5-2013

# Everything is Flat: The Transcendence of the One in Neoplatonic Ontology

Joshua Packwood
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

# Everything is Flat:
# The Transcendence of the One in Neoplatonic Ontology

# Everything is Flat:
# The Transcendence of the One in Neoplatonic Ontology

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

By

Joshua Packwood
Ouachita Baptist University
Bachelor of Arts in Health, 2000
University of Arkansas
Master of Arts in Philosophy, 2008

May 2013
University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

Dissertation Director:

_____
Dr. Lynne Spellman

Dissertation Committee:

_____
Dr. Jacob Adler

_____
Dr. Edward Minar

**Dissertation Duplication Release**

I hereby authorize the University of Arkansas Libraries to duplicate this dissertation when needed for research and/or scholarship.

Agreed _____
***Joshua Packwood***

Refused _____
***Joshua Packwood***

**Abstract**

My dissertation research addresses the relationship between the One and everything else in Neoplatonic metaphysics. Plato is vague in describing this distinction and thus much of late antiquity attempts to fill in the gaps, as it were. The potential difficulty, however, is that the hierarchy of existence in late antiquity is susceptible to being understood as postulating a being that is "beyond being." To avoid this difficulty, I propose an interpretation of Dionysius the Areopagite to show that being is, by definition, intelligible and thus finite and limited. Since the first principle is that which is infinite it therefore cannot be a being. I argue that the essence/ energies distinction in Eastern Christianity helps to alleviate any worries of not postulating the first principle as a being.

**Table of Contents**

**Chapter 1**

# INTRODUCTION

In Neoplatonic ontology we find a certain tension between how to understand the transcendence of Plotinus' source of everything, the One, and its relation to everything else. In this dissertation I advance a new approach to understanding Plotinus (ca. 204–270 CE), which will be through the metaphysics of another philosopher of late antiquity, *Pseudo*-Dionysius the Areopagite. I will propose, through the philosophy of Dionysius (6th century CE), that the metaphysical distinctions in Neoplatonic ontology (primarily between the One and being) occur *within* the One, as opposed to between some infinite being and finite being(s). To view the distinction between the One and being as between an infinite being and finite being(s) is the common thought of what is meant by transcendence. For example, A.H. Armstrong, a prominent Neoplatonic classicist scholar, argues that Neoplatonic ontology is primarily about an infinite being that is of a different "kind" of being than finite being(s). My argument that the metaphysical distinction occurs *within* the One is to say that the distinction is between the undifferentiated, the One, and the manifestation or differentiation of the One, being as such. If we interpret Neoplatonism's One as a "being beyond being", then, I argue, we fail to understand the most basic metaphysical premise of Neoplatonism, which is that being is finite. Being as such is limited and therefore to claim that the One is a "being beyond being" is a fundamental contradiction in terms. Thus I will show how the One cannot be a "being", and yet everything remains *within* the One.

The first contribution I will be making to contemporary Neoplatonic philosophy is that I will provide a clear account of how the One is not "cut-off" from being. I will do this by showing

how any distinction between what the One *is* and being (everything else) occurs *within* the One, as opposed to between an infinite being and finite being(s). That is to say, the distinction occurs between the undifferentiated source, the One, and the differentiated manifestation of the One, being. While the contemporary Neoplatonic philosopher Eric Perl makes an argument similar to this, Perl argues that being is a "theophany" of the One, whereas I am proposing a more subtle interpretation by positing being *within* the One. Thus I believe my interpretation helps elucidate both Dionysius and Plotinus in a way that Perl does not. My contribution is a distinctly Dionysian reading of Neoplatonism, whereas Perl believes that his theophanic interpretation is paramount in all Neoplatonic literature, most specifically Plotinus, Proclus (ca. 412–485 CE), and Dionysius.[1] While I believe that Plotinus can, and should, be read the way I propose, I argue that this can only be done if we read Plotinus through Dionysius' metaphysics. Perl's argument is that Dionysius is simply postulating what Plotinus and Proclus have already argued. I am, on the other hand, arguing that Dionysius is bringing something new to Neoplatonic philosophy, and if we take this new interpretation from Dionysius, then it will help us see Plotinus in a more coherent manner. Or to say it differently, my reading of Dionysius will help to elucidate the metaphysics of Neoplatonism, avoiding any worries of an incoherent "being beyond being."

It is generally not a good idea to read an earlier philosopher through the understanding of a later one. When we read earlier figures through later writers we lend ourselves to distorting both figures. However, in this particular case, I am arguing that Dionysius' metaphysics will elucidate Neoplatonic philosophy because my reading of Dionysius makes better use of

[1] Perl (2007: 4).

Plotinus' texts, the *Enneads*, than the alternative readings of Plotinus. Furthermore, this philosophical point has been made in a rather telling passage by Gilbert Ryle.[2]

> Now just as the farmer, in toiling at making paths, is preparing the ground for effortless sauntering, so a person in toiling at building a theory is preparing himself for, among other things, the effortless exposition of the theories which he gets by building them. His theorizing labours are self-preparations, for, among other things, didactic tasks which are not further self-preparations, but preparations of other students... There is a stage at which a thinker has a theory, but has not yet got it perfectly. He is not yet completely at home in it. There are places where he sometimes slips, stumbles and hesitates. At this stage he goes over his theory, or parts of it, in his head, or on paper, not yet with the ease begotten by much practice, nor with the trouble that it had cost him to do the original building. He is like the farmer, whose path is still sufficiently rough to require him to tread up and down it somewhat heavy-footed, in order to smooth out some remaining inequalities of the surface. As the farmer is both half-sauntering and still preparing the ground for more effortless sauntering, so the thinker is both using his near-mastery of his theory and still schooling himself to master it perfectly. Telling himself his theory is still somewhat toilsome and one of the objects of this toil is to prepare himself for telling it without toil.[3]

From this passage we can see how some thinkers come along and "prepare the ground" for others. My argument is that Plotinus' philosophy is the "toiling" that Dionysius received, and then Dionysius went on to "smooth" out the rough surface that Plotinus had prepared. While there is no empirical evidence that Dionysius read Plotinus, other than through Proclus, Dionysius was, as I will indicate shortly, a schooled Athenian. Therefore, it seems rather plausible that a 6th century Neoplatonist would be working with knowledge of the most famous Western thinker in late antiquity, Plotinus.

The second contribution I am making will be to show how Plotinus' double act theory of emanation is, in fact, metaphysically equivalent to Dionysius's ontology of remaining, procession, and reversion. Therefore, the internal and external act in Plotinus occur within the

---

[2] This passage was brought to my attention by Prof. Spellman.

[3] Ryle (2008: 290-291). I am not using Ryle's analogy here for the purpose for which he intended it; besides, for Ryle, "both" farmers are the same.

One in the same way that Dionysius' remaining, procession, and reversion also occur within the One. I will also argue, as no other scholar has, how the Eastern Christian concepts of the essence and energies of God (the One) are equivalent to Plotinus' double act and Dionysius' remaining, procession, and reversion. I will contribute to contemporary Neoplatonic scholarship by showing how these three metaphysical theories help elucidate each other, illuminating how the One can be understood in relation to being. I will do this through the Neoplatonic notion of the One's being "beyond being" as understood in both positive and negative language. Finally, my third contribution will be to show how being is a symbol of the One by arguing that the One is revealed and concealed in both being (symbols), and in silence. In Neoplatonism, to which I am sympathetic, philosophy's ultimate purpose is to go beyond the manifestations of the One, whether in speech or silence, to the One itself, as the undifferentiated source of everything that is.

In the writings of Dionysius we find a thought process that is not entirely filled with rigorous arguments. In fact Dionysius at times refuses to give arguments in favor of making proclamations because he believes arguments are not always beneficial in advancing our understanding of reality.[4] But that does not imply that his thought is not full of philosophical insight and interpretation. Rather it means that we will first need to understand the philosophical tradition in which he is working, namely, the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus and Proclus. Dionysius' thought must be understood from within the Neoplatonic tradition, but it is also true that Neoplatonic philosophy can be made more lucid through the philosophy of Dionysius. Thus

[4] See, for example, Ep. VII.1, 11077a–1080a.

I will elucidate the philosophy of the first and most important Neoplatonist, Plotinus, and then I will show how Dionysius' metaphysics helps us to better understand Neoplatonic ontology.

One infamous debate among scholars is about the authenticity and historical accuracy of a person known as Dionysius the Areopagite,[5] but my focus here will be on the *Corpus Dionysianum.* The historical person who penned the *Corpus* is not important to our pursuit of a fuller understanding of Neoplatonic ontology. That is, it is the *Corpus* of writings, which are *The Divine Names, The Mystical Theology, The Celestial Hierarchy, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,* and *Letters,* which are of significance here. While the name Dionysius the Areopagite comes from the reference in Acts 17:37 to the Athenian convert to Christianity by St. Paul, scholarship today has determined that the writings of the *Corpus* came from the sixth century, and not the first century. Both Hugo Koch and Joseph Stiglmayr, in 1895, showed the unmistakable influence of the writings of Proclus upon the *Corpus*.[6] Since that time there have been a multitude of theories about who this individual was, and this debate continues to this date with no foreseeable solution to the problem. Dionysian scholars have, however, unanimously agreed that whoever the author was, he was not the historic person referred to in the Acts of the Apostles. Thus the debate is over which educated Christian (presumably) of the 6th, or some argue 5th, century is the historical author who penned these writings.

Another problem that has developed in the history of Dionysian studies is whether or not the writings can be considered "orthodox" by the teachings of Christianity, since, after all, the author claims to be a prominent Christian. Moreover, in the history of Christianity this figure has been considered to be both a Bishop in Athens and a Bishop/Missionary in Paris, France (St.

[5] See, for example, Jones (1980), Rolt (1920), Louth (1989).

[6] Jones (1980: 8).

Denys). Some theological scholars have focused on trying to find out the Christian influence of the *Corpus* in regards to doctrines, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation.[7] Here we find a wide variety of opinions regarding the theological significance of the writings of Dionysius. Some scholars, such as Paul Rorem, argue that Dionysius' writings are not orthodox and thus should only be read with great carefulness.[8] Others, such as Alexander Golitzin and Andrew Louth, have argued that Dionysius is indeed orthodox in his writings on Christian doctrine.[9] Thus we have a wide discrepancy within Christian scholarship over the value and "orthodoxy" of the Areopagite.

However, due to the historical impasse, and the inconclusive theological debates, a new interest in the *Corpus* has emerged that is not centered on the questions of authorship or on theological orthodoxy. Instead what we find is an increase in recent scholarship on the purely philosophical (as opposed to historical or theological) perspective in the *Corpus*.[10] My project will focus solely on the ontology of the *Corpus* without consideration of the historical and theological questions. In fact I believe that the unrevealed nature of the author of the *Corpus* is significant because it conceals the writer whose works can now be known only through the works' manifestation. The lack of biographical information about Dionysius causes us, I believe, to simply read the works in and of themselves without some historical or theological axe to

---

[7] A few of these scholarly works would be Louth (1989), Rorem (1993 and 1995), and Golitzin (1994).

[8] Rorem (1993: 15). John Meyendorff (1985) is another example of a scholar who believes Dionysius' teaching are not orthodox.

[9] Golitzin (1994), Louth (1989).

[10] Especially in the recent works of Schafer (2006), Perl (2007), and Klitenic Wear (2007).

grind.[11] Thus the name *Dionysius* is what I will use to refer to the text, that is, to the content of his work, and not the author.[12] No doubt my own affinities for Dionysius will be evident in this work; however, my interest in Dionysius is in conjunction with, or rather is united with, an equal affinity for Plato and Plotinus, and above all else the metaphysical theory of the One as "beyond being."

Following a short summary of each chapter, in the remainder of Chapter 1, I will explain briefly the historical tradition that Plotinus, Proclus, and Dionysius inherit and rely upon for their metaphysical structure. I will show how the ontological basis of being as intelligibility can be found throughout the Greek philosophical tradition. This fundamental ontological premise of being as intelligibility can be explicitly found in the historic Parmenides and, most significantly, in Plato's *Republic*, *Sophist*, *Timaeus*, *Parmenides*, and *Phaedo*.

Chapter 2 will explain the metaphysics of the One according to Plotinus. In this chapter I will show how there is a tension in Plotinus' writings about how we are to understand the transcendence and the "beyondness" of the One. By referring to the metaphysical interpretation by the eminent Neoplatonic scholar, A.H. Armstrong, I will elucidate how some contemporary Neoplatonic scholars interpret the One as "being beyond being," which is to say, a being that is infinite and also has a list of rather infamous attributes, such as omnibenevolence, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc. In other words, Armstrong posits Plotinus' One as the onto-

---

[11] Alexander Golitzin (1994) argues that "... every attempt to date that has sought to deal with the *CD* as a single body of thought... has engaged the particular scholar's sympathies and presuppositions--most often in a negative manner--to a considerably greater degree than were he dealing with an ancient author whose purpose in writing were clearly advertised."

[12] From here forward I will omit the prefix Pseudo- in referring to Dionysius the Areopagite. I will do so to avoid its awkwardness and pejorative connotation.

theological being that has predominated the history of Western metaphysics. In chapter 2 I will look closely at the concepts of transcendence and immanence, positive and negative language, and specifically at what Plotinus means when he says that the One is "beyond being."

Before we can begin to evaluate Dionysius' metaphysics we will first need to understand Plotinus' theory of "emanation." Thus chapter 3 will be an exploration of Plotinus' double act theory of emanation. For this theory I will use the explanation given by one of the most prominent contemporary Neoplatonic scholars, philosopher Eyjolfur Emilsson. Emilsson's interpretation is to show that by the One's being what it *is*, being or intelligibility comes forth from the One by an activity. While this activity of the One does not intend to form being, being nonetheless is the result of the One's isness. This emanation is important to how we understand the One and its relation to being as such because it will help us see how being is distinct from the One. In introducing Emilsson's interpretation, I will refer very briefly to various contemporary philosophies of action in order to elucidate how the double act is essentially one act. The result of this act brings about an "overflow" from the One which is being. Therefore, what we find in Emilsson's account is an internal act (the One's *isness*) causing or producing an external act (being or intelligibility). What we find is that even though the language of emanation implies a spatial and chronological sequence of events, Plotinus is clear that the double act is occurring only in a metaphysical sense (atemporally) and not in space and time.

In chapter 4 we will turn to look at Dionysius' metaphysics. In order to do so we must begin with Dionysius' concept of intelligibility. I will look at what Dionysius means by negative theology and its relationship to the One as being "beyond being." In this chapter Dionysius' concept of remaining, procession, and reversion will be explored and compared to Plotinus'

double act as seen in chapter 3. I will show how the procession and reversion of being are, for Dionysius, equivalent to the external act we saw in Plotinus. Dionysius' metaphysics hinges on the idea that being as such is a manifestation of the One. Chapter 4 will begin to introduce the idea of what it means, according to Dionysius, for the One to be manifested. Moreover, this chapter will also present Dionysius' view of love as *eros* and *agape* as manifestations of the One in comparison to his ontology of remaining, procession, and reversion. Finally, I will show how the Eastern Christian concept of the distinction between the essence and energies of God (the One) can be explained according to Dionysian ontology. In the conclusion of this chapter I will argue that, for Dionysius, the metaphysics of remaining, procession, and reversion is not only equivalent to Plotinus' double act, but is also equivalent to the distinction between the essence and energies of God. Furthermore, I will argue that the distinction of the essence and energies of God occurs, most importantly, *within* the One, which helps to elucidate further how we are to understand the relationship and difference between the One and everything that is. All three of these metaphysical theories, Plotinus's double act, Dionysius' remaining, procession, and reversion, and the Eastern Christian concept of the essence and energies of God, I argue, reflect a metaphysical reading of Dionysius that I advocate and call *flat transcendence*. Which is to say, the One is not brought down to being, rather being is elevated in sanctity to the level of the One, while still remaining distinct from the One.

Chapter 5 will explore the concept of causation in Dionysian metaphysics. This chapter will look back to Plotinus and Proclus to help with understanding the tradition in which Dionysius is working. Here I will also be referring back to Dionysius' distinction *within* the One so that we can consider whether he should be seen as a pantheist or even a dualist. While there

are many different definitions of pantheism, I am taking a very basic definition, as given by Michael Levine, according to whom "all is God and all is equal."[13] Levine argues that many philosophers, including Plotinus, are actually pantheists, even though the term seems to be somewhat pejorative in Western philosophy.[14] I will consider pantheism and dualism only for the purpose of situating Dionysius' metaphysics within contemporary metaphysical theories. That is to say, my interest here is not to get caught up in a semantic argument over definitions, but with the metaphysics of Dionysius' theory.

Finally, in the last part of chapter 5 Dionysius' ontology will be used to show how he understands being as symbols or images of the One. From his metaphysics that we find in chapters 4 and 5, we will discover how the One is to be seen as symbolized in that which comes from it. The Dionysian philosophy of symbols will elucidate how the One is both similar and dissimilar to being, and how the One is both revealed and concealed in being. Here I will also consider the role of speech and silence in relation to Dionysius' philosophy of transcendence. What we find in Dionysius, I will argue, is that not only is being equivalent to intelligibility, but being is also expressed as a symbol of the One, in both speech and silence. Thus we can understand what being is by means of speech, or philosophy, but I will show that we can also know (and *un*know) the One only through being, in speech and silence.

### 1.2 Historical Background

The philosophical concept of the first principle of all reality, the One, as residing beyond being and thought is not an idea without rational justification. The notion of the One as beyond

[13] Levine (1994: 3).

[14] Ibid.

being is not something the ancients accepted by faith as some sort of foundational assumption. Rather, the conclusion that the One is beyond being is the result of a rigorous progression of metaphysical reasoning, and any notion of the metaphysics of the first principle can be evaluated and understood within the context of this philosophical process. Plotinus, however, is not the first philosopher to use this concept of the One as beyond being. We will begin by looking briefly at the history of the philosophical justification in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition.

To begin, we first must understand that an important principle of the Neoplatonic philosophical tradition depends on the argument that to be is to be intelligible. The concept that what is, being, is that which is intelligible, or apprehended, is fundamental not only to the Neoplatonic identification of being as form (or idea), but also the view that the sensible is less than completely real and the concept that the One (first principle) is the source of reality as itself beyond being and intelligibility.[15] Therefore, in order to understand Plotinus and Dionysius' metaphysics we will need to look back to the arguments that are given to support show that being is intelligible.

The concept of being as intelligible is implicit from the beginnings of Greek philosophy. To even attempt to think about reality as one whole, as in, for example, Thales of Miletus, is to presuppose that being as such is able to be understood by thought. This presupposition is first stated explicitly in Parmenides, when he says, "For neither can you know what is not (for it is not to be accomplished), ...[to know what is not] is impossible... nor [can you] express it... for the same thing is for thinking and for being."[16] To think is to apprehend something. For Parmenides,

---

[15] Perl (2007:5).

[16] Parmenides, fr. 2.6-8, 3.

thought is necessarily about something or some being. Similarly, that which is not cannot be thought, because to think about what isn't (or non-being) would mean to have no content for that thought, and thus to not be thinking. In fact, we even find this Parmenidean concept in Thomas Aquinas, when he says, "Being falls first in the conception of intellect... Wherefore being is the proper object of intellect."[17] Whatever we can say about thought, it seems that at its most basic point it is about or of some being, which then can be specified by various differentiations. Parmenides, in this passage, is arguing that being cannot go beyond thought, which means there is *no thing* beyond the reach of thought. Therefore, it would be unthinkable to postulate an unintelligible being which cannot be thought, because to do that would be already to postulate a being. This brings about an indispensable idea in Greek philosophy, that to think being, that which is, is to presuppose its intelligibility. In other words, to think being is to think it as thinkable. However, not only is being intelligible, but this also implies that intelligibility is the very meaning of being. Thus being can only be what is there for thought, and so thought cannot extend to anything else but being. That which is, then, is that which can be solely apprehended by intellection, and intellection is solely the apprehension of that which is.[18] Being is that which is reached, or grasped, by thought itself. To simply be thinking of any thing is to make it intelligible since it is being thought.

### 1.3 Intelligibility in Plato

After Parmenides we have Plato making similar claims about being and intelligibility. In Plato's writings, however, we find dialogues that can be read in a multitude of ways. For our

[17] *Summa Theologica* Ia, 5, 2.

[18] Perl (2007: 6).

purposes I will only present the interpretation of Plato that is common in the Neoplatonic tradition. Therefore, what follows is, knowingly, an oversimplification of Plato's views from the perspective of the Neoplatonic (or Platonic) tradition and Plato's idea of the relationship to being and intelligibility.

