also have learned from Plotinus that the soul seeks union with the One beyond Intellect.<sup>38</sup> How, a good Platonist might ask, could union with the One by an intellect be achieved unless that One was in some sense intellectual, not just intelligible? But of course it could be neither in any way that implied complexity.

In trying to understand the Platonic position, Stoic influences must of course be used with care.<sup>39</sup> The immanence of Zeus in Stoicism has to be clearly distinguished from the transcendence of the Good or the One in Platonism. Nevertheless, to the extent that the logic of the Platonic position moves toward the conclusion that the One is all things, just to that extent we can, like the Stoics, infer the nature of the first principle from its “parts.” That there should be real parts of the Stoic God is not only not problematic but actually necessary for a corporeal deity. This, however, is obviously not the case for Numenius' Brahmins, Jews, Magi, Egyptians, and Platonists all of whom acknowledge or argue for an incorporeal deity. Our problem then becomes: how can the

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<sup>36</sup> See Simplicius, *In. Epict.* 138.22-33 Ἰκετεῦν σε, Δεσπότη, ο(πατρὸς καὶ ἡγεμονίας σου ἐν ἡμῖν) ἰσχυροῦ, ὑπομνησθησάμενος ἡμῖν τῆς ἐλευθερίας σου γενεῆς, ἣν ἠΐψυχρῶς παρα/sou: συμπραταί δέ/sou ἀποκινήσεις ἡμῖν, προῖς τὸ κατὰ σὴν τῆς ἀπο/sou=sw ματοῦ καὶ τῶν ἀ/συχρῶν παρ/sou, καὶ προῖς τὸ ὑπερεκεῖν καὶ ἀ/συχρῶν ἀ/συχρῶν, καὶ ὅπως ὀργασθῶν κερήσῃ κατα/sou προσηκόντα τρόπον: συμπραττεῖν τὸ καὶ προῖς διορῶσιν ἀκριβῆ=σου ἐν ἡμῖν ἰσχυροῦ, καὶ ἐ/συχρῶν ἀ/συχρῶν προῖς τὰ ὀνείδῃ οἴητα, δια/sou=τῆς ἀ/συχρῶν ἡγεμονίας σου. Καὶ τὸ τρίτον καὶ σὺν τῷ: ἰκετεῦν, ἀ/συχρῶν εἰς τὸ ἐ/συχρῶν τῆς ἀ/συχρῶν τῶν ὑψίστων ἡμῶν ὀνείδῃ, ὄφρ' εὐλογησῶμεν (κατα/sou ὀνείδῃ ἡμῶν ὄφρ' ἡμῶν ἡμῶν ἀ/συχρῶν. Cf. Simplicius' quotation from a presumed fragment of Aristotle's *On Prayer*, in his *Commentary on Aristotle's De Caelo* 485.19-22, who says that Aristotle said ο(θεῶν ἡ)νοῦς ἐστὶν ἡ)επεκεῖνα τὸ νοῦς=

<sup>37</sup> *Th.* 176B. See the valuable and comprehensive study of S. Lavecchia (2006).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. 6.9.3.10-13. This is precisely what Hierocles denies; for him union with Intellect is the ultimate goal. See his *Commentary on the Golden Verses* 1.17 (pg.12.25-6 Koehler), where ομοιωσις θεῷ is pretty clearly identification with an Intellect.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. the suggestive remarks of S. Gersh (1973) 4-5, on the “transposition of the Stoics physics into the [Neoplatonic] metaphysical sphere.”

One be all things and at the same time be absolutely simple? If the Platonist can explain how this is so, then according to how we determine what “all things” means, we are in a position to infer these as what the being or **ousia** of the One is.

2.

I return now to Plotinus and to his solution to our initial puzzle. In order to appreciate the subtlety of his solution, we need to sketch first his argument for an absolutely simple first principle of all.

In *Ennead* 5.4.1, Plotinus argues for two conclusions: (1) every composite must be accounted for by that which is incomposite or absolutely simple and (2) there can be only one absolutely simple thing. We can better understand the reasoning for (1) if we concentrate first on the reasoning for (2). Assume that there is more than one absolutely simple thing. Then, there would have to be something that each one had that made it at least numerically different from the other, say, for example, a unique position. But that which made it different would have to be really (not merely conceptually) distinct from that which made it to be the one thing it is.<sup>40</sup> That which had the position would be really distinct from the position itself. But then something which had a position and so was distinct from it would not be absolutely simple. So, that which is absolutely simple must be absolutely unique. Only the first principle of all is unqualifiedly self-identical; the self-identity had by anything else is necessarily qualified. This argument suggests the meaning of “composite” that Plotinus has in mind when he argues for (1). A composite is anything that is distinct from any property it has. What we might call a “minimally composite individual” is one with one and only one property from which it is itself distinct.<sup>41</sup> Compositeness is then equivalent to qualified self-identity.

It is owing to the compositeness of everything other than the One that potency is introduced into the intelligible world.<sup>42</sup> To be Intellect is then to be in potency, a potency that Intellect's cause, the One, does not possess. The One is not just the cause of the **ousia** in which Intellect partakes, but the cause of Intellect's being itself. Intellect is limited by the **ousia** in which it partakes, even though it partakes of all possible **ousia**.

So, now the question is: why should any composite need the unique, absolutely first principle of all to account for it? Plotinus' concise answer is: “All beings (**onta**) are beings by the One (i.e., the first principle of all).”<sup>43</sup> Here, the word “being” refers to that which partakes in whatever property it has. Why is it that the One explains this? Plotinus answers that if anything is deprived of the “oneness” that is said of it, then it is not that “one.”<sup>44</sup> Here, “one” or “oneness” appears to refer to a second-order property of

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<sup>40</sup> The possibility of real distinctiveness *within* one thing follows from a denial of nominalism, which is the view that all self-identity is unqualified self-identity. To claim, for example, that x is f, is for Platonists to acknowledge that f somehow identifies that which is nevertheless distinct from the identifying property.

<sup>41</sup> Plotinus' argument seems to be inspired by Plato's *Parmenides* 142B5-C2 where it is argued that that which is one must partake in the *ousia* of oneness and hence be distinct from that.

<sup>42</sup> See *Enneads* 5.9.6.9-10 where Intellect is said to be like a genus in relation to particular intellects like a genus to species or a whole to parts.

<sup>43</sup> See 6.9.1.1.

<sup>44</sup> 6.9.1.4.

whatever property that the being has.<sup>45</sup> Thus, a being is one being having whatever properties it has owing to the first principle of all. The “oneness” belongs not to the **ousia** alone nor to the being that has it, but to the composite. That is, its oneness is irreducible composite oneness. As such, it is not a “one among many,” but rather a unique entity.

The One is needed to explain any composite being because no composite being is self-explicable. The One explains as an efficient cause of the being of any composite whatsoever.<sup>46</sup> Composites are necessarily what we may conveniently call “heteroexplicable.” Heteroexplicability follows from the fact that the **ousia** in which something partakes could not uniquely constitute the being's identity. If it could, then that being would be unqualifiedly identical with its **ousia**, a possibility which has already been excluded by the argument for the uniqueness of that which is absolutely self-identical. Something gets to be what it is by partaking in some **ousia**, which means, minimally, that the **ousia** is what that thing is. The One is, however, as Plato said, “above **ousia**.” It cannot be the **ousia** that explains the being of anything with **ousia**. Instead, the One is “virtually all things” (**duhamij twa pantwa**),<sup>47</sup> roughly in the way that “white” light is virtually all the colors of the spectrum or in the way that a function is virtually its domain and range. As such, it is absolutely self-explicable or “self-caused.”<sup>48</sup>

Much more needs to be said about this line of argument and the various versions of it that have subsequently turned up in the history of philosophy as proofs for the existence of God. For present purposes, it is enough to indicate first that this is the general line of argument taken by Plotinus' successors in the Platonic tradition. And yet there is an obvious problem with it as it stands. For it cannot be the case that when something partakes of oneness, it partakes of that which makes the One composite—it and its oneness. Either something partakes in the One itself, in which case the One would have to be distinct from that which it partakes in, or else it does not partake in the One itself, in which case how can we continue to hold that the One is the ultimate cause of the being of anything? Plotinus' solution seems to rest on two claims. First, is the claim that things partake in the One by “intermediaries,” meaning the “hypostases” of Intellect and Soul.<sup>49</sup> Second, Plotinus insists that the One is not really related to anything else.<sup>50</sup> This means that no relational “distance” can be assumed to exist between the One and anything else. Hence, it is neither separate nor identical with anything else. Yet the claim about intermediaries hardly seems to work for Intellect itself, the first “offspring”

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<sup>45</sup> 6.9.1.27.

<sup>46</sup> See 5.3.15.12-13; 5.3.15.28; 5.3.17.10-14; 6.4.10; 6.7.23.22-4.

<sup>47</sup> See 5.4.1.23-6; cf. 5.4.2.38, 6.7.32.31, 6.9.5.36, etc. I would resist the dominant scholarly opinion that the **duhamij** of the One is a “power” or “active potency.” Active potencies are still potencies of some sort and they therefore require compositeness, i.e., the entity plus its potency, even if this potency is actualized in another. In addition, an active potency actualized in *another* necessarily implies a real relation between that entity and the entity in which the potency is actualized.