Plato's concept of being as form or idea comes directly from Parmenides' understanding of being and intelligibility. Plato takes being to be the forms and makes this the most important aspect of his metaphysics. These forms are ultimately what is real because they and only they are completely intelligible. The complete reality of the forms is as a result of perfect intelligibility. To be intelligible is, therefore, to be real. On the other hand, form is what is there for thought. In order to have thought there must be something that is there to think about; thus thought depends upon reality. Conversely, anything that is sensible is less than ultimately real because it is an appearance (or image) of the forms. These sensibles are understood not primarily by intellect but instead by sensations which produce what Plato refers to as opinion (*doxa*). This is the apprehension of appearance as opposed to reality.[19] The world of appearances is what Plato famously calls the world inside the cave, rather than the world of reality, which is outside the cave. These images inside the cave are not non-existent, but instead they are in between the real and what is not. As Plato says, "that which is is altogether knowable, while that which in no way is is in no way knowable" (*Republic* 477a 2–3). He continues, "if something should appear such as at once to be and not to be, this will lie in between that which purely is and that which wholly is not, and neither knowledge nor ignorance will be about it, but again what appears between ignorance and knowledge" (*Republic* 478d 5–11), hence, opinion (or *doxa*). For Plato, his levels

[19] See, for example, *Republic* 476a 4–7.

of ontology depend on the identification of being with intelligibility. Insofar as something is intelligible, it is being; whereas, if it is not intelligible, then it is less than being. Notice how the levels of being are directly related to the differences in intelligibility.

While Plato's metaphysics is certainly similar to that of Parmenides, there is indeed an important distinction between the two. According to Plato, as opposed to Parmenides, being (and hence intelligibility) is multiple as opposed to unitary. That is to say, in Plato's ultimate reality, the forms are different from each other, yet they each also share the fact that they are intelligible. In order to have intelligibility, Plato believes, there must also be differentiation so that the forms have their intelligibility in relation to each other. That the forms are distinct is a necessary condition for their intelligibility, as Plato says, "for through the interweaving of the forms with each other discourse comes to be for us" (*Sophist* 259e 5–6). Plato's idea of differentiation is dependent on the idea that in order for there to be intelligibility, there must be multiplicity.

The Good, for Plato, as that which provides being, is another identification of being and intelligibility. The intellect desires the Good because it wants to understand.[20] Socrates makes this point in the *Phaedo* in relation to Anaxagoras. Socrates once read Anaxagoras and he was delighted at the thought that Anaxagoras would explain how everything is via the mind (intellect). Socrates states, "mind [intellect] is the orderer and cause of all things... it seemed to me in a certain way good that mind be the cause of all things; I thought, if it were so, the ordering mind would order all things and establish each thing in whatever way that was best" (*Phaedo* 97c 3–7). For Plato, to give an explanation of things in conformity with intellect is also to take into account the goodness of the thing itself. Anaxagoras, however, did not go on

[20] Gregory (1998: 8).

to explain everything to Socrates, and thus Socrates goes on to say that because Anaxagoras did not give explanations in accordance with intelligibility then, "[Anaxagoras] made no use of mind [intellect]" (*Phaedo* 98b 8–9). Goodness, then is the principle of intellectual understanding and even for intelligibility itself. The intellect must find goodness in its objects in order to make sense out of the objects. Thus any activity, event, or thing, can only be intellectually understood if goodness is its reason for being. What can be understood is so only insofar as it is good (*Timaeus* 46e 3–7). We can see here that that which is *is* only because the good holds and "binds it together", and only in this case can anything be known or understood by the mind (*Phaedo* 99c).

The notion of goodness here is also emphasized, at least according to a Neoplatonic reading, in the *Republic* with the image of the sun. As the sun makes sensible things visible by providing light, so the Good gives that which makes the forms able to be known and enables the intellect to know the forms (*Republic* 508b 12–c2). That is to say, the Good is that by which intelligibility becomes possible for the intellect. Consider Plato again,

> When the soul is fixed upon that which truth and being illuminates, it thinks and knows and appears to have intellect: but when it is fixed upon that which is mixed with darkness, upon that which comes into being and passes away, it opines and is dimmed and changes its opinions up and down and seems then not to have intellect. (*Republic* 508d 4–9)

The idea of the intelligible being revealed has a beautiful connotation with thinking of truth as that which is not hidden.[21] That is to say, if truth is understood as that which is "unconcealed", as Heidegger would put it, then the truth of the forms is their unconcealedness, as it were. The intelligibility or accessibility of the forms to the mind is their truthfulness. This truthfulness,

[21] Perl (2007:8).

Plato believes, is provided by the Good. For in the absence of goodness, consciousness attempting to understand reality is like the eye in the absence of light; it cannot see its objects. So just as there can be neither visibility nor vision without light, so there can be neither intelligibility nor intellection without goodness. The forms must contain goodness in order for them to be.

Plato, however, wants to say more, namely, that in order for anything to *be*, there must be some element of goodness in it. Consider, "to the things that are known, not only their being known is present by the Good, but also their being and reality is present to them by it" (*Republic* 508e 1–3). Plato, following Parmenides, is stressing the identification of being and intelligibility. To *be* requires being able to be apprehended, and since things can be only in light of being good then the Good is the source of being.

Plato continues by emphasizing a point which is very important for Neoplatonism, "the Good is not reality but *excels* beyond reality in seniority and power" (*Republic* 508e 1–3) (italics added). Since the Good is that which gives being and intelligibility to the forms, which constitute reality, it cannot be one of them, it cannot be a member of the whole of reality, but must "be" outside or beyond it.[22] The Good must transcend that of which it is the source because being and intelligibility require something else in order to be. Plato identifies this "beyond being" as the Good. Plato, however, is not completely consistent in this analysis; for example, he also calls the Good an object of intellection, implying it is intelligible. Nonetheless, Plato does realize that being, as a multiplicity, cannot be the first principle for all things in existence. Being and

[22] Ibid.

intelligibility must depend on something that transcends being and intellection, that which he calls the Good.

Plato never explicitly identifies the Good from the *Republic* with the One from the *Parmenides.* The Neoplatonic tradition, however, unequivocally read Plato as identifying the first principle as both the Good and the One. The Good that enables us to make sense out of things is essentially a matter of absolute unity.[23] For as J.N. Findlay says, the Good "excludes the unruliness, the lack of precision, the absence of clear limitation with which it contrasts, and to which by such exclusion it necessarily gives a certain shadowy status, not only in the instantial, but also in the intelligible sphere." For the Neoplatonists Mathematics lies behind Ethics so that the Good, which is the source of all deep delight, is a complete unity, and its offspring are diversified appearances of its overarching goodness.[24] It is this concept of the One to which we will now turn in the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus.

[23] Findlay (1974: 185).

[24] Ibid.

**Chapter 2**

## THE METAPHYSICS OF THE ONE

Plotinus' metaphysics begins with the central idea that there are different ontological levels of reality, and the source of those levels is Plotinus' first principle, referred to as the One. The One is the most simple and unified. In fact, the One is so simple and unified that there are no parts in it. For Plotinus, a being has limits, and these limits presuppose some type of distinctions; thus the One, considered to be beyond all limits and distinctions, is thought to be beyond all being. Ultimately, the One is so completely other that nothing can even be said about the One. The One cannot be known nor thought because one cannot know what the One *is*. However, it is this One which is the cause of all else.

Having begun his metaphysics with the first principle, which is the One, the One emanates from itself what is called the intellect or *nous*, which is the second hypostasis. The intellect and the content of intellect's thoughts (the intelligibles) are what make up being.[25] Central to Plotinian metaphysics is the idea that being as such is not to be understood as "coming forth" in space and time. Instead, emanation is the outpouring of an atemporal but ontologically dependent being. In emanation, the One is not separating itself into different parts. Though something is coming about from within the One, this in no way takes away any of the unity or simplicity of the One.

Being is the most beautiful, the most good (other than the One), and an image of the One because it is closest to the One. The way in which it comes about is as follows: all things that

---

[25] As with Aristotle's Unmoved Movers that think themselves, the intellect (the thinker) and the intelligibles (the content of thought) are the same.

come from the One ultimately desire to go back to their source, and this is true of the inchoate intellect. The general idea behind the inchoate is that it is what being is as it is coming forth from the One. It has not completely become being yet, and thus it is inchoate or potential. (It is important to remember again that though the language here implies temporality, emanation is *not* temporal.) Although the inchoate intellect attempts to grasp the One, it cannot because the One cannot be known. In attempting to think about the One, the inchoate intellect can only think about that which is closest to the One, namely itself. That is to say, in order for there to be thought, then there must be something to think about, but because the intellect is thinking about itself, it therefore must be dual. The intellect has the highest degree of unity possible, second only to the One. But this unity that the intellect has cannot be something provided by itself because it is not complete unity. Therefore, the intellect is dependent upon the One for its unity, and this makes being's unity second to the One's.

As a Platonist, Plotinus knows that in order to have a sensible world there must be a world of Plato's Forms. That is to say, Plotinus will follow Plato, using the existence of the Forms to give an account for everything in the sensible world. Take for example the human person; our ability to reason and have sense perception presupposes, according to Plotinus, an intellect which is free from limitations due to sense perception and discursive reasoning.[26] Plotinus believes that in order to explain the sensible world, or rather, to make sense out of the sensible world, there must be something else on which the sensible world depends. Therefore, we can see that at this level Plotinus has a unified ontology and epistemology in the Forms. For Plotinus, unlike Plato, the Forms are the thoughts of the intellect, and they are what constitute the

[26] Emilsson (2007:2).

many in the intellect. This is to say, in its thinking of multiple objects (i.e., the Forms), intellect contains a plurality within it.

Now that there are two hypostases, the third comes about in a very similar process in emanation. Coming forth from being is the soul. The soul emanates from being as it attempts to grasp and think about being. But it also cannot do so because it is unable to grasp all of being at once. Therefore, the soul can think about being, but only in pieces and not all at once. The soul's reasoning is discursive and unable to think about the Forms all at the same time; instead the soul reasons from premise to conclusion.

**2.2 The One**

In understanding the Plotinian hypostases of the One, being, and soul, it is the One that is the most central to Plotinus' philosophy. The One is the source of all that is; it is the first principle of everything. Yet the One is also that which is everything and nothing, everywhere and nowhere.[27] The difficulty in conceiving the One is due to its being beyond all comprehension. As Plotinus says,

> It [the One] is, therefore, truly ineffable: for whatever you say about it, you will always be speaking of a "something". But "beyond all things and beyond the supreme majesty of Intellect" is the only one of all the ways of speaking of it which are true; it is not its name but says that it is one of all things and "has no name", because we can say nothing of it: we only try, as far as possible, to make signs to ourselves about it. But when we raise the difficulty "Then it has no perception of itself and is not even conscious of itself and does not even know itself", we should consider that by saying we are turning ourselves round and going in the opposite direction. For we are making it many when we make it object

[27] Gregory (1998: 12).

> of knowledge and knowledge, and by attributing thought to it we make it need thought: even if thought goes intimately with it, thought will be superfluous to it. (V.3.13, 1–12)[28]

And,

> How do we ourselves speak about it [the One]? We do indeed say something about it, but we certainly do not speak it, and we have neither knowledge or thought of it. But if we do not have it in knowledge, do we not have it at all? But we have it in such a way that we speak about it, but do not say what it is: so that we speak about it from what comes after it. But we are not prevented from having it, even if we do not speak it. But just as those who have a god within them and are in the grip of divine possession may know this much, that they have something greater within them, even if they do not know what, and from the ways in which they move and the things they say get a certain awareness of the god who moves them, though these are not the same as the mover; so we seem to be disposed towards the One, divining, when we have our intellect pure... that he is not only of a kind not to be these, but something higher than what we call "being", but is more and greater than anything said about him, because he is higher than speech and thought and awareness; he gives us these, but he is not these himself. (V.3.14, 1–9)

Plotinus believes that anything expressed about the One is ultimately going to fail. The ineffability of the One is important, and according to Plotinus, the One is inexpressible. If the One were expressible, then the One could be known or understood by the intellect. As such, the One is beyond the intellect, and therefore the One cannot be expressed. Moreover, the ineffability of ultimate reality should not be all that puzzling for those within the Platonic tradition, as Plotinus is. After all, as we have already seen, it is Plato himself who references the Good as being beyond being, when he says,

> Therefore, you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their being is also due to it, although the *good is not being, but superior to it in rank and file*. (*Republic* VI 509b) (italics added)

---

[28] "On The Knowing Hypostases And That Which Is Beyond." The quote in this text refers to Plotinus' loose use of Plato's *Republic* VI 509b, and the First Hypothesis of the *Parmenides* 142A. All quotes from Plotinus' *Enneads* will be the Armstrong translation unless otherwise noted. I will give the titles of Plotinus' treatises the first time a treatise is mentioned or quoted.

Moreover, it is Plato who also remains quite ambiguous as to the nature of that reality which is outside the cave in the famous "allegory of the cave." For example, Plato gives a short description to Glaucon,

> And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. *Whether it is true or not, only God knows. But this is how I see it*… (*Republic* VII 517b) (italics added)

It seems correct to conclude from this passage that Plato is not altogether clear about the ultimate source of reality, or better said, that Plato does not have knowledge of that reality. Our purpose here is merely to make the point that Plotinus is continuing this Platonic theme which views the ultimate nature of reality as rather mysterious. From this account we might wonder, can we have knowledge about the One? If not, what does it mean to speak or think about that which is unspeakable and unthinkable? Yet even though Plotinus is unequivocally clear that the One is ineffable, he still constantly makes references to it, making paradoxical claims about it and its role in the nature of reality.

For Plotinus, everything affirmed about the One, even the name "One" itself, is ultimately denied. Because of this constant negation, Plotinus is without a doubt rather elusive in referencing anything about the One. The difficulty in *apophatic* thought is the use of language. Plotinus is merely following in the tradition of Parmenides and Plato in how he understands the role of language in explaining his metaphysics. Language, for Plotinus, implies existence, or being. Because language can only refer to that which *is*, then the difficulty here is that in using negative language there is still a conceptual idea because when we say, "not this", we think something else. That is to say, when we say something is "not", we immediately think of a *thing*

(a being) which does not contain that property. But the difficulty, for Plotinus specifically, and *apophatic* thought in general, is that when Plotinus says the One is is not, he is attempting to deny even that basic concept of taking something away from some *thing.* Thus Plotinus admonishes us to negate even the connotation of the name "One" for this very purpose. He says, "But if the One--name and reality expressed--were to be taken positively it would be less clear than if we did not give it a name at all; for perhaps this name [One] was given it in order that the seeker, beginning from this which is completely indicative of simplicity, may finally negate this as well" (V.5.6, 31–34).

> Let us consider one of the most fundamental passages in Plotinus.
>
> For since the *nature of the One is generative of all things it is not any one of them*. It is not therefore something or qualified or quantitative or intellect or soul; it is not in movement or at rest, not in place, not in time but itself by itself of single form, or rather formless, being before all form, before movement and before rest; for these pertain to being and are what make it many. (VI.9.3, 38–41)[29]

In this passage the One seems to have a "nature" and that nature is that it is "generative of all things." Notice that the One's being generative is something positive, and it also is something that connects the One to "all things." So any reference to the One is to the relation between being and its source. To say it differently, the way to talk about the One in a meaningful way is through its offspring, being. On the other hand, Plotinus also says that the One is also "not any of them." Here Plotinus is taking away any identification of the One with anything that *is*. So in negating any *isness* of the One, Plotinus is separating the One fundamentally from all being, which seems to imply that we are to take away any idea or "nature" of the One. The One, which is the source

[29] "On The Good Or The One"

of all things, is also not all things, and it seems that Plotinus has said two things that are apparently contradictory.

I will begin with the eminent classicist A.H. Armstrong's interpretation and consider what Armstrong thinks Plotinus means by transcendence. He understands the concept of the One as transcendent in such a way that it is completely distinct or cut-off from the being that emanates from the One.[30] This common reading posits the One as an *infinite being* that is fundamentally distinct from finite being. While there are other prominent Neoplatonic scholars I could refer to for an examination of Plotinus' metaphysics, Armstrong is arguably the most prestigious Neoplatonic scholar of the mid-20th century. He is, after all, the Loeb translator of Plotinus' works and the author of numerous works on Neoplatonism in general and Plotinus in particular, and we will see there are other Neoplatonic scholars who make the same basic claim as he does. I will later contrast Armstrong's reading, that the One is an "infinite being", with a different view of transcendence which I will advocate.

So that the One is the source or cause of all things has been taken to mean that Plotinus postulates an infinite "being", as in, say, theism. In this case Plotinus would just think of the One as a different kind of being from that with which we are familiar. This is the interpretation that Armstrong gives when he says that for Plotinus the One is "beyond being," which he takes to mean that the One is beyond all of our conceptions of what being is.[31] Thus Armstrong is giving what he would agree is a theistic interpretation of Plotinus. In fact, it is plausible that Augustine of Hippo also reads Plotinus in this theistic way. Armstrong argues that the One must be just a

---

[30] Armstrong (1940: 42).

[31] Armstrong (1940: 44).

being that is infinite, and so of a different "kind."[32] According to another prominent Neoplatonic scholar, John Rist, "beyond being" is meant to distinguish the infinite from the finite, and nothing more.

> The question before us is not whether Plotinus said that the One is beyond being but what he meant by saying this. And in view of the general Greek usage of being to mean finite being, the *prima facie* meaning of the phrase "beyond being" should in fact be understood as "infinite being."[33]

But we might wonder how we are to understand this "infinite being"? Here is how Armstrong attempts to address how the One can be a being.

> He [Plotinus] takes the decisive step when he makes the One *energeia* and gives it a will, makes it eternally create itself and return eternally upon itself in love. This makes it inevitably an *ousia*, however much it may transcend the beings which we know, and if an *ousia*, then a one-in-many. It becomes a being to which predicates can be applied and about which logical distinctions can be made. The One-God can be regarded variously as lover, love, and loved, eternal, creator, creative process, and eternally created, willer, will, and willed. This is necessary if the One is to be a First Cause in a metaphysical system. It must, in such a system, be a substance, however far it may transcend all substances known to us.[34]

According to Armstrong, the One must be a being if in fact it is something "to which predicates can be applied." And it must be the case that predicates can apply because the One can only be a cause of all existents if in fact the One possesses these predications.[35] Armstrong believes that in order for anything to be it must by necessity be a being. To take away being would mean that the One does not exist.

---

[32] Ibid.

[33] Rist (1967: 25).

[34] Armstrong (1940: 3)

[35] Ibid.

> The absolute being [the One], distinct from the being of particular things, obviously cannot be a "universal" or abstraction, for it is clear that if we attempt to abstract being from a being it cannot be done, for *nothing remains from which to abstract*. The being of the Absolute must differ not only in degree but in kind from that of the relative and derived beings which we know. It is in this sense that it can be said to be "beyond being." It is unknowable as it is in itself. We can only know of it, know that it must be there, through our knowledge of the beings which derive their reality from it.[36]

Yet Armstrong also wants to maintain a fundamental distinction between being and the One, because the One as the source of all reality is the sole explanation of multiplicity. The distinction is between being as relative and derived, and the One (infinite being) as unchanging. The former is being as such, whereas the latter is the One beyond being. For Armstrong we know about the One through that which comes from the One, which is all derived beings. But Armstrong also wants to maintain that if the One is not a being, then we would be left with the unreality of derived beings, as well as of the infinite being.

> Parmenides was right when he maintained that Being-in-itself must be wholly other than the "beings" of our ordinary experience. Because there is no way in which Being as such can be limited or qualified it must be outside space and time, eternal, unchanging. Where Parmenides went wrong was in maintaining (if he really did) the total unreality and illusoriness of relative and derived beings; for it is only through these latter that we can know of the Absolute [the One]. If we deny their reality, we are sawing off the branch we are sitting on.[37]

In wanting to distinguish the One from derived being, Armstrong has argued that derived being is our only reference to the "infinite being." I will refer to Armstrong's position as common transcendence, or just "transcendence" because it is the generally held view. While this reading seems correct in wanting to maintain a connection between the One and derived being, it seems

---

[36] Ibid., 114.

[37] Ibid., 115.

to raise some difficult questions about how we understand the One as "beyond being," questions which we will now consider.