<sup>48</sup> 6.8.14.41. Cf. 6.8.20.9ff where the One is also said to be “activity” (**ehergeia**), but activity “without **ousia**”. Compare this with the way that Numenius puts it.

<sup>49</sup> 6.7.42.22; cf. 6.9.1.23.

<sup>50</sup> 6.8.8.12-15.

of the One. Indeed, Plotinus says explicitly that Intellect participates in the One.<sup>51</sup> In addition, if Intellect did not partake in the One, why not make *it* the first principle of all, as Aristotle argued? And if it does partake in the One without being identical with it, must it not follow that it is really related to the One and that the One must be sufficiently complex in order to allow this eventuality?<sup>52</sup>

The controversy that swirled around the doctrines of Hierocles of Alexandria almost a century ago and have since then been immeasurably clarified by Ilsetraut Hadot and most recently by Hermann Schibli reveals indirectly part of the problem faced by Plotinus.<sup>53</sup> On the one hand, there is impressive evidence to support the view that Hierocles identified the first principle of all with a divine Intellect.<sup>54</sup> And yet, As Hadot has argued, Hierocles' identification of Intellect with the Pythagorean Tetractys or Tetrad as a source of the mathematical intelligibility of the sensible world strongly suggests that Intellect is a derived principle.<sup>55</sup> It is of course derived from the Monad. But is this not exactly the problem Plotinus and before him Numenius were trying to solve? If the first principle of all is the Monad, it seems impossible to endow it with even an attenuated set of personal attributes. If, in contest with Plotinus, ideal and ultimate union is with Intellect, in what sense relevant to a religious or ethical ascent is the Monad first? If the role that the Monad fulfills is attributable to Intellect, how is its absolute simplicity to be preserved?

### 3.

If my account thus far of the Platonic efforts to join the Idea of the Good and God as first principle of all is cogent, the succeeding trajectory is not difficult to anticipate. As Proclus says in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, all the commentators agree that the First Hypothesis of the *Parmenides* concerns “the first God.”<sup>56</sup> But, as John Dillon has shown, the commentators whom Proclus goes on to mention who also found in the First Hypothesis the henads includes first of all Iamblichus.<sup>57</sup> The Iamblichean distinction referred to earlier of the triad participant-participated-unparticipated seems tailor-made for personalizing the first principle of all. It is a straightforward matter to

<sup>51</sup> 5.3.17.8-10.

<sup>52</sup> Porphyry, Plotinus' disciple, only seems to exacerbate the problem in claiming (*Sententiae* 30) that all things participate in the One each according to its own capacity. If the *Anonymous Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* is, as Hadot and Dillon suppose, by Porphyry, then the evident attribution of cognitive characteristics to the One (cf. Fr. 2) is a further complication. The author of the commentary does argue in this fragment that the knowledge that the One possesses (or is?) does not entail complexity. But it is far from clear to me at any rate what the reasoning here is.

<sup>53</sup> See especially H. Schibli (2002) 44-58, on Praechter's postulation of what he called Alexandrian Neoplatonism based largely on the claim that Hierocles conflated the One with the Demiurge. Ilsetraut Hadot has provided powerful arguments in favor of the interpretation that Hierocles did not deviate from the Neoplatonic tradition in positing a One above Intellect.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g., *Commentary on the Golden Verses* 1.2 (pg.8.15-16 Koehler); 1.13 (pg.11.20-1 Koehler).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. *Commentary on the Golden Verses* 20.12-19 (pg. 87.19–89.14 Koehler).

<sup>56</sup> See *In Parm.* 6.1053.39-1054.1: **h(prw̄th perii qeou=tou=prwtīstou (pahtej gar toūto koinoh ēkousin̄).**

<sup>57</sup> See *In Parm.* 6.1054.37-1055.2: **Oi, delmeta\ toūtouj kat' aīlon tropon eīsagontej ta lōnta, thh meh prw̄thn legontej einai perii qeou=kai ī qew̄n: ou)gar mōhon perii tou=e(̄oj, a)l ī a) kaii perii pasw̄n tw̄n qeīwn ehadwn aūthh poieisqai toh lōgon.** See J. Dillon (1972) 102-06.

infer the personal attributes of the henads from the existence of these anywhere, since these henads are the unifying causal agents of these “series” or “orders.” So, for example, a henad for intellection will be an intellect. Whether we preserve the absolute simplicity of the first principle of all in the manner of Iamblichus or in the manner of Proclus hardly seems to be of primary concern.<sup>58</sup>

What is crucial, however, is Proclus' identification—we might say *a priori* identification—of the One as first principle of all with the primal God. As Proclus surveys the various interpretations of the *Parmenides*, he introduces the view of his master, Syrianus.<sup>59</sup> According to that view, “if God and the One are identical because there is nothing greater than God and nothing greater than the One, then to be unified and to be deified are identical.”<sup>60</sup> This view represents a profound divergence from that which we found first in Numenius, according to whom God is identical with being, not with oneness.<sup>61</sup> According to Numenius (we may suppose) and according to Plotinus, the attributes of the first principle are to be inferred from the properties of being with the proviso that no attribute should be posited or posited in a way that compromises divine simplicity. According to the view of Syrianus and his disciple Proclus, the attributes of the first principle (or lack thereof) are to be inferred from the property of unity.<sup>62</sup> What this means is that even *conceptual* distinctions—conceptual *quoad nos*—are eliminated or, rather, translated into really distinct attributes of the henads. Whereas Plotinus would claim, for example, that the love that the One has for itself and its “hyper-cognition” are only different ways of understanding it as virtually all things, Proclus claims that the existence of love and cognition are reason for positing explanatory divine henads. A commitment to protecting the total transcendence of the first principle follows from taking “One” as its proper name.<sup>63</sup>

I do not wish to suggest that the version of Platonism embraced by Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, and later Damascius is not without resources in responding to the version found in Numenius and Plotinus. For one thing, it is difficult to see how Plotinus can maintain that the first principle is the cause of the being of everything given that

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. *In Parm.* 6.1066.16-1071.8 for Proclus' argument against "de-simplifying" the One of the First Hypothesis by introducing henads into its realm.

<sup>59</sup> *In Parm.* 1.640.17ff.

<sup>60</sup> *In Parm.* 1.641.10-12: **Ei'gar qeoj kaiieh tau)oh, dioti mhte qeou=ti kreilttoh e)sti mhte ehoj, to)hfw)sqai t%)teqew)sqai tau)oh.**

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Proclus' *Platonic Theology*, 3.35.6; 36.6; 51.23 and *In Tim.* 1.232.6; 232.7 for the distinction of **au)tooh** from **to)eh**.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *In Parm.* 6.110824-5: **pahtwn gar oh aition outeh e)sti tw)h pahtwn.** Proclus is careful to add that not only can we have no cognition of the One, we cannot even have cognition of the fact that it has cognition of itself. Cf. *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 5.20 which designates the One as **au)toeh**, not **au)tooh**.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *In Parm.* 6.1108.38-1109.20 where Proclus refers to *Parm.* 142A in saying that there is no “name” (**o)homa**) for the One. Nevertheless, in this passage Proclus goes on to allow that the One is the cause of all things just in the way that primary Intellect is the cause of all intellects and primary Soul is the cause of all souls. For Proclus, this would seem to imply that the One is the cause of all being just insofar as being is understood as unity.

Plotinus identifies matter with “privation” (**sterhsij**).<sup>64</sup> By contrast Proclus, following Aristotle and, in his view, Plato, identifies matter with “power” (**duhamij**).<sup>65</sup> Thus, matter is insinuated into the primary product of the One.<sup>66</sup> And, accordingly, Proclus will argue against Plotinus that evil is a privation of good, not a privation of form, that is, matter. Undoubtedly, Plotinus' doctrine of matter flows from his determination to reject metaphysical dualism of any sort. But if that leads him to collapse privation and potentiality or power, one might argue that the cost is too high. Proclus, in making the first principle of all **autoeh**, can accept that matter is a power inherent in all multiplicities.<sup>67</sup> The result of doing this, however, is that the being of whatever possesses being has no God as first principle. The One is only the “source of all divinity.”<sup>68</sup> Alternatively, Proclus can say that it is “divinity itself,”<sup>69</sup> thereby ensuring that the first principle is completely stripped of personal attributes.

As we have seen, Plotinus holds that the One is **duhamij pantwæ**; Proclus seems to hold and certainly seems to be committed to saying that the One is **provdunamewj**.<sup>70</sup> And Damascius, taking the apophatic approach to its logical conclusion, argues that the Ineffable One is beyond any causal role or any non-causal role; indeed, it is not a first principle at all.<sup>71</sup> This position is not so much an explication of the Platonic Idea of the Good as it is a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the hypothesis of the derivation of all things from a first principle.<sup>72</sup>

#### 4.

Where does all this leave us? Historically, it is clear that there are two forms of Platonic response to the suprapersonal Idea of the Good. One is what has been called the ontological approach and the other the henological approach. The first is represented by

<sup>64</sup> See *Tim.* 52D which strongly implies that the receptacle of becoming or matter/space has an existence independent of the Demiurge and, it would seem, of the One or Good. This is a problem for all Platonists to confront. Cf. *Enneads* 2.4.16.3-8. Also, 1.8.5.6-13; 1.8.11.1-7.