For Armstrong what is significant about Plotinian ontology is the positive claim that the One is the source of all that is. The beings that we are aware of are not self-sufficient or self-explanatory and must, therefore, require some supreme reality to be the ground of being.[38] That ground of being is the One. So the negative claims about the One really have no purpose except to say that the One is an "infinite being."[39] But if this account of the One is correct, then why do we need both hypostases in the first place? In other words, what is the difference between the One and the intellect for Armstrong? In the lengthy passage quoted above, is that which is "outside space and time, eternal, unchanging" rightly the One, or is it intellect? This seems like a rather difficult problem.

To be sure, Armstrong is clear in affirming two differences between the One and intellect: first, that they are different "kinds" of beings (one infinite and one finite), and second, that the One is completely unitary whereas the being (intellect and the intelligibles which in thinking itself, it thinks) is multiple.[40] But if the most useful part of Plotinus' ontology is what *can* be said about the One (as Armstrong claims), isn't that just what Armstrong says about the intellect also--that *intellect* is necessary because its positive attributes explain all other beings? If the negative language about the One, according to Armstrong, is not helpful because it doesn't elucidate what everything else is and doesn't tell us anything about reality, then why do we need

---

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., 44.

the One at all? In a very telling passage, it may be that Armstrong recognizes this problem and is willing to concede that there really isn't much need for the One after all, when he says, "There is really no need for the One to be regarded as more than the aspect of intellect [being] which it presents when its unity rather than its diversity is stressed; at least, so it appears."[41] Or it may be, as Armstrong goes on to say in the same passage, that Plotinus is just not consistent on this point at all.[42] Either way Armstrong claims that if he is right, then "much of Plotinus' metaphysics is not left standing."[43]

### 2.3 Transcendence

Let us look at a passage that emphasizes Plotinus' view of transcendence.

> ...while the Principle [the One] abides "in its own proper way of life", the activity generated from the perfection in it and its coexistent activity acquires substantial existence, since it comes from a great power, the greatest indeed of all, and arrives at being and substance: for that Principle is "beyond being". That is the productive power of all things, and its product is already all things. But if this product is all things, that Principle is beyond all things: therefore, "beyond being"; and if the product is all things *but the One is before all things and not on an equality with all things*, in this way too it must be "beyond being". That is, also beyond intellect; there is, then, something beyond intellect. For being is not a dead thing, nor is it not life or not thinking; intellect and being are one and the same thing; for intellect does not apprehend objects--which preexist it--as sense does sense objects. but intellect itself is its objects. (V.4.2, 36–44)[44] (italics added)

---

[41] Ibid., 4.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 119.

[44] "How That Which Is After The First Comes From The First, And One The Good"

Thus it seems here that we can conclude, quite explicitly, that the One is not equal with all things, but before everything. We notice in this passage that the One is the generative force for being (or intellect).[45] It is this idea of "beyond being" that Plotinus constantly refers to, beyond or outside all that exists. And Plotinus does imply that there are two ways to understand "beyond being" in this passage. At the end of the quote above he states, "in this way too it must be beyond being." We may wonder, what are these two ways? First, Plotinus is arguing that the One is the generating source of all. The One's perfection and activity result in being, while the One remains "beyond being" as being's source. We will come back to this point in chapter 3. Second, the One is "beyond being" in that it is not only the source of being, but also because it is beyond the scope of intellection. Therefore, since intellect can only apprehend objects, then the One's beyondness means that the One is not an object to be thought.

We have already noticed that the passage is saying that the One is that which generates "from the perfection in it" all that is. Plotinus is saying that the difference between the One and being is that the One is the generative and being is the generated. From its perfection, the One generates being. And we have seen that, as Armstrong says, in trying to give an account of the One in this passage, Plotinus appears to be ascribing being to the One, the very thing that he is denying, unequivocally. That is, he states that the One *is* perfection, *is* activity, *is* generating, but all of these apply to being. But if the One *is* beyond being, in some way other than the infinite being which Armstrong suggests, then there has to be a more nuanced understanding of how to read this passage.

---

[45] In this passage Plotinus goes on to argue that "Intellect and being are one and the same thing."

Consider another passage, “The One is all things and yet not one of them. It is the source of all things, not itself all things, but their transcendent Principle; for in a way they [all things] move *within* the One” (V.2.1.1) (italics added). Being is limited because it is that which comes forth from its source. It is also limited in that it is apparently dependent on the One (since it is *within* the One). Because being comes forth from the One, then perhaps everything that being is *is* also in the One, but only the One as generative. Thus it seems possible to also understand Plotinus to be saying that for anything to exist at all, it must, by necessity, be *in* the One, yet remaining *distinct* from the One. Here we find that the One is both “there and not there.” Perhaps we can only understand these passages by coming to a better understanding of what it means to be “beyond being.” The difficulty is that Plotinus does not ever tell us, explicitly, what it means to be “beyond being”, other than that it isn’t being, and that it is an unknowable source of all things in existence.

Since Plotinus does not explicitly tell us what he means by “beyond being”, then we must try to understand his point as best we can from what he tells us about being. One difficulty with understanding Plotinus’ language here is that when we hear that something is “beyond” we immediately think of spatial and temporal proximity, in terms of distance and time. Plotinus clearly does not have this in mind as we are discussing something that is atemporal and purely metaphysical as opposed to being empirical. Therefore, no matter how tempting it is to think of “beyond being” in this way, we must resist falling into spatial categories when we are supposed to get “beyond” being.

The Greek term for “beyond being” is *meta ousia*. *Meta* generally refers to that which is behind, above, or after, whereas *ousia* is usually referred to as the substance or essence of a

thing. However, in translating *ousia* as substance we must be careful to not think of *ousia* as some specific kind of being or thing. Rather, by *ousia* Plotinus is referring to being as such. Nevertheless, the One is, according to Plotinus, "not equal to the other units [beings] so as to be one of their company; otherwise, there will be something in common between it and those which are included in the count with it, and that something in common will be before the One itself" (V. 5.13, 20-24). So the One is not a member of the class of beings, i.e., a being, or it would be differentiated from other beings within that totality, and would thus be determinate, finite, and dependent on something else. Therefore, no term can indicate both the One and its products, for the One would then be part of its products and within the totality and differentiated from others within it. In this context we find a reading of "beyond being" that is completely negative in that the One is *not* any being at all. Thus the One does not have a name and this means that it is "*not* a this."

> Since the substance which is generated [from the One] is form... the One must be without form. But if it is without form it is not a substance; for a substance must be some one particular thing, something, that is, defined and limited; but it is impossible to apprehend the One as a particular thing: for then it would not be the principle, but only that particular thing which you said it was. But if all things are in that which is generated [from the One], which of the things in it are you going to say that the One is? Since it is none of them, it can only be said to be beyond them. But since things are beings, and being: so it is beyond being. (V.5.6, 2-11)

In this passage we can see why Plotinus does not want to make the One some kind of being beyond being. To do so would be to make the One determinate and therefore finite. Thus to say "finite being" is redundant and to claim an "infinite being" is a contradiction in terms. So it seems clear that Armstrong is incorrect in positing the One as some kind of "infinite being", which just means a being that is of a different "kind."

Another way to think about the One as "beyond being" and as the source of all that is is to see the One as ontologically prior to being.[46] That is to say, being is in the One as it must be in order to exist at all, i.e., to be, but the One must be distinct from being because it is not exhausted by being. Being as such is exhausted in its determinateness, whereas the One cannot be exhausted. The One cannot have distinctions because it is a completely simple unity, yet being can only be because it is that which is differentiated from the One. Being is the One in a limited way. But being cannot be identical with the One because the One cannot be limited/differentiated in any way.

This seems better and so to say that the One is beyond being is to say that the One is not reducible to the realm of being. Being and the One, however, are not independent from each other as if they were two *things.* Rather the One, as the source of being, is not contained within being because it cannot be contained at all. The One remains "beyond being" because of its priority. The One's *beyondness* is nothing other than the One's being unable to be contained, apprehended, or limited in any way The One is beyond being because it is not reducible to being, yet it is not altogether distinct from being either. It cannot *be*, or being would not be at all. Now that we have some grasp of Plotinus' view of "beyond being," we can consider how the One can also be always present everywhere.

---

[46] This idea was suggested to me by Prof. Spellman in conversation. The notion of ontological priority will come up again in Dionysius the Areopagite when referring to the One as the source of all that is.

## 2.4 Omnipresence

Besides transcendence, Plotinus also claims that the One is immanent, in other words, that it is omnipresent in all the things generated from it. Here are a few passages from the *Enneads.*

> A general opinion affirms that what is one and the same in number is *everywhere present as a whole*, when all men are naturally and spontaneously moved to speak of the god [the One] who is *in* each one of us and the same. (VI.5.1, 1–3) (italics added)[47]

and,

> ...so then being together with all things, we are those; so then, we are all and one. So therefore when we look outside that on which we depend we do not know that we are one, like faces which are many on the outside but have one head inside. But if someone is able to turn around, either by himself of having the good luck to have his hair pulled by Athene herself; at first he will not see as the All but then, when he has nowhere to set himself and limit himself and determine how far he himself goes, he will stop marking himself off from all being and *will come to all the All [the One] without going out anywhere*, but remaining there where the All is set firm. (VI.5.7) (italics added)

In these two passages we find a common thread, the One is everywhere present. Moreover, this presence is the same everywhere, which would follow from the simplicity of the One. Therefore, we have the One which is omnipresent as a "whole." But this may cause us to wonder how can the "whole" of the One be present in everything? This would imply that what we find in anything is the whole One, i.e., not a part of the One. This interpretation, if taken alone, may incline us to conclude that Plotinus is some sort of pantheist. If, however, we take Armstrong's interpretation here, then we might wonder how the One as an infinite being can be present, completely present, everywhere, yet remain a being of a different kind? Finally, one last possibility would be to see

[47] "On The Presence Of Being, One And The Same, Everywhere As A Whole: I"

omnipresence as occurring *within* the One. That is to say, omnipresence is just showing the interconnectedness of everything *within* the One.

In fact, the passage above is from Plotinus' specific treatise, titled, "On the Presence of Being, One and the Same, Everywhere as a Whole" in which he explores the concept of omnipresence in depth. In this treatise Plotinus argues that sensible things are appearances of their source, or cause. In other words, all things are the appearance of the cause *in the* effect. Plotinus refers to these appearances as "images" of being (or intellect).[48]

> The things in matter are images, and the Forms hold the rank of archetypes... But now we must speak more precisely and not assume that the Form is spatially separate and then the Idea is reflected in matter is if in water, but that matter, from every side grasping the Idea, receives from the Form, over the whole of itself, by its drawing near to it all that it can receive, with nothing between. (VI.5.8, 13–21)[49]

Notice that it is one and the same "Form" that is present in all cases, "with nothing between", that is, nothing separating the Form from its sensible appearances. These appearances Plotinus calls "images" of the archetype, which is the Form that is wholly present in each. This Form, however, appears as multiple in its sensible expressions, and these multiple expressions are what "images" are.

> It is not correct to divide that same up into many, but rather to bring back the divided many to the one, and that one has not come to these many, but these because they are scattered have given us the impression that also that has been taken apart, as if one were to divide what controls and holds together into parts equal to what is controlled. (VI.4.7, 4–8)

Plotinus brings the many "images" back to a unity while maintaining that the unity is not to be divided up into "parts." Neither is the unity something that "come[s] to the many." Rather it is

---

[48] V.9.3, 36–37; V.9.5, 18.

[49] "On The Presence Of Being, One And The Same, Everywhere As A Whole: II"

that the many only appear to be distinguished in the sensible: “It is not then divided up into parts, but seems to be so divided to the recipient” (VI.4.14, 13–14).

To divide the One up into parts would mean that only a part of the One is present in the image, but Plotinus is clear that the omnipresence of the One means that the One is completely in each thing. Therefore, it would follow that only the One can be omnipresent because it is not a *being* and thus partless. This is a salient point in analyzing the omnipresence of the One. If the One is a *being*, then it would, according to the Neoplatonic conception, have parts. It would have parts because in order for being *to be* it must be intelligible and contain content. For being to contain content implies multiplicity. Therefore, being, containing parts, is necessarily multiple. If being contains parts, then we might ask how the One can be completely present everywhere? Again, Plotinus’ answer is: only if the One is *not* a being can it be wholly present everywhere. A being, even an *infinite* being, cannot be wholly present without breaking up, as it were. Therefore, it follows that only that which comes *from* the One, being, is that which can be “divided to the recipient.” And being can only be divided in such a way because it requires both a subject and an object in order for there to be intellection. Thus we can see why the One must be “beyond” intellection, because it cannot be broken up into parts, as being can. If the One were content for intellection, then it would no longer be simply One. To be One is to be partless. To be omnipresent is to partless, whereas to be a *being* entails parts. Therefore, Armstrong’s interpretation seems to be at odds with the Neoplatonic idea of omnipresence.

If, for Plotinus, in order to be, something must be united, then all beings are beings by participating in the unity of the One. “But that which comes after the origin [the One] is, somehow, under the pressure of the One, and all things are by participating in the One” (V.5.4,

4). Insofar as it is unified, it is an image of its source. The image is ultimately how the source is understood within a lower ontological realm, while the source remains "above it", ontologically. This account fits with the One as beyond being because the One is that which is common to all beings, which is what makes them be, though it is not itself a being. So "omnipresence" here is the notion that the One is transcendent in not being identical or confined to any being, yet remaining immanent in that it is present to all as that which constitutes their being.

Briefly put, the difficulty with Armstrong's transcendence is that it distinguishes the One from being, i.e., the One as cut off. But I have said that the "otherness" of the One can better be thought of as its ontological priority. To view transcendence as a distinction *within* the One, between that which generates and the generated (images of the One), is what I call *flat* transcendence, and it is perfectly described in the passage from V.2.1.1 which states, "The One is all things and yet not one of them. It is the source of all things, not itself all things, but their transcendent Principle; for in a way they [all things] move *within* the One." Thus in flat transcendence being itself is that which is generated while also remaining *in* the One, as it were.

If the One were completely cut off and distinct from being, then we might conclude that Plotinian metaphysics is some kind of dualism, an infinite being distinct in kind from finite being. However, if the One is not cut off from being and being resides within the One, then we might worry that Plotinian metaphysics is pantheistic. In fact, philosopher Michael Levine, in his book on pantheism, argues that Plotinus is a pantheist because of his identifying the One with everything that is.[50] It is this tension of transcendence that Dionysius will address, I believe, in a more lucid way. Dionysius will show, as I will argue in chapters 4 and 5, that flat transcendence

[50] Levine (1994: 12).

is the better understanding of Neoplatonic metaphysics, including the metaphysics of Plotinus, and that it is not pantheistic.

### 2.5 The One as Described in a *Kataphatic* (Positive) Way

Plotinus has two grounds for making assertions about the One, by comparison and by negation. By "comparison" is to say that which can be positively said about the One by means of analogy, reasoning, metaphor, and even symbol. By "negative" knowledge Plotinus is referring to the limitations of rationality. As we shall see, this negation applies to any designation made about the One, even the designations of "One" and "Good."

In order to understand the One by comparison, we will look at some terms that Plotinus gives to explain the One. While we have already established that the One is completely ineffable, Plotinus, however, does tell us about the One. These descriptions are what we call *kataphatic* or positive statements, and through these it seems we can know *something* about the One. After all, if we are going to have any idea of what the One is, and is not, it seems we are going to have to begin with affirmations of it. Moreover, it seems obvious that there must be something to affirm, or Plotinus would be destined for complete agnosticism and/or skepticism.

A most basic affirmation Plotinus makes of the One is that it is said to be simple. It is simple because it contains only oneness. To have more than oneness implies multiplicity which in turn implies being composite. This simplicity makes it distinct from the intellect; however, the relative simplicity of intellect mirrors that of the One. Anything that is composite, according to Plotinus, is dependent upon its parts, but the One is before all things and all things are dependent

on it. As Plotinus says, “That alone, *simple*, single and pure from which all depends and to which all look and are [exist] and live and think: for it is the cause of life and mind and being.” (I.6.7.7, 910)[51] So the One is the most simple, the most pure, and the most single.[52] To say that the One is simple is in fact to speak a truth about the One using affirmative language. On the other hand, Plotinus is quick to interject that saying the One is “simple” is not to say “anything clear and distinct” about the One (III.8.9, 16–18).[53]

But in order for this One to be completely simple, single, etc., it must also be completely self-sufficient since it is lacking nothing. Consequently, for Plotinus, because of the One’s simplicity it is completely self-sufficient in that it has no “need” for anything outside itself. To be One and to be simple implies no other on which the One depends. Therefore, it is complete as it is requiring nothing in addition to itself.

> He [the One] does not need the things which have come into being, but leaves what has come into being altogether alone, because he needs nothing of it, but is the same as he was before he brought it into being. He would not have cared if it had not come into being. (V.5.12, 40)[54]

Another affirmation Plotinus uses to describe the One is “perfect”, “And all things when they come to perfection produce; the One is always perfect and therefore produces everlastingly; and its product is less than itself.” (V.1.6, 38)[55] Plotinus goes on to say that the One is the most

---

[51] “On Beauty”

[52] Ibid.

[53] “On Nature and Contemplation and the One”

[54] “That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect, and On the Good”; V.4.1, 10–15.

[55] “On the Three Primary Hypostases”

perfect of all things, and always perfect.[56] The One's perfection is seen in its completeness in itself, not lacking anything. Being, as the first other, however, is that which is as close to perfect as a being can be. In other words, being is perfect but not in an absolute sense. Since nothing exists that is like the One, the One is completely alone in the sense that nothing is even comparable to it, including being.

In fact, the One does not move nor is it resting (standing still), but instead, it is the source of all movement and all resting,

> …he is One for he is simple and the first, in that he is the Principle for all things come from him: from him comes the first movement (for it is not in him); from him comes rest, because he had no need of rest: for 'he does not move, nor does he stand still'; for he has no place to stand still in and no place to move in. (V.5.10, 11–13) [57]

Plotinus also describes the One as the measure,

> ….but it [the One] is without need, sufficient to itself, lacking nothing, the measure and bound of all things, giving from itself intellect and real being and soul and life and intellectual activity. (I.8.2, 5)[58]

Plotinus here refers to the One as the measure of all things, but only the ultimate cause of everything can be the measure of everything. The One does not "come into range of number" (V. 5.4, 13) because "who is there to measure it?" (V.5.11, 2–3) Thus though the One is the measure of all things, it itself is unmeasured, or beyond measurement.

---

[56] Ibid.

[57] "That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect, and on the Good"

[58] "On What are and Whence Come Evils"

The One, as seen in emanation, is the cause and/or creator who holds the universe together, "When we say that the universe has always existed before and will always exist, although it has a body, we refer the cause of its everlasting existence to the will of God [the One]." (II.1.1)[59] Therefore, all that is (mind, life, being, etc.) is derived from the One and exists only through it. The One, as the sustainer and source of all that is, is also depicted as "… gentle and kindly and gracious, and present to anyone who wishes."[60] That is to say, all that exists ontologically depends upon the gentleness, kindness, and graciousness of the One. In order for gentleness, kindness, and graciousness to exist at all, it must be the case that the One is the cause or source of those traits. The One, as the source of all that is, is also the sustainer which implies that everything that exists depends for its existence on the One. Nothing is, according to Plotinus, unless the One is both its source and its sustenance.

Along these lines, Plotinus also describes the One as a "Father" to its offspring.[61] This language of offspring is also in Plato, for example, "So let's abandon the quest for what the good itself is for the time being...but I am willing to tell you about what is apparently an *offspring* of the good and most like it... so here then is this *child and offspring* of the good."[62] At times, in fact, Plotinus refers to the intellect, following Plato, as the "son of the Good."[63] The individual soul is also referred to as having a Father in the One. Moreover, according to Plotinus every soul

---

[59] "On Heaven"; also see II.1.4; V.3.15.

[60] V.5.12, 33-35.

[61] V.1.6.

[62] *Republic* 506 d–e. Italics added.

[63] III.8.11; IV.4.9; V.1.11; V.8.10-13. In these passages we find Plotinus emphasizing why there must be a first principle beyond the Intellect. The Intellect is good but it cannot be the ultimate source of goodness, again, due to its multiplicity.

is a descendant from the One (and intellect) and therefore important, by simply being an image of the One. As Plotinus says, "every soul is a child of That Father."[64] Even though the One is beyond being, it still in some sense seems to contain something that allows things to be said about it, in this case, caring as a Father cares for his offspring.

On the other hand, it seems that though Plotinus uses affirmative words to describe the One, these words do not encompass what the One really is. In fact, the One seems to be so completely beyond language, thought, being etc. that nothing could encompass the One, as the One is beyond any predication. But the affirmative descriptions, though not "clear and distinct", still have worth in Plotinus' metaphysics. The words enable us to have some point of contact, though quite dim and rather uncertain, with the ineffable beyondness of the One.

### 2.6 The One as Good and Beautiful

This first principle of Plotinus is, as we have seen, frequently referred to as the Good and the supremely beautiful.[65] Plotinus uses beauty as a reference to indicate how one can ascend towards the supremely beautiful. What Plotinus is referring to with the beautiful is, obviously, the Platonic tradition of ascent to beauty as described in the *Symposium* 210a–211d. The soul moves from an outward appreciation of beauty (namely beautiful bodies) to an inward beauty of soul and character and then proceeds to ascend to Beauty itself (i.e., the great sea of Beauty), and then to the source of Beauty, the One. It is important to remember that although Plotinus does

---

[64] II.9.16, 9.

[65] As in I.6.6: "so for God [the One] the qualities of goodness and beauty are the same, or the realities, the good and beauty."

speak of the One as being the absolute Good and the absolute Beauty, these are not meant to be qualities, as it were, of the One. Plotinus does not want to give qualities to the One because the One is simple (I.6.6, 18–25). But Plotinus does refer to the Good as the Beautiful, and this is seen by the ascent to the Beautiful itself. For example, in I.6.7, Plotinus refers to the Good as that which is beautiful, to those who have seen it. He goes on to state that the soul that sees the beautiful is "…full of wonder and delight, enduring a shock which causes no hurt, loving with true passion and piercing longing" (I.6.7, 15–18).

This beauty, oddly enough, at other times is said to be something inferior to the Good.

> …but if one distinguishes the intelligibles (from the Good) one will say that the place of the Forms is the intelligible beauty, *but the Good is that which is beyond, the "spring and origin" of beauty;* or one will place the Good and the primal beauty on the same level: in any case, however, beauty is in the intelligible world. (I.6.9, 37–40) (italics added)

The Good, for Plotinus, though beautiful, is also referred to as being itself beyond Beauty. Therefore, it seems that the Good and the Beautiful, though sometimes both referring to the same thing, are also not *always* the same in Plotinus, and perhaps we can see why. It seems plausible that the reason that Plotinus is hesitant to assign the Good and the Beautiful as completely identical is because of the existence of beauty in the world that can cause or result in something that takes us away from the Good. In other words, worldly goods can ultimately be a distraction to the soul in seeking to ascend to the One. But Plotinus even goes a step further and also warns the soul of intellectual beauty (V.5.12, 15–16). To see even intellectual beauty "…causes pain," (V.5.12, 17) and the soul continues to long for this Beauty. But the Beauty Plotinus is describing in *Enneads* V is only on the level of the intellect, and so the intellect itself is beautiful

insofar as it the closest image of the One. Therefore, the soul is to seek to ascend beyond Beauty. That is to say, the Beautiful really is not Beautiful unless it is "cast upon the Good" (VI.7.22, 6).[66] The love or desire of beauty, then, is only secondary to a complete desire for the Good.[67]

> ... Beauty is shown to be secondary because this passionate love for it is secondary and is felt by those who are already conscious…. Good itself does not need beauty, though beauty needs the Good. (V.5.12, 19, 34)

The Good, then, is beyond the Beautiful, yet they are both participating in the One.

There are, however, also passages that speak of the absolute Beauty as first, such as *Enneads* VI. 7.

> For love is not limited here, because neither is the beloved, but the love of this would be unbounded; so his [the One's] beauty is of another kind and beauty above beauty. For if it is nothing, what beauty can be? But if it is lovable, it would be the generator of beauty. Therefore, the productive power of all is the flower of beauty, a beauty which makes beauty. (VI.7.32, 29)

The implication here is that Plotinus is asserting the One and the Beautiful as being identical. In these cases though, it seems that Plotinus is thinking of the One with reference to a vision of it. Beauty seems to be the content of desire in vision; therefore, to speak of having a vision of the One, it would seem that it would be best to refer to it as Beautiful. Yet even with this language of the One as being Beautiful, Plotinus is also careful to distinguish the One from Beauty by indicating the One as "Beauty above Beauty" and "beyond Beauty" (VI.7.33, 20). Thus this

---

[66] "How the Multitude of Forms Came into Being, and on the Good"

[67] Carabine (1995: 108).

seems to indicate that the One must in and of itself be completely simple, hence "beyond Beauty."

All this seems to support the claim that though Plotinus is speaking in positive language about the One, he is fundamentally laying a foundation for negation in order that the reader can see that the One is Beautiful yet also, and maybe more importantly, beyond the Beautiful, i.e., not the Beautiful. While the Good does not need the Beautiful, both participate in some sense in the One.

> The cause of the error is that both [the Good and the Beautiful] participate in the same and the One is before both, and that in the higher world also the Good itself does not need beauty, though beauty needs it. (V.5.12, 31)

This passage is very unusual as it also seems to indicate that both the Good and the Beautiful are after the One. When the One is said to be "before both" (referring to the Good and the Beautiful), Plotinus is not ascribing a chronological sequence, but instead, seems to be making a distinction between the Good, the Beautiful and the One. This is a fascinating move as one of the most common themes in Plotinian literature is the idea that the "Good is the One." That is to say, if Plotinus is truly denying the equality of the Good and the One here, then it would seem that while affirming that the Good is the One in many places, he is also, once again, choosing to also affirm the opposite. If the Good is "after" the One, this implies that the One is the first principle and it is not only beyond knowing, beyond being, beyond beauty, but now, even beyond the Good.

The Good, on the other hand, is also seen as the transcendent Good, the source of all goodness, the end (*telos*) which all things desire and that on which all things depend as nothing

can be without it. “The Transcendental Good is Cause of the good in him [humanity]; the fact that It is good is different from the fact that It is present to him” (I.4.4, 20)[68] Also consider, “So we must ascend to the Good, which every soul desires” (I.6.7, 1). Generally the Good seems to be elevated to the same stature as the One only when thought of as identical to the One. But in that case, nothing can be said about the Good, because the Good *is* the One, or so it seems. For example,

> If then one takes away everything and says nothing about him [the One] and does not say falsely about anything that it is with him, he allows him his “existence” without attributing to him anything which is not there….. We also, then, must not add any of the things which are later and lesser, but say that he moves above them and is their cause but not that he is them. For, again, it is the nature of the Good not to be all things and not to be any one of them. (V.5.13, 10–15, 20)

Along with all these descriptions already given, Plotinus also refers to the One (or the Good in this case) as having a free will (VI.8.13, 20–22)[69], being an activity (V.6.6, 1–3)[70], as love, lovable and the lover of Himself (i.e., self–love) (VI.8.15, 1–3), and as all of his effects (VI.8.18). On the other hand, these positive descriptions of the One do relate well to the metaphors involving light that Plotinus gives regarding emanation.[71] After all, the positive descriptions are said to be of the One and they must be true of the One to some degree, because in order to have these descriptions be true of intellect, the One must be the source. That is to say,

---

[68] “On Well–Being”; see also I.7.1; I.8.2; V.5.1 and 12; VI.7.25; VI.8.13.

[69] “On Free Will and the Will of the One”

[70] “On the Fact That That Which is Beyond Being Does Not Think, and on What is the Primary and What the Secondary Thinking Principle” (this activity is the subject of chapter 2).

[71] Plotinus gets the light metaphor from Plato in the *Republic* VI 509b.

everything that exists or is predicated about anything at all must, in some sense, be true of the One as its source. In order for anything to be at all, it must come forth from the One.

Thus anything that is has the mark of the One on it. To say something about the the offspring of the One is also to say something about the One itself. In this qualified sense it seems that everything we can say about the intellect is also true about the One. The One as the source of being therefore must also be, to some degree, what being also is. Everything that being is is what the One also is. As Plotinus says in the metaphor,

> The sun, too, is an example, since it is like a centre in relation to the light which comes from it and depends on it; for the light is everywhere with it and it's not cut off from it; even if you want to cut it off on one side, the light remains with the sun... let it imagine soul as if flowing in from outside, pouring in and entering it everywhere and illuminating it: as the rays of the sun light up a dark cloud, and make it shine and give it a golden look, so soul entering into the body of heaven gives it life and gives it immortality... (I.7.1, 1–50)[72]

With this understanding of the positive or *kataphatic* notion of the One in Plotinus, we still need to see how it fits with the idea of negation.

### 2.7 The One as *Apophatic* (Negative)

The One as negative is a concept that is tied to the idea of the One as positive. Though Plotinus stresses the One as positive so that we can have a vague understanding of it, he also wants to remind us that whatever we say about it, it refuses all conception. When Plotinus refers to the One as the Good, he is making a distinction between a good and the Good. The Good does not possess goodness in itself; instead the Good has "nothing in itself" (V.5.13, 1–2). That is to

[72] "How the Multitude of Forms Came Into Being, and on the Good" Also see VI.9.9.

say, the Good (referring to the One, in this case) does not possess goodness as a predication of the One; instead, the Good is merely meant to be some sort of identification for the One.

> As for the good, if it is the first, the nature which we certainly do call that of the good, of which nothing is predicated, but we call it this because we cannot indicate it in any other way. (VI.2.17, 3–7)[73]

Consequently, the name, the Good, when referring to the One, does not mean that the One is in any way related to a good; the One is the Good which is beyond all things, or to be more precise, it is "more than Good" (VI.9.6, 40).[74]

This beyond Goodness is beyond everything, even existence, because it must be different or above everything that comes from it.

> This raises the other problem, how substance [or being] can come not from substances [but from something which is not substance]. Now it has already been said that what comes into being cannot be the same as that from which it comes. (II.6.1, 50–51)[75]

Being, as such, must come into being (though this should not be understood temporally), and that can only be brought about by the One. Thus, the intellect, as the first act of the One, is that being which can be understood because it is intelligible and real, as Plotinus says, "That Intellect is the first act of the Good and the first substance" (I.8.2, 21–22). This intelligible being, as the perfect being (since it is the first), is not a physical being, yet it *is* in the truest sense. "If, then, there is no before or after about it, but its "is" is the truest thing about it, and itself, and this in the sense

---

[73] "On the Kinds of Being II"

[74] "On the Good or the One"

[75] "On Substance, or On Quality"

that it is by its essence or its life" (III.7.6, 15–19).[76] In another passage Plotinus continues to stress that the One is not to be understood as an *is*; "for it has no need whatsoever even of this" (VI.7.38, 1–2).

Just when it would be reasonable to conclude that Plotinus cannot go any further in negating things about the One, he does so by negating even the term "One", or unity. Plotinus indicates that the use of the term "One" is only meant to indicate its partlessness.

> ….that which is before this Intellect, this marvel of the One, which is not existent, so that 'one' may not here also have to be predicated of something else, which in truth has no fitting name, but if we must give it a name, "one." (VI.9.5, 32–34)

That is to say, the term "One" is meant only to indicate its unity, yet it is not what it *is* (this seems to follow naturally from the idea that the One is not an *is*). The term "One" is the best term to use because it gives the best representation of denying multiplicity.

> But we in our travail do not know what we ought to say, and are speaking of what cannot be spoken, and give it a name because we want to indicate it to ourselves as best we can. Perhaps this name "One"contains the denial of multiplicity. (V.5.6, 27–30)

Once even calling it the One is negated, is all that is left for Plotinus' ontology something that is complete nothingness? In other words, with nothing but complete negation of all the positive statements, then how are we to understand the One? It would seem that for Plotinus the logical conclusion is that the One is not just an infinite thing but *no thing*. Of course, Plotinus does not want to admit that the One ultimately is nothing at all. After all, if the One is nothing, then this would entail that all thought, speech, and even being itself would be completely

[76] "On Eternity and Time"

impossible.[77] The reason Plotinus is negating all these concepts is simply to reinforce the idea that no thought of the One can be grasped. All references to the One, even in a positive sense, are not meant to appeal to our discursive reasoning. For Plotinus, there is a form of thought that is superior to reasoning discursively, that is, the immediate, intuitive, and comprehensive intellection of the intellect. Once one is able to grasp the intellect, then it will become clear that the One is not nothing but instead is that which is unnamable. As Plotinus says, "if there is anything before it, Intellect knows clearly that this is what it derives from" (V.5.2, 15–16). In other words, because there is something that exists (i.e., being), then for Plotinus it means there must be a source of being. And that source must be greater, more unified, more perfect, etc. With this understanding of the positive and the negative in the Plotinian One, let us return to the question of predication.

### 2.8 Armstrong Revisited

For Armstrong, the only way we can conceive of reality as being, having free will, being good, beautiful, etc. is if in fact that One is all of those things. After all, how can we get all these predications unless, in fact, the One *is* all these as their source? In other words, the One is the source of all goodness, beauty, free will, activity, etc., therefore, it seems to follow that the One should be identified with all these conceptions. How do we get goodness if in fact the source doesn't have the attribute of being good? This is precisely what Armstrong is advocating for in his notion of the positive statements of the One. For Armstrong the positive statements about the

[77] see VI.9.13, 44-49.

One are what the One really is. Conversely, the negative statements are only to show that the One is a *being* of a *different kind* than all other beings. Thus Armstrong arrives at his conclusion that the One is an "infinite being."

Armstrong gives a compelling attempt to describe the One; however, it is not clear that this is Plotinus' view. Plotinus' ontology is going to rest on the fundamental concept that the One is beyond all knowing, again, because to know implies multiplicity, a knower and what is known. Therefore, whatever is going to be said by a knower about the known is not going to be accurate regarding the One. Here is a lengthy passage in which Plotinus described how in fact one can be aware of, but not know, the One.

> The perplexity arises especially because our awareness of that One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with outer intelligible things, but by way of a presence superior to knowledge. The soul experiences its falling away from being one and is not altogether one when it has reasoned knowledge of anything; for reasoned knowledge is a rational process, and a rational process is many. The soul therefore goes past the One and falls into number and multiplicity. One must therefore run up above knowledge and in no way depart from being one, but one must depart from knowledge and things known, and from other, even beautiful objects of vision. For every beautiful thing is posterior to that One, and comes from it, as all the light of day comes from the sun. Therefore, Plato says, "it cannot be spoken or written" (*Letter* VII 341C5), but we speak and write impelling towards it and wakening from reasoning to the vision of it, as if showing the way to someone who wants to have a view of something. (VI.9.4, 1–10)

Plotinus is emphasizing how our desires must be toward the One in order for us to come to it. Thus what is important here is that we have the resolve to "see" the One and not to understand it intellectually. This also implies that we have prepared ourselves by being "like" that which we seek. As Plotinus goes on to say:

> For teaching goes as far as the road and the traveling, but the vision is the task of someone who has already resolved to see. But if someone has come to the vision, and his

> soul has experienced and does not have in himself in seeing a kind of passionate experience like that of a lover resting in the beloved, then, having received the true light and illumined his whole soul through drawing nearer, but being still held back in the ascent by a burden which hinders the vision, and having ascended not alone but taking something with him which keeps him from the One, or being not yet brought together into unity– for that One is not absent from any, and absent from all, so that in its presence it is not present except to those who are able and prepared to receive it, so as to be in accord with it and as if to grasp it and touch it in their likeness; and, by the power in oneself akin to that which comes from the One, when someone is as he was when he came from him, he is already able to see as it is the nature of that God to be seen– if then someone is not yet there but is outside because of these impediments, or through lack of a reasoning to guide him and give him assurance about the One, let him blame himself for those hindrances and try to depart from all things and be alone…(VI.9.4, 11–19)

The One, therefore, cannot be known by reasoning. However, we can be made aware of the One by being open and willing to receive its "vision", and this is what gives us assurance of the One even though we cannot "know" the One intellectually. As we have seen, Plotinus does give arguments to support the idea, that there must be a source and that that source must be a complete singularity, but we cannot know what the One *is* in and of itself because there is no content to the One to be known. This explains why Plotinus resorts to metaphors and symbols to communicate that which is ultimately uncommunicable.

We could, as Armstrong and Rist advocate, read Plotinus' ontology as depending on an "infinite Being" that is intelligible but without limits. For Armstrong we need only the positive attributes of the One, and not the negative. While this reading may be in some ways appealing, it seems to go against Plotinus' philosophical concept of being as intelligibility. The difficulty that we find in Plotinus is how to understand a first principle, from which everything is derived, that is everything yet is not everything and in fact *is* not. And we need to know, how can the One *be* "beyond being"? In order to arrive at a better solution to these vexing problems, I believe, we

will need to first turn to Plotinus' theory of emanation in order to grasp how the One "causes" everything else.

**Chapter 3**

## EMANATION AND CONVERSION

The difficulty with trying to grasp Plotinus' theory of emanation is that Plotinus does not give a theory of emanation. Plotinus wants to have a completely simple One as that from which all multiplicity come forth. That which is (being) must come forth, in some way, from the incomprehensible Good/One. This hierarchy of reality Plotinus attempts to elucidate is referred to as emanation, though Plotinus never explicitly called his metaphysics a theory of emanation. Instead, Plotinus uses metaphors to describe the process which philosophers refer to as emanation.

A contemporary Plotinian philosopher Eyjolfur K. Emilsson, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oslo, Norway, has attempted to analytically describe the process of emanation using a theory of double action, which will be explained below. Emilsson is referred to by Robert van de Berg, a contemporary philosopher of late antiquity, as the "leading contemporary Plotinian scholar."[78] Van de Berg believes that Emilsson gives the best explanation of how the intellect can be multiple yet also be the first being.[79]

Though Plotinian philosophers have often asserted the double act in emanation, Emilsson is the first to attempt to give a lucid and detailed account of it.[80] John Bussanich, a prominent

---

[78] Van den Berg (2008: 315).

[79] Ibid.

[80] For example, two of the most prominent contemporary Plotinian philosophers Lloyd (1999: 98) and Gerson (1994: 23–37) have claimed the double act in emanation play a vital role in Plotinian philosophy. Neither, however, gives as an elaborate account as Emilsson.

Plotinian philosopher, for example, has stated that Emilsson "…brings to the task the sensitivity and surehandedness that come only from many years of intimate contact with the *Enneads*", particularly because Plotinus is notoriously obscure in expressing the metaphor of emanation and conversion.[81] Bussanich adds that any student of Plotinus must come to grips with why Plotinus answers difficult metaphysical questions with both "yes" and "no" or in a way "yes," and in another way "no." Sometimes Plotinus says both "yes" and "no" in virtually the same breath. Bussanich expresses the view that Emilsson's double act explanation is very fruitful and an excellent analysis of Plotinus' theory, making sense out of a difficult concept.[82]

So Emilsson's account of the double act is seen in contemporary Plotinian philosophy as the best account of explicating emanation, namely, that a double activity occurs in the genesis of the intellect from the One. I will elucidate Emilsson's understanding of emanation for the purpose of evaluating whether or not we can come to any coherent distinctions within the Plotinian hierarchy. The attempt here of distinguishing among the hypostases of Plotinus is imperative for us as we evaluate the claims that Neoplatonic metaphysics are theistic, pantheistic, or even dualistic, because the distinction between the One and the intellect can potentially help to elucidate the tensions that we have already discovered.

### 3.2 Metaphors

Plotinus gives a very telling description, albeit metaphorically, of this process of emanation when he states,

---

[81] Bussanich (2008: 439).

[82] Emilsson (2007: 25).

> This, we may say, is the first act of generation: the One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, *overflows*, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself. This, when it has come into being, turns back upon the One and is filled and becomes Intellect by looking towards it. Its halt and turning towards the One constitutes being, its gaze upon the One, Intellect. Since it halts and turns towards the One that it may see, it becomes at once Intellect and Being. Resembling the One thus, Intellect produces in the same way, pouring forth a multiple power–---his is a likeness of it--just as that which was before it poured it forth. This *activity* springing from the substance of Intellect is Soul, which comes to be this while Intellect abides unchanged: for Intellect too comes into being while that which is before it abides unchanged. (V.2.1, 7–18)[83] [italics added]

The passage above is one of the most succinct accounts given in the *Enneads* of the generation of the intellect from the One. Of course, the intellect, as we see here, is derived from the One by an activity, as is everything that exists. According to Emilsson, this activity entails two distinct acts, which are not mentioned here: internal and external.[84] The external act is generally described by metaphors, such as "overflowing", and it is the initial step in the formation of the intellect. The consequence of the external act is often referred to as the "inchoate" or potential intellect until it is fully realized intellect proper.[85] Intellect proper does not come about until the conversion of the inchoate intellect towards the One. Conversion is also referred to by metaphors, such as the inchoate's "looking" back and being "filled" by the One. Once the intellect is "filled", it is no longer potential and becomes actual or realized intellect. The actual intellect is identified as the "sphere of being" and is equated to the sphere of Platonic Forms.[86]

---

[83] "On the Origin and Order of the Beings Which Come After the First"

[84] Emilsson (2007:22).