<sup>65</sup> See *Platonic Theology* 3.39.4-40.6: **Tautá/moi dokousi kaii oi,perii PI wtihon pol I akij e)ndeiknumenoi toloh ek te eidouj kaii ul hj nohtj poieih, tol<meh> eidoj t%e(hii kaii tv= uparcei, thh delduhamin ahal ogon [upo]-tattontej tv=ul v. Kaiiei'touto I egoien, o)rwj: I egousin: ei'delamorfoh tina kaii aheigon fusin kaii a)riston epi thh nothh ou)sian a)hapempousi, thj PI atwnikhj a(martahein moi dokousi dianoiqj. Ou)gar estin ul h tou=peratoj tolapeiron, a) I alduhamij: ou)deleidj tou=apeirou tolperaj, a) I aluparcij:**

<sup>66</sup> See *In Tim.* 1.384.27-385.16. Note especially 385.14-15: **diolkaii [h(u) h] a)gaqoh pv/esti kaii a)peiron.**

<sup>67</sup> On the univocity of "matter" see *In Tim.* 2.65.21-4.

<sup>68</sup> *In Parm.* 6.1109.7.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.1109.16.

<sup>70</sup> See *In Parm.* 7.1174.12. Proclus is here discussing the views of unnamed Platonists. J. Dillon (1987) 524, n.37, thinks he is probably talking about Iamblichus. But he can hardly disagree with Iamblichus (or whomever he is referring to here) in holding that the One is prior to **duhamij** in view both of his locating of **duhamij** in the product of the One and of his strictures on the description of the One itself.

<sup>71</sup> See *On Principles* 1.22.15-20, 2.115 Combès-Westerink. See S. Rappe (2000), 197-207.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. R.T. Wallis (1972, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1995) 158, who says of Damascius' account of the Ineffable that “while he was doing no more than bring[ing] out some of the traditional teaching's implications...the consequences were little less than annihilation of the Neoplatonic hierarchy.”

Numenius and Plotinus; and the second especially by Iamblichus, Proclus, and Damascius. I do not mean to suggest that these are, as it were, pure types of response. There are henological elements in the first group and ontological elements in the second. Further dialogue or development within the Platonic tradition was to alter considerably with the triumph of Christian philosophy. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this speculation flourished most richly in France. Let me, however, conclude with a different, philosophical consideration.

What Platonic ontologists and henologists share is a commitment to a “top-down” approach to metaphysical, by which I mean ultimate, explanations of the universe. This approach is in sharp contrast with the “bottom-up” approach that virtually defines science. According to the first, the lower or inferior is only explained by the superior or higher; according to the second, the superior or higher, insofar as these terms have any significance at all, are explained by the lower or inferior or, to add a marginally relevant variable, the earlier. It is not true that Platonists were not in a position to engage their “bottom-up” protagonists, like Empedocles and Democritus.<sup>73</sup> It is certainly true, however, that such engagement today must occur at an exceedingly more sophisticated level.

To put the question as plainly as possible, in explaining human intellect and all the properties that flow from it, are the tools of physics, chemistry, and biology adequate? The view shared by virtually all of the philosophers discussed here is that intellection or thinking could not be a bodily state or succession of states because any state of a body has a particularity or specificity that belies the universality of thinking. One might object that a particular bodily state—say, a functional state—can indeed instantiate a universal rule. In reply, Platonists all insist that thinking is essentially self-reflexive and that bodies, all of which have parts outside of parts, cannot be self-reflexive. Accordingly, if the immateriality of thinking cannot be explained by a “top-down” approach, it cannot be explained at all. It should be noted that the latter possibility is equivalent to an admission of a failure to find an explanation, not a proof that there cannot be one. A proof of inexplicability could only pertain to an absolutely simple first principle. We could just say that thinking is what it is, but the being or existence of thinking could only be explained by that which is absolutely simple and virtually thinking in the way described above. Here it seems that Platonists need to reflect on the Aristotelian lesson that thinking is primary being, but not on the basis of a conception of primary being that implies complexity.

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Met.* 12.7.1072b30-1073a4, for a “top-down” argument against Pythagoreans and Speusippus.