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid. 23.

The emanation of the intellect as described above is merely a quick explanation of a very complicated philosophical concept. Of course, many difficulties and questions must be addressed in order to rightly understand the metaphysical distinction, or apparent distinction, between the One and the intellect. First, we have yet to address this idea of an internal activity. How does the internal activity also produce an external? Furthermore, why do the double activity and conversion occur together? Is conversion something new and distinct, or is it merely a logical sequence taking place from the internal act? Questions like these will need to be answered in order for us to come to some philosophical understanding of Plotinus' metaphysics and how we understand the One as "beyond being."

As we have seen, Plotinus uses metaphorical language as he attempts to describe that which is beyond description. In fact, Plotinus gives various metaphors in order for us to have a picture of this account. Here is an example of the perfect generation in emanation:

> All things which exist, as long as they remain in being, necessarily produce from their own substances, in dependence on their present power, a surrounding reality directed to what is outside them, a kind of image of the archetypes from which it was produced: fire produces the heat which comes from it; snow does not only keep its cold inside itself. Perfumed things show this particularly clearly. As long as they exist, something is diffused from themselves around them, and what is near them enjoys their existence.(1.6, 34–38)

This passage alludes to Plato's famous account in the *Timaeus* 29e, in which it is said that things come to be because they must be like their source, i.e., they are images of their source. Plato says, "…why did he who framed this whole universe of becoming frame it? … He was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible. In fact, men of wisdom will tell you

that this, more than anything else, was the most preeminent reason for the origin of the world's coming to be." Another example of a metaphor of illumination is as follows:

> So if there is a second after the One it must have come to be without the One moving at all, without any inclination or act of will or any sort of activity in its own part. How did it [intellect] come to be then, and what are we to think of as surrounding the One in its repose? It must be a radiation from it while it remains unchanged, like the bright light of the sun which, so to speak, runs around it, springing from it continually while it remains unchanged. (V.1.6, 28–31)

And,

> For at what is it to aim, as if it was missing something? If we are to make a rational statement, we shall state that the first activity, which, so to speak, flows from it like a light from the sun, is Intellect, and the whole intelligible nature, but that he himself, staying still at the summit of the intelligible, rules over it; he does not thrust the outshining away from himself–or we shall make another light before light--but he irradiates forever, abiding unchanged over the intelligible. (V.3.12, 38–45)[87]

Because of Plotinus' elusive language in describing the generation of the intellect, it has been very difficult to reconstruct an accurate, lucid description. Moreover, as Emilsson points out, the language used by Plotinus here seems to suggest a temporal process with a beginning and end.[88] One difficulty here is that what the metaphors are meant to describe what occurs prior to the emergence of time, which happens only at the level of soul. Therefore, any happenings during this stage of emanation cannot involve temporal procession, yet Plotinus nonetheless uses the language of events.[89] This last problem regarding temporal language in Plotinus cannot be addressed adequately because we have no other language but temporal discursive language

---

[87] "On the Knowing Hypostases and That Which is Beyond"

[88] Emilsson (2007:24).

[89] Ibid.

which implies a sequence of events.[90] The other difficulties, however, Emilsson will attempt to answer by means of his double act theory, to which we now turn.

### 3.3 Double Activity

Plotinus describes the internal and external activity coming from the One in another lengthy passage.

> But, how, when that abides unchanged, does Intellect come into being? In each and every thing there is an activity which belongs to substance and one which goes out from substance; and that which belongs to substance is the active actuality which is each particular thing, and the other activity derives from that first one, and must in everything be a consequence of it, different from the thing itself: as in fire there is a heat which is the content of its substance, and another which comes into being from that primary heat when fire exercises the activity which is native to its substance in abiding unchanged as fire. So it is also in the higher world; and much more so there, while the Principle abides 'in its own proper way of life', the activity generated from the perfection in it and its coexistent activity acquires substantial existence, since it comes from a great power, the greatest indeed of all, and arrives at being and substance: for that Principle is beyond Being. (V.2.2, 21–37)

To begin looking at this passage, we find that in each thing the activity is what constitutes it, which is to say, its activity completes what it is. In other words, it seems that the internal activity is fundamentally the essence of whatever it is. Subsequently, an external activity comes from each and every internal activity. This external activity becomes, ontologically, the next stage below in the hierarchy and is brought into completion by a "conversion" towards its source.[91] This conversion, as Emilsson understands it, becomes the internal activity of the following level in the ontological hierarchy.[92] The sense of this internal-external activity

---

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

continues until matter is brought into being which in turn is too weak to continue the activity. Another way to see the culmination in matter is to see the multiplicity of reality as reaching its limit of dispersion and thus unable to multiply further. Therefore, matter is the lowest level in the hierarchy and does not have an external act, which implies it is the only level that is without both activities. Emilsson believes that these internal and external activities are the fundamental component to Plotinian metaphysics.[93]

Plotinus uses fire here as an analogy of the internal and external acts. The internal act represents the heat itself (in the fire), whereas the external act represents the heat that surrounds the fire. Plotinus also makes the same point with cold and smell (perfume). While his claim may be right or wrong scientifically, Plotinus is not primarily concerned with elucidating sensible phenomena. The important quality here is that the physical phenomena are meant to provide a picture of an ontological reality.

In other passages Plotinus says that the external act is not "cut off" from the internal. For example,

> The sun, too, is an example since it is like a centre in relation to the light which comes from it and depends on it; for the light is everywhere with it and is not *cut off from it*; even if you want to cut it off on the one side, the light remains with the sun. (I.7.1, 27)[94] [italics added]

The external act depends completely on the internal act. If the internal act does not continue to be what it is, the external act cannot itself be. Consider, for example, a mirror. If the object is removed, the mirrored image is "cut-off" from its source and ceases to exist. The external act is thus an image of the internal. The intellect, for example, is to be seen as an image and

---

[93] Ibid., p. 27.

[94] I.7.1, 27. Also see V.2.1, 13-22; V.3.12, 44; VI.2.22, 33-35; VI.4.3, 8-10; VI.4.9-10.

representation of the One. This idea of an essence and its image certainly comes from the Platonic tradition, and it should not surprise us to see it in Plotinus. As Plotinus says,

> … just as the image of something, like the weaker light, if cut off from that which it is, would no longer exist, and in general one cannot cut off and make exist separately anything at all which derives its existence from something else and is its image, these powers also which came from that first could not exist cut off from it. But if this is so, that from which they derived will be there simultaneously where they are, so that again it will be present itself everywhere all at once undivided as a whole. (VI.4.9, 36–40)

The external image can be compared to a mirror in that the mirror image does not have any effect on the the thing itself (i.e., the internal act). The internal act is not changed by the external act.[95] The internal remains or abides the way it is. The unchanging nature here can be seen clearly by the self–containment of the internal act.[96] The distinction here is quite important; the internal act is completely self–contained whereas the external act is completely other-directed, toward the internal, as it were. As Plotinus explains,

> But peace and quiet for Intellect is not going out of Intellect, but the peace and quiet of Intellect is an activity taking its rest from other activities, since for other beings also, which are left in peace and quiet by other things, there remains their own proper activity, above all for those whose being is not potential but actual. The being, therefore, is activity, and there is nothing to which the activity is directed; so it is self-directed… For it had to be first in itself, then also directed to something else, or with something else coming from it made like itself, just as in the case of fire it is because it is previously fire in itself, and has the activity of fire that it is able to produce a trace of itself in another. (V. 3.7, 13–25)

---

[95] Emilsson (2007: 28).

[96] Ibid.

Of course the self-containment here does not imply that the internal act cannot affect something external.[97] Instead, the significance of the passage shows us that just by the internal act being "in itself", the external is the effect of what the internal *is*.

### 3.4 Activity or Activities?

A reasonable first assumption is that both acts are different events in which the first (the internal) act issues a new and different (external) event. (It is important to remember here that though language implies a sequence of events temporally, Plotinus is explicit that the three levels of the hypostases are atemporal and, therefore, he uses language to imply a logical rather than temporal sequential relation.) But, we might ask, even so, should we view these activities as different events as such?

We first must admit that Plotinus states explicitly that the two acts are different events. In another very important passage for emanation, for example, Plotinus elucidates the internal act:

> When, therefore, the Intelligible abides "in its own proper way of life", that which comes into being does come into being from it, but from it as it abides unchanged. Since, therefore, it abides as Intelligible, what comes into being does so as thinking; and since it is thinking and thinks that from which it came–for it has nothing else–it becomes Intellect, like another intelligible and like that Principle, a representation and image of it. But how, when that abides unchanged, does Intellect come into being? In each and every thing there is an activity which belongs to substance and one which goes out from substance; and that which belongs to substance is the active actuality which is each particular thing, and *the other activity derives from that first one, and must in everything be a consequence of it, different from the thing itself*: as in fire there is a heat which is the content of its substance, and another which comes into being from that primary heat when fire exercises the activity which is native to its substance in abiding unchanged as fire. So it is also in the higher world; and much more so there, while the Principle abides 'in its own proper way of life', the activity generated from the perfection in it and its coexistent activity acquires substantial existence, since it comes from a great power, the

[97] Emilsson (2007: 29).

> greatest indeed of all, and arrives at being and substance: for that Principle is "beyond being". (V.4.2, 27–39) [emphasis added]

There is much in this passage to help in our understanding of emanation; however, for our purposes here let us note the external act (intellect) is "different from the thing itself." Therefore, Plotinus seems to be indicating how the external act is a separate event from the internal. Or consider Plotinus' emanative metaphors, such as flowing water, emanating light, heat, cold, or smell, in each case there are two separate phenomena, the source and what issues from it.[98] Emilsson argues, however, even in considering this explicit passage, we do not need to assume that the internal and external acts are separate events in which the internal is accomplished and then through an "extra effort" the external is accomplished, a second, new act.[99]

Emilsson cites the following passages:

> For when it [Intellect] is active in itself, the products of its activity are the other intellects, but when it acts outside itself, the result is Soul. And since Soul acts as genus or specific form, the other souls act as specific forms. Also the activities of these are *double*. (VI. 2.22, 26–29)[100] (italics added)

And,

> But it is false to say that the image is unlike the original; for nothing has been left out which it was possible for a fine natural image to have. The image has to exist, necessarily, not as the result of thought and contrivance; the intelligible could not be the last, for it had to have a *double activity*, one in itself and one directed to something else. There had, then, to be something after it, for only that which is the most powerless of all things has nothing below it. (II.9.8, 20–25)[101] (italics added)

---

[98] Emilsson (2007: 31). These references are taken from V.I.3, 5-10; V.4.2 25-26; VI.7.18, 2-8.

[99] Ibid.

[100] "On the Kinds of Being II"

[101] "Against the Gnostics"

Emilsson stresses that in the passages above Plotinus unequivocally asserts a "double activity" as opposed to two activities.[102] That is to say, instead of having two separate acts occurring as two events, Emilsson believes there is one activity that has two sides, as it were. The two sides of the activity are the activity in and of itself (internal) and the activity in relation to an external.[103] Of course, Emilsson readily admits that this two–sided activity does not answer the difficulty of the internal being self-contained. To adequately account for how the double act can explain Plotinus' metaphysics, Emilsson believes looking into the notion of events will help elucidate this problem. For example, is a walker's walking on the beach the same act as his making a trace in the sand? Emilsson advocates turning to contemporary action theory to come to a better understanding of what Plotinus has in mind in the double act.

### 3.5 Walking and Making a Trace

Emilsson points out that in contemporary philosophy of action, philosopher Donald Davidson would propose that X (walking) and Y (making a trace in the sand) are one act, having an identical cause and effect.[104] Davidson gives an account of this single act by stating,

> I flip the switch, turn on the light, illuminate the room, unbeknownst to me I also alert a prowler to the fact that I am home. Here I do not do four distinct things but only one, of which the four descriptions are given.[105]

---

[102] Emilsson (2007: 32).

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Davidson (1980: 179).

For Davidson, to use Emilsson's analogy, the walking and the trace-making are the same event because they have the same causes and effects.[106] Emilsson contrasts this view with Alvin Goldman on the other hand, who asserts, to use Emilsson's example again, that it is two acts because walking and making a trace are not synonymous. Walking and trace-making are two different events.[107] Goldman argues,

> If X and Y are an identical act then they must have all the same properties. But, clearly the properties of X are different than the properties of Y, thus they are two acts.[108]

Emilsson proceeds to propose a third possible view, that of David Charles, according to whom Aristotle provides a theory that is actually a way between these two positions of Davidson and Goldman.[109] According to Charles, Aristotle indicates that an action can be described in semantically different ways, which implies that an action does not depend upon the language that is used to describe it.[110] Therefore, walking and making a trace can in fact be one and the same action altogether. But, according to Charles, Aristotle argues that actions do indeed have an essence, and "that essence is determined by the nature of the being that initiates it."[111] That is to say, an agent has certain capacities that can be actualized, and some actions are the actualization of these capacities.[112] Moreover, two descriptions can describe one and the same action if they

---

[106] Emilsson (2007: 33).

[107] Ibid.

[108] Goldman (1970: 2).

[109] Charles (1984: 32).

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Emilsson (2007: 33).

are true descriptions of the "actualization of the same capacity." For Plotinus, like Aristotle, Emilsson proposes, there can be two descriptions of the same action. As we have seen in Aristotle, an action has an essence and that essence is determined by the actualizing of a capacity of the agent who initiates the act. Thus in Plotinus, according to Emilsson, the internal and external acts involve the same agent. The essence of the act is the internal activity (the One), whereas the consequence of the internal activity becomes the external activity (intellect or being).

Continuing with this Aristotelian concept of action, Plotinus in *Enneads* VI.1 and VI.3 provides an account of motion and activity which Emilsson believes illuminates his double action theory.[113] Aristotle distinguishes between complete and incomplete activities (actions being complete, motion being incomplete).[114] Complete activities are things such as seeing and understanding, as they constitute completed actions.[115] That is to say, a completed activity occurs whenever one is engaged in the activity. To use the example, to see or to understand is to have seen or understood. Motions, on the other hand, have to do with things that are in the process of being completed, such as for example, the process of building a house. That is, for Aristotle there is motion until the house is complete, but once the house is complete, there is no longer any motion. It seems that for Aristotle, seeing and understanding do not have motion and do not involve a sequence of events because they are complete activities, i.e. actions that are complete instantaneously, and therefore in this sense of lacking duration do not occur in (over) time.

---

[113] Ibid.

[114] *Phys.* III, 201b 31-32.

[115] Ibid.

Whereas in building a house there is a process in time that involves motion, because it is incomplete.

Plotinus, however, does not agree with Aristotle's distinction between complete and incomplete activities, where incomplete activities are motions. Instead, Plotinus argues that (i) motions are not incomplete as Aristotle claims, and (ii) actions, such as seeing and living are just as much in time as motions (incomplete activities) are. Plotinus argues,

> But if someone were to say that movement was an incomplete active actuality, nothing would prevent us from giving active actuality the priority and subordinating movement to it as a species as being incomplete, making its category active actuality, but adding the "incomplete". For the incomplete is said about it, not because it is not also active actuality, but it is altogether active actuality, *and it also has the "over and over again" not that it may arrive at active actuality--it is already that, but that it may do something, which is another thing subsequent of itself*…. Walking, for instance, was walking from the beginning…. For certainly the man who is in motion has already moved, and the man who is cutting, cut already. And just as what is called active actuality does not need time, so neither does movement. (VI.1.16, 1–6,9,15–17) (emphasis added)

For Plotinus, (i) walking is a complete activity any moment it occurs and not just when there is a desired end that is obtained. In other words, the goal or end (*telos*) is not required for the completion of the motion, as it is to Aristotle. The extent of the motion, therefore, becomes subsequent or different from the motion itself. Motions for Plotinus simply are actions. That is to say, at each motion or movement the activity of walking is completed without there being a particular end (*telos*) or completion of the movement.

Regarding the issue of time, (ii) for Aristotle an activity (complete) occurs in a timeless fashion because once one begins to see, for example, one is already in the state of having seen; it is complete. Thus, the activity is "timeless", which is just to say that once the event occurs it

does not need more time to be completed. There is no time in which the activity is in the making. Plotinus takes this point about timelessness and simply applies it to motion as well. So in the motion/activity of walking there is no extension in time. The activity (or movement) is such that at each moment it is fully complete; it just occurs again and again.[116] Applied to Plotinus' internal and external acts, what this means is that at the moment of the action both internal and external are completed simultaneously, and both are considered to be pure motion or activity.

In VI.1 and 3, Plotinus refers to "absolute motions." Motion is "either to have in oneself absolute motion which comes from oneself or a motion which starts in oneself and ends in another" (VI.1.22, 3–5). Absolute motion, for Plotinus, is an intransitive action, which means it does not require an outside object onto which the action is done. Actions such as walking are intransitive, according to Plotinus. As he says,

> Let us grant that movement, to describe it sketchily, is the passage from potentiality to that which it is said to be the potentiality for. For one thing is potential because it can arrive at a particular form, potentially a statue for instance, and another because it can arrive at an activity, the activity of walking for instance, and when one progresses to a statue, its progress is movement, and when the other is engaged in walking, the walking itself is movement. (VI.3.22, 9–12)[117]

Aristotle, on the other hand, holds that any motion involves both an agent and a patient.Thus, anything that is moved must be moved by something else. One cannot move even oneself without an agent and patient. For Aristotle, in order to have self-motion, one part must remain unmoved (the agent) which moves a different part (the patient).[118]

---

[116] Emilsson (2007: 35).

[117] "On the Kinds of Being III"

[118] *Phys*. 3.22, 9-12.

So Plotinus argues that absolute motions do not need to be completed in something outside the agent.[119] For example, walking occurs when something on the inside (namely, the individual soul) is moving the feet regardless of the effect on the outside (to use Emilsson's example again, the trace in the sand). Critical to Plotinus' concept of internal activity is that absolute motions do not imply any relation to other things. Internal acts then, seem to be absolute motions in and of themselves, and do *not* need a "patient" (something on the outside), as it were, in order for there to be activity. The internal act is, therefore, "self motion," with no patient, to use Aristotle's language.

### 3.6 The Application to the Plotinian Hierarchy

But if the double act does not need an "other", then this helps to elucidate how in fact we can have something that is completely unitary  cause multiplicity. For Aristotle, as we have seen, there must be a duality in order to have motion, but for Plotinus this is not the case. Thus in Aristotle' metaphysics the intellect (the Unmoved Mover) is the first principle, whereas for Plotinus, the One, as completely singular, can be the first principle from which multiplicity comes.

We have seen that an absolute activity, according to Plotinus, is self-contained. So for example, if a walker makes a trace, the making of a trace is not part of walking. The activity itself is not defined by that result because the trace is unintended for walking; it is an incidental

[119] Emilsson (2007: 40).

action.[120] More generally, in the internal act, the external is not an intended result, and because the external act is not part of the intention of the internal act, the internal is self–contained. Nevertheless, if one were to ask whether or not all activities are in fact producing or affecting something else, it seems that for Plotinus, the answer is, yes. Plotinus claims that there is an internal and external act in "each and every thing." Therefore, all activities do have an effect on something else, but again, the important component is that the internal act does not intend the external. To use the example again, the walking (the walker) does not intend the tracing. The internal act is absolute, independent both ontologically and epistemologically, "taking leave of all other activities."[121]

In the *Enneads* the word "trace" is an image and it is used to describe external acts of hypostases.[122] For example, the intellect contains a trace of the One.

> For Intellect needs the Good, but the Good does not need it; hence too, when it attains the Good it becomes conformed to the Good and is completed by the Good, since the form which comes upon it from the Good conforms it to the Good. A trace of the Good is seen in it, and it is in the likeness of this that one should conceive its true archetype, forming an idea of it in oneself from the trace of it which plays upon Intellect. The Good, therefore has given the trace of itself on Intellect to Intellect to have by seeing, so that in Intellect there is desire, and it is always desiring and always attaining, but the Good is not desiring--for what could it desire? (III.8.11, 19–25)[123]

Soul is the trace of intellect.

---

[120] Emilsson (2007:44).

[121] Ibid. 49.

[122] Ibid.

[123] See also V.5.5, 13-14; VI. 7.17, 13-14; VI.7.18, 15.

> And the offspring of Intellect is a rational form and an existing being, that which thinks discursively; it is this which moves round Intellect and is light and trace of Intellect and dependent upon it…(V.1.7, 44)[124]

And the sensible form is a trace of the intelligible form. "When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows, and hurry away to that which they image" (I.6.8, 7).[125] Thus the external can be understood as an image of the internal. Just as "leaving a trace" in the sand is not necessary for walking, so here too the external act of "trace-making" is incidental.[126]

In summary, for Plotinus the external act is a result of the internal act and is a necessary consequence of the activity. Furthermore, this external act is said to be an image of the One:

> How did we come to be then, and what are we to think of as surrounding the One in its repose? It must be a radiation from it while it remains unchanged, like the bright light from the sun which, so to speak, runs round it, springing from it continually while it remains unchanged. All things which exist, as long as they remain in being, necessarily produce from their own substances, in dependence on their present power, a surrounding reality directed toward what is outside them, a kind of image of the archetype from which it is produced: fire produces the heat which comes from it. (V.1.6, 28–33)[127]

The generation of the intellect occurs by emanation, which is a double act both internal and external, which is in each and every hypostasis. The internal act is self–contained; however, it produces an external as an offspring. This external becomes complete only when it converts back

---

[124] See also VI.7.20, 12.

[125] See also II.6.3, 18.

[126] Emilsson (2007: 47). Notice that the absolute activity is not done for external results; in *this* sense there is no teleology in Plotinus' system.

[127] See also V.2.1, 15-21; V.3.7, 23-24; IV.5.7, 16-18.

to its source (i.e., conversion, which we will address in 3.7). This conversion is what causes or begins, as it were, the next internal activity, which is also accompanied by a new external and so on. This internal-external process continues to take place until matter is reached. Matter has become too weak to contain either an internal or external act; it contains no external act because there is no longer room for dispersion and thus no internal act either.

What we have seen is that the internal and external act pervade Plotinus' metaphysics. We can see here how Plotinus is working within a Platonic system in constructing a hierarchy of reality and images of that reality. The external act is not to be thought of as something that is "cut off" from the internal act. As Plotinus states,

> The sun, too, is an example, since it is like a centre in relation to the light which comes from it and depends on it; for the light is everywhere with it and is not cut off from it; even if you want to cut it off on one side, the light remains with the sun. (I.7.1, 27)[128]

And here,

> Resembling the One thus, Intellect produces in the same way, pouring forth a multiple power--this is a likeness of it--just as that which was before it poured it forth. This activity springing from the substance of Intellect, is Soul, which comes to be this while Intellect abides unchanged. But Soul does not abide unchanged when it produces: it is moved and so brings forth an image. It looks to its source and is filled, and going forth to another opposed movement generates its own image, which is sensation and the principle of growth in plants. Nothing is separated or cut off from that which is before it. (V.2.1, 13–22)[129]

The external act, thus, depends on the internal. As a reflection ceases to be if the object causing the image ceases to be, so does the external without the internal. On the other hand, the internal

---

[128] "On the Primal Good and the Other Goods"

[129] See also V.3.12, 44; VI.2.22, 33-5; VI.4.3, 8-10; VI.4.9-10.

activity is not to be considered as "changed" by the production of the external image because, once again, the internal is an act that is self-contained. This "self directed" activity is to be contrasted with the external, as the external is acting towards its source. Plotinus refers to this self- containing in the internal as "peace and quiet", though it is not to be confused with inactivity.[130]

Since the external act depends on the internal act in such a way as to not be two separate acts, then we can see how the double act theory fits well with flat transcendence. In flat transcendence we see that the One and being are not two distinct *things*. Rather being is that which is *within* the One. The internal act is the One as source or cause of the external act, being. Conversely, for Armstrong the One is an infinite being that is "cut off" from everything else in that it is a being of a different kind. To make this distinction between an infinite being and finite being(s) would seem to imply that there are two acts in emanation; first, the One, being what it is (an infinite being), and second, finite being as it comes to be. After all, Armstrong is unequivocally clear that he cannot make sense out of Plotinus' theory of emanation.[131] If Armstrong's analysis of Plotinus' metaphysics, that for Plotinus there is an infinite being beyond being, cannot give an account for emanation, then it seems that Armstrong does not have a satisfactory understanding of Plotinus' ontology. This may explain why Armstrong concludes that Plotinus' greatest achievement in the history of Western philosophy is that he is full of contradictions.[132] That is to say, Armstrong does not think that Plotinus' philosophy can

---

[130] Ibid.

[131] Armstrong (1940: 142).

[132] Ibid.

coherently explicate a theory of emanation along with a satisfactory explanation of the One and being.

### 3.7 The Life of the Intellect

If the One is "thought that transcends thought" (VI.8.16, 32)[133], then presumably thought would be the closest thing to being what the One is. Therefore, the intellect, as the first thing to come forth from the One ontologically, must be that which is most like the One, or that which mirrors the One most closely. The intellect is the closest multiple that there can be to the unified One.

Although Plotinus also applies both activity and a kind of will to the One, he states that this is not meant to be literal. For example, he says, "….its [the One's] comprehension of itself is itself a kind of self-consciousness in everlasting rest and in a manner of thinking different from the thinking of Intellect" (V.4.2, 15). The One then, it seems, is not void of a mental life; it possesses it, but not in the way humans or even intellect itself has a mental life. For humans, mental attributes are incomplete and diverse, whereas for the One all is simple and free from this limitation of diversity. Even the intellect is in some way limited and therefore not free from diversity, though the intellect's mental life is distinct from that of humans as well. But, for Plotinus we must remember that in referencing the One, as we are doing here, we are speaking about positive (*kataphatic*) language. Thus as with anything that we assert about the One it is also true to say the One does not think. But in the case of the One we need this concept of "thought," however, if we are going to understand emanation and the generation of the intellect.

---

[133] "On Free Will and the Will of the One"

If we do not have thought, in the intellect, then according to Greek philosophy we do not have being. Thus to have being, existence, or reality, for Greek philosophy, means that we must also have thought.

As we have already seen, the intellect is the first to come forth, as it were, from the One because it is the most like the One. Therefore, whatever we say about the intellect is the closest we can come to actually saying something about the One. But, at the end of the day, we must remember that whatever we say about the One is still not what the One *is*. The One, as we have seen, is not only referred to as thought, but is also referred to as the Good; this is significant because the Good is totally self-sufficient. Plotinus takes the idea of the Good as being self-sufficient from Plato, where Plato describes the Good as that to which all beings aspire and as the perfect end sought by all. Plotinus believes that Plato's references to the Good in the *Republic* and to the One in the *Parmenides* occupy the same place at the top of the Platonic hierarchy. In coming after the One, the intellect is not complete and self-sufficient; it is, as it were, in need. The One is that completeness; it is that to which all things aspire. So all desire this Good as a *telos* or final cause. Only the One can be self-sufficient, which therefore implies that nothing else can ever arrive at this complete Oneness and simplicity. The significance here is that beings whose natures are in need cannot completely achieve their desire. This lacking in being follows because if the intellect *is* then it can never *be* the One as such. Nonetheless, what the intellect lacks, namely, the One, it desires.

This is the reason for conversion, this seeking for, or desiring, completeness in the Good/One. The intellect seeks to attain this Good by knowing it. "Again, Intellect is something other

than the Good [One]; for it has the form of the Good by thinking the Good" (V.6.4, 5–6).[134] Conversion then, at this level, is the inchoate intellect's longing/desiring the One, in a subject-object distinct way. The desired object, or as Emilsson puts it, the "intended object", is the One, whereas the object as it appears to the intellect is the intentional object.[135] The inchoate intends to grasp the One, but since it cannot, it settles for second best, and grasps the closest thing to the One, namely, an image of the One (i.e., itself). Though the *intended* object is the One, it is the *intentional* object (the intellect "after" conversion) that really is the object that the subject achieves.

This emergence of the intellect from the One means that the intellect has a need that is different from itself. The desired end is the One, the *intended* object of the subject. But the difficulty of discussing the subject's desiring the object is that both the subject and the object are atemporal. Thus the nontemporality of the intellect indicates that the intellect *always* has an object. The intellect is constantly directed towards the One, always desiring the One, but always only grasping itself, the intelligibles "after" conversion. This makes the intellect "after" conversion the actual intentional object, or we might say, fully intellect (no longer "inchoate").

This atemporality elucidates why there is no such thing as a pure inchoate intellect which has not already converted. That is to say, mythologically, the intellect proceeds from the One facing it, as if it were backing out of the One. As Plotinus states,

> What is it then, which we shall receive when we set our intellect to it? Rather, the intellect must return, so to speak, backwards, and give itself up, in a way, to what lies behind it (for it faces in both directions); and there, if it wishes to see that First Principle, it must not be altogether intellect. (III. 8.9, 29-31)

---

[134] See also V.6.5, 10.

[135] Emilsson (2007: 73).

Plotinus believes that that which is distanced from the One seeks and desires the One, although it can only get a substitute, or an appearance of the One, not the actual One itself. If this is the case, then why does Plotinus say that the inchoate intellect "sees the One" (V.1.6, 41)[136] if he really thinks what it sees is an image? The answer is that for Plotinus, any seeing is already in a sense seeing an image of an object. When Plotinus uses the language of vision here, he intends it (of course) as a metaphor. All seeing of the One, therefore, is of the One but only as an image, such as in a mirror. Therefore, according to Emilsson, "seeing the One" and "seeing an image of the One" are not different.[137] Instead, when we see the One, we are really seeing an image and not the One in and of itself. The One, because it is beyond being, cannot be seen in any sense because it has no ontological category. That is to say, the One is such that any categories applied to the One ultimately fail, as we have already seen. Thus any statements made by Plotinus about seeing the One cannot mean seeing the One as it really *is*.

Furthermore, since the One is also unknowable, seeing the image of the One cannot constitute knowledge of the One in itself. To know something as it is in itself implies for Plotinus knowing it from an internal point of view, or to know it from its internal activity (or being it).[138] This would mean that to know the One would be to be identical with the One. Though the One seems to have some sort of psychological aspect to it, it is not that of thought or knowledge as exists in the case of the intellect. Since the source of the intellect is the One, then anything we say about the intellect is also true about the One. But we must remember that anything we say

---

[136] See also V.3.10.

[137] We will return to this notion of image in chapter 5.

[138] Emilsson (2007: 78).

about the intellect is also not true about the One. Again, knowledge here would mean that the One could be known from the internal point of view, which would require being internal to the One, i.e., being the One.[139] Intellect cannot capture this because it cannot have thought about the One as it is in itself. Moreover, to say that the One has some sort of a psychological aspect is not to predicate anything about it. Instead, as we noted above, for the intellect to be the image of the One, it must be imaging something about the One, even though the One is certainly "beyond" any grasp.

The distinctness between the One and the inchoate intellect occurs upon conversion, in which there is a distinct subject and object, the intellect and that which it knows (an image of the One), which is also the intellect's apprehension of itself.[140] This is what Plotinus refers to as the first duality.

> For this reason Intellect is not simple but many; it manifests a composite, of course an intelligible one that already sees many things. It is, certainly, also an intelligible, but it thinks as well; so it is already two. And it is also a different intelligible by being posterior to the One itself. (V.4.2, 11-12)[141]

This duality develops because intellect is attempting to think about the One. But it cannot and thus it thinks about the closest thing to the One, to be as close as possible, as it were. Consequently, as the intellect is attempting to think about the One, it naturally comes to think about that which is most like the One, which is, of course, itself, and thus apprehends itself as a

---

[139] This applies for the individual soul as well; the soul apprehends only an image of the intellect, and not the intellect itself. To a soul, the intellect is unknowable in the same way the One is unknowable to the intellect. But the difference is that the intellect can become knowable for the soul, whereas the One cannot become knowable for the intellect because there is no knowing in the One.

[140] Emilsson (2007: 79).

[141] See also III.8.9, 5-12; V.6.1, 7; 5, 10.

plurality. But this raises a problem for Plotinus, namely, why must the first being be a plurality, if, in fact, the first being is that which is most like the One (which is completely simple)? The answer is that the intellect already is unified (as much as it can be) as the first hypostasis from the One. If the intellect were to become more unified (which isn't possible), it would be completely unified with the simplicity of the One. Thus the intellect must have a degree of unity second only to the One, but how are we to understand this duality?

Emilsson emphasizes VI.7.39, 5-9, where Plotinus argues that intellect is both otherness and sameness, in order for it to think:

> But since there is no distance or difference in regard to itself (intellect), what could its attention be other than itself? Therefore, Plato rightly understands that there is otherness and sameness where there is intellect and substance. For one must always understand intellect as otherness and sameness if it is going to think. For otherwise it will not distinguish itself from the intelligible by its relation of otherness to itself and will not contemplate all things if no otherness has occurred to make all things exist: for without otherness there would not even be two.

Emilsson proposes that possibly there are two sorts of multiplicities that are related in such a way as to explain this second most unified level (intellect). The One, being perfect, having complete unity, cannot have merely one image of itself because the one image would not or could not encompass all that the One is, as the image that is closest to the One.[142] Therefore, the intelligibles are ultimately all images of the One. Thus, the intellect, as it attempts to attain the One but cannot, gets as close as it can, which would be for itself to be multiple in order for it to be intellect, and these multiples are images of the One because they are as close to the One as possible.[143] In other words, Emilsson thinks the One is so utterly magnificent and other than any

---

[142] Ibid.

[143] Emilsson (2007: 81).

being that in order for there to be an image of the One, the image must itself be multiple images. To state it simply, the intellect desires to grasp the One, but it cannot; thus it grasps the closest thing to the One, namely itself, and in so doing it grasps itself as multiple images. These multiple images are things that are good and reveal the One as being. The images are good because they are as close to the Good as anything can be. Thus Plato's Forms would reveal what is most like the One yet not the One; these are what Plotinus calls "the intelligibles." Therefore, it follows that there are really two types of duality here: (i) the difference between a thinker and its object (subject/object), and (ii) the internal differences within the object of thought. The plurality of the intellect resides within it, namely, as the content of its thoughts. Its thoughts are multiple because it attempts to think about the One, but cannot, and therefore thinks about everything that is Good, which is itself. But in thinking of itself, it becomes multiple because it thinks about that which is Good, Loving, Beautiful, etc., which are images of their source, the One.

### 3.8 The Role of Philosophy in Conversion

Now that we have looked at Plotinus' idea of conversion, I would like to take up one special case, namely the conversion of the soul through philosophy. Plotinus does mention, oddly enough, that the One is still the ultimate goal and pursuit of all philosophy, but he says that any argument that is given is only going to appeal to those who already accept the existence of the One (I.3.1, 2–6).[144] Insofar as we are desiring or pursuing truth, then we are, according to Plotinus, striving to be closer to the One.[145] In doing philosophy we are attempting to think and speak ultimately about the One because the One is that which is most true, most good, most

[144] "On Dialectic"

[145] Bussanich (1996: 24).

desirable, etc. Philosophy then becomes the attempt to understand, albeit in a discursive fashion, that which is the source of ultimate reality, and that which *is* the ultimate, namely, the One.

In some sense the One cannot *not* exist or we would have no way to have thought and speech, as Plotinus says,

> If, then, it is not possible to think anything without the one or the two or some number how is it possible for that not to exist without which it is not possible to think or speak? For it is impossible to say that something does not exist of which, since it does not exist, you cannot think or say anything at all. But that which is needed everywhere for the coming into existence of every thought and statement must be there before statement and thinking: for this is how it can be brought to contribute to their coming into existence. (VI.6.13, 44–49)[146]

By being the first principle, the One is required to transcend determinate being and even thought.[147]

> The perplexity arises especially because our awareness of that One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with other intelligibles things, but by way of presence superior to knowledge. The soul experiences its falling away from being one and is not altogether one when it has reasoned knowledge of anything; for reasoned knowledge is a rational process, and a rational process is many. The soul therefore goes past the One and falls into number and multiplicity... Therefore, as Plato says, "it [the One] cannot be spoken or written" [*Letter* VII 345c5], but we speak and write impelling towards it and wakening from reasonings to the vision of it, as showing the way to someone who wants to have a view of something. For teaching goes as far as the road and the traveling, but the vision is the task of someone who has already resolved to see. (VI.9.4, 1-16)

Therefore, any discussion of the One is, for Plotinus, going to stress the limits of reasoning and, in some sense, to admonish the reader to transcend conceptualization. That is not to say, however, that Plotinus does not offer arguments for his concepts and theories, as in II.9, for example, where he argues against the Gnostics. For Plotinus the limit of reasoning is not based

---

[146] "On Numbers"

[147] Ibid.

on some deep seated skepticism; instead Plotinus believes discursive reasoning is a lesser form of thought. It is inferior to an immediate, intuitive, and comprehensive understanding that gives the best possible account of the One.[148]The comprehensive understanding, which is the intellect, however, still cannot grasp the One.

But if we cannot grasp the One, what role does philosophy have? Why should anyone attempt to do philosophy regarding an ontological reality that is completely beyond all thought and speech? To this Plotinus responds that all reasoning must attempt to point beyond us, beyond our understanding, with the goal of an unmediated experience of the first principle.[149] Consider his claim,

> The perplexity arises especially because our awareness of the One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with other intelligible things, but by way of *presence superior to knowledge*. The soul experiences its falling away from being one and is not altogether one when it has reasoned knowledge of anything; for reasoned knowledge is a rational process, and a rational process is many. The soul therefore goes past the One and falls into number and multiplicity. One must therefore run up above knowledge and in no way depart from being one, but one must depart from knowledge and things known, and from every other beautiful, object of vision. For every beautiful thing is posterior to that One, and comes from it, as all the light of day comes from the sun. Therefore, *Plato says* [in the *Republic*]*, "but we speak and write impelling towards it and wakening from reasonings to the vision of it, as if showing the way to someone who wants to have a view of something. For teaching goes as far as the road and the traveling, but the vision is the task of someone who has already resolved to see*." (VI.9.4, 1–15) (italics added)

Plotinus is advocating for a type of discourse to take place which points the philosopher toward the One, as it were. To do philosophy, therefore, is a practice that is needed to help us on the journey to the One. Moreover, this philosophical discourse is attempting to apprehend that which is inapprehensible. In other words, Plotinus believes that ultimate reality is in fact within our

---

[148] Bussanich (1996: 39).

[149] Ibid.

grasp, in a mystical way that transcends all dualities of subject and object. Though this sounds quite unattainable, Plotinus points out that the One "is always present to anyone who is able to touch it, but it is not present to one who is unable."[150] Since the One is "always present", then this mystical way is in fact attainable to everyone who is willing to enter the journey. Thus philosophy, for Plotinus, is meant to point towards an ultimate experiential goal by nullifying itself.[151]

As long as the philosopher is correctly seeking to be transformed, then philosophy is an aid on that journey. This journey we might call the occurrence of conversion. By doing philosophy we increasingly desire to attain the One, however, the One cannot be attained discursively and thus the One is not attained solely by philosophy. This is why philosophy must be nullified if we are to enter into the experience or "vision" of the One. Philosophy is meant to be a "ladder" to get us as close as we can to the top of Plotinus' ontology. Ultimately, however, we will not need the ladder once we arrive at the top. To begin the philosophical journey, Plotinus wants to start with what we can know, which is that which can be said about the One. The philosopher is one who has direct access to the *intellect's* understanding and by this sees that the One "*is*," as Plotinus says,

> For we and what is ours go back to the real being and ascend to that and to the first which comes from it, and we think the intelligibles; we do not have images or imprints of them. But if we do not [have imprints of them], we are the intelligibles. If then we have a part in true knowledge, we are those; we do not apprehend them as distinct within ourselves, but we are within them. For, since the others, and not only ourselves, are those we are all those. So then, being together with all things we are those; so then, we are all and one. So therefore, when we look outside that on which we depend we do not know that we are one, like faces which are many on the outside but have one head inside. But if someone is

---

[150] VI. 9.7. 4-5.

[151] Bussanich (1996: 42).

> able to turn around, either by himself or having the good luck to have his hair pulled by Athene herself, he will see God and himself and the All; at first he will not see as the All but then, when he has nowhere to set himself and limit himself and determine how far he himself goes, he will stop marking himself off from all being and will come to all the All without going out anywhere, but remaining there where the All is set firm. (VI.5.7)[152]

Discursive reasoning is secondary to the intuitive experience of the One. For Plotinus it is only the philosopher who "…has seen, knows what I am saying... and has a part in him, and so is in a state to know that the true life is present and we need nothing more" (VI.9.9, 46, 49).[153] The "knowing" that Plotinus is referring to is much more than our concept of knowledge in the 21st century. We often think of learning as "critical, tentative," and "a revisionary attitude" as essential in doing philosophy.[154] Plotinus' philosophy is ultimately concerned with truth as it pertains to the One, the intellect, and the soul. In a paradoxical manner Plotinus believes that the negative knowledge is the product of making philosophical (and spiritual) progress by ascending the hierarchy or reality.[155]

In order to achieve this transcendent form of knowledge, Plotinus requires both philosophical reasoning and affective training.

> The knowledge or touching of the Good is the greatest thing, and Plato says it is the "greatest study", not calling the looking at it a "study", but learning about it beforehand. We are taught about it by *comparison* [analogy] and *negations* and knowledge of things which come from it and certain methods of ascent by degrees, but we are put on the way to it by purifications and virtues and adorning and by gaining footholds in the intelligible and settling ourselves firmly there and feasting on its content. (VI.7.36, 2–9)[156] (italics added)

---

[152] "On the Presence of Being, One and the Same, Everywhere as a Whole I"

[153] "On the Good or the One"

[154] Bussanich (1996: 40).

[155] Gregory (1998: 14).

[156] "How the Multitude of the Forms Came Into Being, and On the Good"

The "touching" that Plotinus refers to here is that of the mystical experience of the One. Therefore, the role of philosophy is to aid us in understanding the One. However, once we understand what the One *is*, we will realize that what we have understood really is not the One. Thus we will leave all discursive conceptions of the One behind with the hope of "touching" the One.

After observing the development of the concept of the internal-external act and conversion within Plotinus, we are ready to come back to the central question of how to understand Plotinus' metaphysical differentiation between the One and intellect. As we have seen, the external act and the internal act are not identical, even as they are also not two acts. Furthermore, the One, as the internal act, is not something that is cut off from the external act, intellect. Therefore, any attempt to understand Plotinus' transcendence must give an explanation for his double act theory of emanation. I have proposed that flat transcendence gives a more lucid explanation for Plotinus' theory of emanation than the common notion of transcendence, as we have seen in, for example, Armstrong's theory.

In the next chapter we will turn to consider another Neoplatonist from late antiquity. Dionysius the Areopagite, I will argue, takes Plotinus' ontology and further elucidates the relationship between the One and intellect. In Dionysius, I argue, we will find philosophical arguments that will support reading the Neoplatonic distinction between the One and being as "flat", as opposed to "cut-off."

**Chapter 4**

# INTELLIGIBILITY IN DIONYSIUS

Dionysius continues within the Greek philosophical tradition we have seen in Plotinus. However, one difference is that Dionysius wants to maintain some sort of Christianity in accord with the developments in Greek thought. When scholars read Dionysius primarily from within a Christian context, they generally have some religious persuasion which they are trying to advance.[157] Some religious thinkers, on the one hand, read Dionysius as an orthodox Christian and advocate that Christians should pay close attention to his theology.[158] Or, on the other hand, other religious thinkers see Dionysius as a dangerous theologian and advise Christians to proceed cautiously in reading his works because of a skeptical attitude toward his Christological theology (or lack thereof).[159] Yet another group of recent scholars, however, tend to view Dionysius solely from a philosophical perspective regardless of the question of his orthodoxy.[160] Our purpose here will be to consider the metaphysics that Dionysius has from within the Neoplatonic tradition giving no consideration to the question of his orthodoxy in the Christian tradition. I tend to agree with Eric Perl in his assertion that Dionysius' metaphysics is completely Neoplatonic, but I see

---

[157] Such as, for example, Vladimir Lossky (1976) and Alexander Golitzin (1994).

[158] Both Lossky and to some extent Golitzin go to great pains to show Dionysius as a Christian and not a Neoplatonist.

[159] An example of this category would be Paul Rorem (1984 and 1993).

[160] For example, in recent scholarship both Klitenic Wear (2007) and Eric Perl (2007).

no reason to conclude that it is thus unorthodox. In other words, I think Christianity can be Neoplatonic in its metaphysics.[161]

In the next two chapters I will argue that Dionysius will clarify in a more lucid way the apparent tensions we saw in Plotinus. We will find that Dionysius will give a clear picture of how being remains *within* the One without being equal to the One. Thus Dionysius will show how transcendence and immanence are to be understood in Neoplatonic ontology. Moreover, Dionysius will indicate the proper relationship between positive and negative language when referring to the One. Once we have the picture of how being remains *within* the One, which I call flat transcendence, then we can have a better understanding of Plotinus' arguments. If language ultimately fails in referring to the One, then it would follow that Plotinus' ontology is susceptible to being misunderstood. Therefore, by turning to Dionysius, I will argue, we are better able to understand how the One can be without *being*.

### 4.2 Procession and Reversion

In the previous chapter we looked at how the One causes or "emanates" the world. This metaphysical account depends on the understanding of the double act theory that we saw in Emilsson, which is that by the One's being what it is a multiplicity comes forth from it as manifestations or images of the One. These images are not intended by the One but are merely because of what the One *is doing.* With this overflowing of the first image, intellect, we have

---

[161] I don't think the metaphysical structure of Neoplatonism is in opposition with Christianity as Lossky, Golitzin, Louth, and others have argued. I also believe that it is in accord with many other religious traditions as well, but it is only Christianity that seems relevant in consideration of Dionysius. However, I am not advocating that certain Christian doctrines, such as the Incarnation or the Trinity, are thus Neoplatonic. Rather, my interest is purely ontological here and not theological.

something that cannot not be because of its source, the One in its *isness*, as it were. Therefore, the intellect comes into being as the external activity of the One. Again, the internal activity is simply the One's being what it is, which is, of course, beyond being. In the external act, however, the image of the One becomes that which is most like the One without actually being the One.

Now that we have this understanding of the double act we come to an important element of Neoplatonic metaphysics, which is the dynamic and not static relationship between all that is, i.e., the world, and its source, the One. This relationship, though it is non–temporal, is dynamic in that it is in a state of process. This state of process is referred to by Dionysius as remaining, procession, and reversion (or return). While we can certainly find procession and return in Plotinus, namely, as the overflow of emanation, and conversion, we find it more explicitly expressed in Proclus, "Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts upon it" (*El. Th.,* prop. 35). As referenced here, the One not only contains all things and is the source from which all things come, but is also the end or goal to which all things are moving or going.

Dionysius takes this notion of procession and reversion from Proclus (and other Neoplatonists), and it becomes his metaphysical structure for how he can give names to the One. Dionysius does this in chapter four of the *Divine Names* in order to account for why the One is good, light, beautiful, love, ecstasy, and zeal. However, the most important divine name given to the One by Dionysius is, of course, the Good. Therefore, in order for us to understand this metaphysical cycle of procession and reversion, we will need to return to the Neoplatonic tradition and its important notion that the One is the Good. We saw in chapter one how[162] for Plato, goodness is the principle of intelligibility, which means that for anything to be intelligible

[162] p.37 ff.

it must be understood in virtue of its being good. To be intelligible is to be good, and that intelligibility in every being is its distinct way of being good. Everything that is, therefore, is a specific and distinct manifestation of goodness. Let's look more closely at the significance of the One and the Good in Greek philosophy.

If the One in Neoplatonic metaphysics is the Good, then in order for anything to be it must, by necessity, also be good, as an image of the One. What the goodness is in each thing is its distinction from every other being. We find that this notion of seeing the first principle as the Good is a common idea not only in Plato, as we have already seen, but also in Aristotle.

Aristotle argues that the formal cause of a thing is its final cause, because it determines its "shape, structure, and function" (*Physics* II.7, 1986a26, 198b3; II.8, 199a33), and thus accounts for the thing's being what it is.[163] For Aristotle, something's end (*telos*) is its principle of unity and intelligibility; the end that any being is directed toward possesses unity and intelligibility, making the being distinct from other beings. In other words, the final cause to which each kind of thing aspires is what makes each being what it is.[164] Thus, for Aristotle, the final cause is the ground of its being what it is and what a thing is is its distinct way of being good. The final cause which is the object of desire, Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, is complete intelligibility and purely good (*Metaphysics* XII.7, 1072b29). Moreover, this source is the principle of actualization for everything that is (*Metaphysics* XII.7, 1072a26, 1072b3).[165]

---

[163] Klitenic Wear (2007:15)

[164] Ibid.

[165] My point here is not to say that Plato's good is identical to Aristotle's. For Aristotle each kind of thing's good has a distinct goodness that isn't clearly universal (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.6, 1096a11). Instead I am focusing on the similarity in that all things look to goodness for both Plato and Aristotle.

Along these lines Plotinus too argued that each thing's end (or determination) is that thing's way of being good. As Plotinus said, "but shall we then define the good according to each thing's excellence? But in this way we shall refer to form and reason–principle, certainly a correct manner of proceeding" (VI.7.19. 9–12).[166] On each level in the Plotinian hierarchy the level above is what is good for its consequent.[167] Plotinus said as much here: "So that the good for the last and lowest among beings is what lies before it, and there is a continuous ascent which gives that above a thing to be good for what is below... And still higher, there is intellect, and above this what we call the first" (VI.7.25. 18–28). Plotinus went on to say, "everywhere what comes as a good is form" (VI.7.28, 2). At every level within the hierarchy goodness and intelligibility are either decreasing or ascending.[168] So the goodness in any thing is its distinct way of being intelligible, and thus, its distinct way of being a being. Plotinus also said, "each individual form is good and has the form of good, in that, therefore, it has some good, either common, or more particularly one rather than another, or one primarily and another by succession and secondarily" (VI.7. 18, 25–27). Goodness, as the principle of intelligibility, implies that to be is to be intelligible and good. At every level we find goodness and intelligibility descending from the One. Thus we see here that goodness is a fundamental characteristic of all being.

So goodness of anything is the identity which thereby makes that thing what it is. Plotinus also said, "For all things, the principle is the end" (III.8.7. 17).[169] Moreover, the end, or

---

[166] "How the multitude of the Forms came into Being, and on the Good"

[167] Klitenic Wear (2007: 16).

[168] See VI.7.25, 25ff; VI.7.28, 20ff.

[169] "On Nature Contemplation and the One"

the good of the whole is what unifies its multiplicity so that it is one being rather than multiple,[170] and its being unified is what makes something good. "The form... approaches and composes that which is to come into being from many parts into a single ordered whole; it brings it into a completed unity and makes it one by agreement of its parts" (I.6.2. 18–21).[171] The Good is the One because goodness is the means by which all beings can be. Yet Plotinus also elucidated the Good by the notion that it is "not anything for itself: for it does not bring anything into itself, but itself suffices. It is not, then, *even good for itself, but for others; for they need it*" (VI.7.41. 29–31). The One is not a good thing but instead it is the means by which everything else is good.

Now we can see how the One is not only the source of all that is, but also the end which all things seek. As Plotinus said,

> And the One is on both sides of them; for it is that from which they come and to which they go; for all things originate from the One and strive towards the One. For in this way they also strive towards the Good; for nothing whatever among beings could have come to exist or endure in existence if its striving were not directed towards the One. (VI.2.11 25–29)[172]

It would be incorrect to infer from this formulation that the One is the source and the Good is the end to which all things aspire. Rather, the significance here is that the One as the source gives being its intelligibility, thus allowing it to be precisely the Good, the end for which all things strive.[173] Consider Plotinus, "For all things reach out to the One and long for it by necessity of

---

[170] Perl (2007: 47).

[171] "On Beauty"

[172] "On the Kinds of Being II"

[173] Perl (2007: 38).

nature, as if divining by instinct that they cannot exist without it" (V.5.12. 8–9)[174]. Here we have both the One and the Good as the first principle, both the source and end of all being.

### 4.3 Procession and Reversion and the "Double Act"

Another philosopher from late antiquity, Proclus, made a point very similar to what we have seen in Plotinus.

> Every good is unitive of what participates in it, and every unification is good, and the Good is the same as the One. For if it belongs to the Good to conserve all beings... and if what conserves and holds together the being of each thing is unity (since by unity each is maintained in being, but by dispersion displaced from existence), then the Good renders one and holds together by unification whatever things it is present to. And if it belongs to unity to bring and keep beings together, by its presence it makes each thing complete. And so being unified is good for all things. But again, if unification is in itself good, and the good unifies, then the simply Good and simply One are the same, making being one and so making them good...Goodness, then, is unification and unification is goodness; the Good is one, and the One primally good. (*El. Th.*, prop. 13)

All the multiplicity that exists in the world is none other than the different variations of goodness and unity. These multiplicities are the different ways that anything can in fact be good and unified. Thus all things, by being the manifestations of the One, are good, unified, and intelligible simply by being at all. What we find in Neoplatonism is that to be intelligible, to be unified, and to be good are interchangeable.

The causal relationship here between the One as source and end is the Proclean cycle of being (or remaining), procession, and reversion.[175] Being, or "remaining" as Proclus calls it, is the idea of the cause simply being what it is. To use our previous language, in Proclus remaining

---

[174] "That the Intelligibles are not Outside the Intellect, and On the Good"

[175] El. Th., prop. 23-40.

can be understood as the internal act of Plotinus' emanation, which is the One as the undifferentiated containment of its effects.

Procession, on the other hand, is the unfolding or differentiation whereby the effects are different from each other (i.e., multiplicity) and different from the cause itself, each effect thereby existing as a distinct, determinate being.[176] As Proclus said,

> If the effect should remain only, without procession, it will be indistinguishable from its cause, and will not be an other which has arisen while the cause remains. For if it is other, it is distinct and separate... In so far, then, as it has an element of identity with the producer, the product remains in it; in so far as it differs it proceeds from it. (*El. Th.*, prop. 30)

The idea that the effect proceeds from the cause is only to say that it depends on it; only in this atemporal sense does it come from it. So the procession of what "is" is a differentiated presentation or manifestation of the cause. The procession which comes forth from the One is multiple in its being(s) because of the multiplicity that is, in some sense, present "in" the cause. This procession from the One in Proclus is also, as we can see, the external act that we found in Plotinus. The effect which is completely dependent on its source comes forth not by some willing desire of the internal act, but because the internal act is what it is.[177] The procession of this differentiated being, the external act, is the result of the internal act. Therefore, in Proclus the procession is the result of the remaining, just as in Plotinus the external act is the result of the internal act. Here we find again the Neoplatonic metaphysic of emanation that elucidates the many coming forth from the One.

---

[176] Klitenic Wear (2007: 17).

[177] Emilsson's analogy of the walker making a trace in the sand illustrates this point.

Reversion, or return, is the relation of the effect to the cause.[178] The effect desires or strives after the cause because the cause is the source of goodness. Therefore, since something can only be insofar as it has being, intelligibility, and goodness, then naturally all beings desire or strive to return to their source of being, intelligibility, and goodness. As Proclus said, "All things desire the Good, and each attains it through its proximate cause: therefore, each has appetition of its own cause also" (*El. Th.*, prop. 31). Reversion, then, is the effect reverting to the cause, striving for it as an end because it is attracted to the cause of itself.[179] This return is none other than the conversion of being, which we saw earlier. Being strives for its source, because it is good, but being cannot obtain the Good simply because it is a determinate, or to put the point more succinctly, by being a *being.* Thus being, in desiring the Good and being unable to attain it, becomes itself, namely, intelligible. Here we find a further example of how the double act theory and conversion are used in later Neoplatonic metaphysics to describe the One and the many by the language of remaining, procession, and reversion.

It is important to remember here that in procession and reversion we do not have temporally subsequent events, as if the effect first proceeds from its cause and *then* becomes what it is (namely, intelligible, good, one) by reverting. Procession and reversion are both effects of the cause, and as such are not occurring in temporal succession.[180] Since there is no order between procession and reversion, Proclus argued both ways, from reversion to procession as well as from reversion to procession, "For if a thing reverts by nature, it has existential appetition of that to which it reverts. And if so, its being also is wholly dependent on the

---

[178] Klitenic Wear (2007: 19).

[179] Ibid.

[180] Dodds (1969: 219).

principle upon which it reverts existentially... And if so, its procession is from that upon which it reverts" (*El. Th.*, prop. 34). In order for anything to be, it must both proceed and revert to its cause. In chapter three we referred to the inchoate intellect in Plotinus as that which is not a being because it had not yet reverted. Thus the intellect as such is the completion of the external act and conversion, or to use Proclean language, the completion of procession and reversion. We will return to the idea that procession and reversion go both ways once we understand how Dionysius understands this idea.

### 4.4. Dionysius on the Good

Now that we have seen why the One is the Good and why all being returns (or converts) to the One, we can turn to understanding how Dionysius uses the concept of the Good, particularly in chapter IV of *On Divine Names*. In this Neoplatonic context, as explained above, Dionysius says, "It is the Good... from which all things originate and are, as brought forth from an all–perfect cause; and in which all things are held together, as preserved and held fast in an all–powerful foundation; and to which all things are reverted as each to its own proper limit; and which all things desire" (*DN* IV.4, 700a–b). We have already discussed how, for Dionysius, all things are contained within and come forth from the One and how these beings that come forth are none other than manifestations of the One. But now that we see the Good as the source of all that is, we can grasp why Dionysius believes that all beings have their proper *isness* (being) from the Good. For example,

> Because of this they have their own orders beyond the cosmos, their own unities, their mutual relationships, their unconfused distinctions... They remain supremely constant in their desire for the Good... Everything... comes from the universal Cause and Source of the goodness. From this Source it was given to them to exemplify the Good, to manifest

> that hidden goodness in themselves, to be, so to speak, the messengers of the divine source, to reflect the light glowing in the inner sanctuary. (*DN* IV.2, 696 b–d)

Dionysius makes the above point in reference to angelic beings, but he also intends it to apply to all beings.[181] Here he is emphasizing that the existence of any being is its goodness. Or to say it differently, the Good is what gives being its form (*DN* IV.3, 697a), which means each being's differentiation is its goodness. In order for anything to be, it must, in some sense, have the Good which makes it be, and conversely, makes being itself good.[182]

Dionysius understands reversion (or conversion) as the ontological account of love or desire that all things naturally have for the One.[183] Just as we saw in Plotinus and Proclus, the existence of all things depends on each being's desiring its source, the Good, and so Dionysius says of the angels that "by desiring God [the One] they have both being and being good" (*DN* IV. 1, 696a). Only by desiring goodness can anything exist at all. This implies that no being can in fact *be* unless it desires or reverts to the One. Moreover, because there is no temporal succession in Dionysius' ontology, all things can only be insofar as they are both proceeding from and reverting to the One, which is to say, loving or desiring that from which they come forth.

For Dionysius the very being of everything in existence is its procession and reversion to the One. The proper activity of each being, which constitutes what that being is, is the distinct way in which it reverts to the One.[184] It is important to note how the metaphysics of emanation not only gives an account for the One and the many, but also explains what each thing essentially

---

[181] Klitenic Wear (2007: 20).

[182] Ibid.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Perl (2007: 42).

is. The external activity of the One is the internal activity of being. Each being's activity is its way of reverting to the One. The activity, reversion, is also what Plotinus calls the internal act, or remaining, according to Proclean term, of that being. This nontemporal sequence of activities continues not just in being, but in the images of being which include everything that is. The internal and external activity will be different depending on the particular image of being, of course. For example, a stone is merely existing as a stone while exercising its own distinct activities of being hard, solid, and heavy; a plant has a distinct activity of living; an animal of living sensitively; and a human being in living rationally.[185] Essentially each thing by being what it is, i.e., being in its proper way, is actively proceeding from and reverting to its source. The activity of this occurrence is each thing's desiring the Good (though each in a different way), according to its unique determination. Both the procession and reversion are what constitute what the being is and thus both are necessary for the being to be.

Since we cannot make a temporal distinction between procession and reversion of being, a thing's being made to be by the One is not temporally prior to its desire for the One.[186] Oddly enough, the generation of being depends on its tending toward the One just as much as on its coming forth from the One. This explains how reversion, as the activity of the being, is in fact how the being shares in its own *beingness*. Thus, for Dionysius, as well as in Plotinus and Proclus, being must act in order for it to exist. In other words, the One does not cause being to "be"; apart from being's own wanting or acting. The implication here is that the One does not

[185] Ibid., 43.

[186] Ibid.

cause or bring anything into being without that being's cooperation (or activity).[187] Consequently, at every level of being, animals, plants, etc. there is an aspect of "self", but only insofar as it shares in its own being by being what it is. Most notably, for the human being the self would be human personhood and the freedom to act. But more importantly, this idea of freedom to act must occur at every level of being. Plotinus made this point most poignantly when he stated that "all things contemplate" (III.8)--specifically, the life of a plant is a "growth–thought", an animal is a "sense–thought", and so on.[188] In every level of being there is some form of "thought" taking place, though, of course, some are higher forms of thought than others, depending on their level of being. For Plotinus, as well as other ancients, the earth itself is living and thus this principle of thought extends to everything in the earth.[189]Dionysius agrees that ultimately, if each being did not have this active "self", it would have no identity.[190] Therefore it would not be distinct from any other thing, which is to say, it would not be.

Dionysius also occasionally refers to the One as the Beautiful.[191] We found this identification of the One as Beautiful in Plotinus as well. For example, Plotinus argued that sensible things are beautiful (i.e., attractive and desirable) insofar as they share in the form of

---

[187] It is also true, for Dionysius, that salvation cannot take place unless the being works or acts in a way corresponding to the One. This means that the One cannot create and cannot save any being apart from that being's cooperation. While it is beyond the scope of this work, this Dionysian understanding has important ramifications for the problem of evil in his metaphysics and theology.

[188] Perl (2007: 45).

[189] See III.8.1.4

[190] *DN* IV.7, 704a-c.

[191] See *DN* IV.7, 704b; IV.8, 704d; IV.10, 705c–708a; IV.18, 713d.

Beauty itself.[192] In sharing the form of Beauty, the sensible thing is desirable because it is an image or representation of a greater Beauty, which is the One. The sensible thing is beautiful only insofar as it shows (or is) the beauty of its source. Thus the beauty in anything is really the beauty of the One being expressed through an image. Moreover, we recognize the sensible thing as beautiful because we also have this beauty ourselves. Beauty is something that is desirable as an intelligible form (I.6. 1–2),[193] an argument made by comparing an artistically sculpted stone to a lump of stone (V.8.1).[194] The sculpted stone is beautiful because it has been formed according to the idea in the artist's mind. In the same way, things in the world are beautiful because they are images of the One, "is not this beauty everywhere form, which comes from the maker[195] upon that which he has brought into being?" (V.8.2. 14–15).

So beauty in the world is sharing in the form of beauty itself, which is the content of the intellect, i.e., a form or intelligible. From this we can see that beauty is the differentiated manifestation of the Beautiful or Good. The One is not beautiful but instead it is Beauty itself, the means by which being is beautiful. As Plotinus said, "These beautiful things, then, must be measured and limited, but not the really beautiful or rather the super–beautiful; but if this is so, it (super–beautiful) must not be shaped or be form. The primarily beautiful, then, and the first is without form, and beauty is that, the nature of the Good" (VI.7.33. 19–22).[196] From this account

---

[192] Plotinus derives this idea of Beauty from Plato's *Symposium*.

[193] "On Beauty"

[194] "On the Intelligible Beauty"

[195] By "maker" here Plotinus is using a metaphor, and he does not mean to indicate any kind of intentionality.

[196] "The Forms and The Good"

we can see that being itself is what is beautiful, and the Good is Beauty itself, as the source from which beings are beautiful.[197]

With this understanding, we can see what Dionysius means when he says, "this Good is hymned as Beautiful and as Beauty itself" (*DN* IV.7, 701c). The beauty that is in each thing is nothing other than the One in it. As Dionysius says, "the Beautiful beyond being is called Beauty on account of the beautifulness distributed from it to all beings in the manner proper to each" (*DN* IV.7, 701c). Just as we noted above, the Good/One is the Goodness in all things, and likewise the Beauty in all things is the One. So just as the Good in everything is what causes it to be, also the Beauty in everything makes it be. Consider, "From this Beautiful is being to all beings, each being beautiful according to its proper determinations" (*DN* IV.7, 704c). Therefore, we can see that to be is simply to be beautiful. To say it differently, intelligibility, being, goodness in things, unity, and now beauty are all the manifestations of the One, or for Dionysius, these manifestations are the names of the One (God). For Dionysius, as in Plato and Plotinus, beauty is manifesting itself as an image of transcendence.

Since beauty is in each and every thing, it is also that to which all things aspire, just as we also saw in the case of the Good. "The Beautiful is the principle of all things, as making cause and moving and holding together the whole by the love of its proper beautifulness, and limit of all things, and cherished, as final cause, since for the sake of the Beautiful all things come to be; and paradigmatic, in that all things are determined according to it" (*DN* IV.7, 704a–b). Here it is Beauty that is the cause of each and every thing as well as the end for all beings, as we will also see in the case of Love.

---

[197] Perl (2007:44).

### 4.5 The One as Love

For Dionysius, the fulfillment of reversion occurs in realizing the One, not only as Beauty, but also as Love itself. "The cause of all things, through excess of goodness, loves all things, makes all things, perfects all things, sustains all things, reverts all things; and the divine love is good, of good, through the good. For love, the very benefactor of beings, pre–existing in excess in the Good, did not permit it to remain unproductive in itself, but moved it to productive action, in the excess which generates all things" (*DN* IV.10, 708a–b). The One, then, is not only the Good, and Beauty itself, but also Love by making all things and by being present in each and every thing.

The idea of attributing Love to the One is considered by some scholars not to be consistent with Greek philosophy. For example, Rist argues that love, as being sacrificial, is a distinctly Christian and not a pagan Neoplatonic notion.[198] For Rist the idea of love (as *agape*) is not Neoplatonic because Neoplatonism does not allow the One to love anything in a sacrificial way.[199] If the One loves something in a sacrificial way, it would seem to imply, for Neoplatonism, according to Rist, that the One is lacking. As we have seen, this would provide an acute problem to something that is beyond being and lacks nothing. Rist wants to deny that the Christian God is lacking even though the Christian God is loving, and thus he postulates the Christian God as loving sacrificially, whereas the Neoplatonic One does not love in this way. But I argue that while the terminology is different, the philosophical meaning of *agape* is in fact

---

[198] Rist (1966: 235–239). Rist is not addressing Dionysius in particular; instead he is only referring to pagan Neoplatonic philosophy. For more examples of scholars who argue that Neoplatonism does not have a concept of the One as love and thus is contrary to Christianity, see Golitizin (1994: 55–68) and Louth (1989: 84–87).

[199] Ibid.

consistent with Neoplatonic (pagan or Christian) metaphysics. Ascribing *agape* to the One, I will show, is consistent with Neoplatonic metaphysics in the same way that *eros* is. In fact, I will argue that Dionysius' Love is really nothing other than the "overflow" of the One in producing being. Let us remember just how Plotinus made this point.

"The One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes another" (V.2.1. 8–10).[200] The One gives to beings all that they are, which is, again, differentiated presentations of the One. Furthermore, "we breathe and are preserved because that Good does not give and then go away but is always providing as long as it is what it is" (VI.9.10. 10–11).[201] Since the One is not distant from being, the implication is that the One is present to all things and the means by which they are beings. Now here is how Dionysius explains this divine Love:

> The very cause of all things, by the beautiful and good love of all things, through excess of erotic goodness, *becomes out of himself in his providences toward all beings*, and is as it were enticed by goodness and affection and love and is led down, from above all things and beyond all things, to in all things, according to an ecstatic power beyond being, without going out from himself. (*DN* IV.13, 712a–b) (italics added)

The presence of the One in all things is the One causing them to be, which is, again, the procession or differentiation that makes beings what they are.[202] The One does not remain within itself in the sense of being self–contained, because that would imply it is a separate being and not omnipresent. But because the One does not remain within itself in this sense, it goes beyond itself all the while remaining within itself *in the sense of remaining what it is*. Since everything is in the One, then everything goes out of the One, by constituting differentiation, even as it

---

[200] "On the Origin and Order of the Beings Which Come After the First"

[201] "On The Good or The One"

[202] Klitenic Wear (2007: 53).

remains "interior." But one must be careful about what is meant when Dionysius says that the One remains interior. For Dionysius, the One has no "inner selfhood" that is distinct from its being the determining source of other selves.

If the One had an inner "self", then it would mean the One would have two selves, namely, the "inner self" and then the self which is the determining source of all that is. But this implies a duality (or two *things*) which is what cannot be the case with the One; hence to be beyond being is to not be a *thing* nor a self. Simply put, the One's *isness* just is the determining source of all that is. To speak as if the One *is* something else besides the determining source of all that is would imply there is a *being* or *isness* about the One that is beyond the-One-as-a-source. For Dionysius, knowing and referring to the One can only be done through the differentiated presence of all beings. To use our previous language, the internal act of the One is the source of that which comes from it, and any positive language that we can affirm about the One is fundamentally about the external act, as the differentiated manifestation of the One. Yet because the One is this productive giving, it is also "pure interiority" in the sense that it is unconditioned by anything exterior or any relation to beings.[203] Nothing else can "affect" the One in any way, which is another way of saying it is internal to itself. The One is complete actuality and not a potentiality, because it *is* the fulness of all being, completely actual but undifferentiated. Therefore, to know being is in fact to know the One, but the One cannot be known as it is in its internal act. The One can only be known through its "offspring", the external act. What we know about the internal act is only through the image of the external act, being.

[203] Perl (2007: 48).

From this account we see how love even in Plotinus can be identified as not only procession, and the external act, but also reversion (the movement of the inchoate intellect back to the One). The love that the inchoate has for the One, i.e., desire for its source, is what the inchoate is, but the inchoate is also the love which comes from the One. In fact, we could have read Plotinus in this way when he explains how the soul which has an erotic desire for the One is being "lifted by the giver of its own love" (VI.7.22, 19–21). The love that the inchoate has for the One is nothing other than the love that is "overflowing" from the One to the inchoate. That the One loves does have not to mean, as Rist believes, that the One has needs or lacks anything, but instead that the One draws all things to itself. Therefore, insofar as any being is reverting (or converting), which is its identifying or differentiating activity, it is the One being present and active in that being. If being itself does not revert to its source, then it cannot be. Therefore, whatever exists must, by definition, love.[204] The love for the One is not a love of something, as it were; rather the love for the One is what the One is undifferentiated, and this love is the source of everything. Therefore, the love that comes from being directed towards the One is nothing else but the love that is being reflected from love itself, the One. The One loves, and because it loves, everything else is, and everything else becomes able to love because of the source of everything.

So the love of the One for being is seen not only in its causing being to be by procession, but also in being's return to the One itself. Love is both the source and end of all that is. As Dionysius would say, the love of the One for being and being's love for the One is, on the one hand, being's procession from the One (Plotinus' external act) and, on the other hand, being's reversion (Plotinus' conversion) to the One. Thus love is this full metaphysical motion of

---

[204] This account would also apply to goodness, unity, and beauty, as we have previously discussed.

remaining (internal act), procession (external act) and reversion (conversion) by which all things are.

When we see love in this metaphysical way, we can understand why Dionysius makes no distinction between *eros*, which he calls "yearning" or desire, and *agape*, which he considers to be "beneficent giving" (*DN* IV.11–12, 708c-709d). The One's "agapic" love is the procession of all things (since it is "giving") and the One's erotic (desiring) love is the reversion of all things to itself.[205] As he explains, "the divine love is ecstatic not allowing lovers to belong to themselves, but to those beloved" (*DN* IV.13, 712a). By "ecstatic" he means a desire for others. Thus the erotic desire for being (reversion) is the One's presence in it (procession) which comes forth from the One (remaining).

For Dionysius, the One's presence in the world is for the One a kind of being "outside" itself, as a kind of divine ecstasy. While ecstasy is generally understood to occur when someone is caught up into God, Dionysius makes two uses of it, beings being caught up into the One, and the One being caught up into beings.[206] Consider,

> And, in truth, it must be said too that the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good superabundance of his [the One's] benign yearning for all is also carried outside himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning [*eros*] and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself. That is why those possessed of spiritual insight describe him as 'zealous' because his good yearning for all things is so great and because he stirs in men a deep yearning desire for zeal. In this way he proves himself to be zealous because zeal is always felt for what is desired and because he is zealous for the creatures for whom he provides. In short, both the yearning and the object of that yearning belong to the Beautiful and the Good. They preexist in it, and because of it they exist and come to be. (*DN* 4.13, 712b)

---

[205] Perl (2007:48).

[206] Ibid.

Of course, Dionysius is not suggesting that the One changes and goes beyond itself, as it were. Instead, the One gives of itself to bring about being while maintaining itself as it is.

Being's erotic desire for the One is seeking to have the One (reversion), to receive its source as its being or identity, which allows it to be. This is what Dionysius means when he states, "Wherefore the great Paul, having come to be in possession of divine love, and participation in its ecstatic power, says with inspired mouth, 'I live, and yet not I, but Christ lives in me,' as a true lover and, as he says, ecstatic to God, and loving not his own life but the life of the beloved, as greatly cherished" (*DN* IV.13, 712a).[207] For us the significance here is to notice the phrase "possession of divine love"; to be possessed by divine love is also to possess it. Here we see again the metaphysical concept of love that to abandon the self (*agape*) to the One is the erotic acquiring of the One which constitutes what a being is.[208] So to desire or want (to yearn for) the One is not distinct from giving or losing the self. Instead, the erotic desire of the "self" for the One is precisely the same love as that which is "selfless" and wants to give, or as St. Paul says, "live, yet not I, but Christ who lives within me."

### 4.6 Procession and Reversion Revisited

But this should cause us to pause and realize a fundamental problem with this account of precession and reversion. If, in fact, the One, as the source of all love, goodness, being, etc., is the One causing and the one acting, and since *eros* and *agape* are actually the same, then, does

---

[207] There is a lot in this passage about the role of identity and the self of the author, Dionysius, that is beyond the scope of this work. For more on the identity of Dionysius and this passage see Stang (2012: 153–196).

[208] Perl (2007:46).

this mean that in Dionysius procession and reversion are the same? And if it does, might it also be true that there is, or should be, no distinction between the external act and conversion in Plotinus? If it is the case that the external act and conversion collapse into the same thing, then Dionysius is further elucidating ideas which we found in Plotinus, and thus making the concept of the One as beyond being more lucid.

Dionysius indicates that *eros* is the "ecstatic" loss of self in which the lovers no longer belong to themselves, but to the "beloved" (*DN* IV.13, 712a). So erotic love for the beloved (reversion) is nothing other than the beloved being present in it (procession). This seems to indicate that this single thing, love, is explained in two ways. In other words, the constitutive presence that the One has to being (procession) is precisely what is moving or causing being to desire to come back (reversion). This is also why there seems to be no difference between giving to the other (*agape*) and taking the other for one's own (*eros*).

This Dionysian Neoplatonic account of how being is nothing other than the manifestation of the One,where the very being of anything is the One in it and the One as the being of all things, shows how there cannot be any ontology of the One that is cut off from being. If being is not cut off from the One, then there is no opposition between erotic desire for the other, and selfless giving to the other.[209] The One is both the one who is giving and receiving. To say it differently, the One is the source of being and the means by which being becomes being.

Dionysius explains the giver and receiver of the One as that which is love and the beloved:

> Why is it, however, that theologians sometimes refer to God [the One] as Yearning and Love and sometimes as the yearned–for and the Beloved? On the one hand he causes,

[209] Ibid.

> produces, and generates what is being referred to, and, on the other hand, he is the thing itself. He is stirred by it and he stirs it. He is moved to it and he moves it. So they call him the beloved and the yearned–for since he is beautiful and good, and again, they call him yearning and love because he is the power moving and lifting all things up to himself, for in the end what is he if not Beauty and Goodness, the One who of himself reveals himself, the good procession of his own transcendent unity? He is yearning on the move, simple, self–moved, self–active, pre–existing in the Good, and overflowing from the Good to beings, and again reverting them to the Good. Herein the divine love eminently shows its endlessness and beginninglessness, as an eternal circle, through the Good, from the Good, and in the Good and to the Good in unerring coiling–up, always proceeding and remaining and returning in the same and by the same. (*DN* IV.14, 712c– 713a)

For Dionysius, the One is that which causes the very procession of manifestation in all things. The "eternal circle" of divine love is the One present in all things as their goodness, beauty, activity, and being. It appears from this account that love is the procession and reversion which is the very existence of everything that is. Dionysius' account of divine love is nothing else but the metaphysics we have seen previously, but now we see it more clearly; only now do we see how Dionysius uses the names of the One to indicate this ontology. Thus the procession and reversion that overflow from the One are, in fact, the manifestations of the One, and, as such, are the same thing.

With this discussion of overflow, we are reminded of how Dionysius is using metaphorical language. Any metaphorical language is not meant to be understood literally, but rather as symbolizing or giving a picture to explain the unexplainable. Therefore, what we are to understand about the language of "overflow" is not that the One flows over from a cup, for example, into some other thing. Instead, what we find in the One's overflowing is that the One is being manifested in whatever it is that comes after it, i.e., being. The One, it may be better to say, is not really "in" being, but rather the better picture would be to think of being as *in* the One. Thus in "overflowing," the One, by being what it is, causes something else (being) to come to be

*within* the One itself. The One overflows in that everything that being is exists because of the One. Or to say it differently, the being*ness* of being can only come into being because of its source, the One. Overflow as understood in this way alleviates any worries of seeing the One as something that is transcendent and only immanent by being in *being*. Hence what we find here, in flat transcendence, is that the One overflows and produces being and being is nothing other than the manifestation or differentiation of the One. This idea of overflow should sound familiar as it is what we found in Plotinus with what we called ontological priority.[210]

If it is true that procession (Plotinus' external act) and reversion (Plotinus' conversion) are really the same thing, then how might we understand Dionysius' remaining, procession, and reversion, in comparison to Emilsson's understanding of Plotinus' double act? If the external and internal act in Plotinus are really only one act though still distinct, as Emilsson postulated, then it seems that this act is the One "remaining" or being what it is, while the external act along with conversion are simply the overflowing of the One's being what it is. If this is so, what we find in Dionysius' remaining, procession, and reversion is equivalent to Plotinus' double act. The One, by being what it is (the internal act or remaining), "causes" or "produces" an inchoate intellect which desires its source. In desiring its source (the external act or procession), the intellect (or being) becomes being proper (conversion or reversion). Thus Dionysius has further elucidated the Plotinian theory of emanation by showing that the One, as the source of being, is manifested and differentiated in existence. That is to say, what Dionysius adds to what Plotinus has said is that Dionysius gives us a better grasp of how to understand that being is in the One, as opposed to thinking of the One as within being which is how some scholars such as Armstrong have read

[210] See chapter 2.3, p. 29-33.

Plotinus. With this understanding of Neoplatonic metaphysics, we can also better understand a vexing problem that has been raised in Christian theology, namely, the notion of the essence and energies of God.

### 4.7 Essence/Energies

In eastern Christianity there is a vital distinction between how we understand God and God's relation to the world. This distinction relies heavily on the notion of God as beyond being. While this theological doctrine has been debated vigorously by recent scholarship, this work has been primarily in relation to other doctrines. The scholars who debate the notion of the essence/ energies are doing so within the context of its relationship to matters of Christian orthodoxy. For example, many scholars debate how the Christian God can be simple (the doctrine of Divine Simplicity) while also having energies or activities that imply multiplicity.[211] Other examples include the distinction among the members of the Trinity, and the understanding of the doctrine of the Incarnation.[212] For our purposes, however, we will not engage in the debates regarding the essence/energies and its place in Christian theology. Instead, our purpose is to determine if the essence/energies notion can lend clarity to the overarching ontology of Dionysius' Neoplatonism. Therefore, I will limit my analysis to considering only the recent developments in philosophy regarding the energies of the One as opposed to the long, complicated and unfruitful debate

---

[211] For more on the doctrine of Divine Simplicity in relation to the essence/energies, see Raddle–Gallwitz (2009) in opposition, and John Jones (2005) in favor.

[212] For more on these doctrines and their coherence to Christianity, see R. Williams (1977) for a critical account, or Lossky (1973, 1974, 1986) for a favorable view. For a more balanced presentation, see both A. Williams (2001) and Reid (1997).

occurring among theologians over this topic. We are, after all, only concerned with the relation of the essence/energies to being, as opposed to revealed Christianity.

As we have already seen, if God (or the One) is beyond being, then there doesn't seem to be anything that we can really say about God that is correct. This should look familiar as this is simply what we have seen before as *apophatic* theology. In eastern Christianity because God is beyond being, then this would mean that we can never really know God as God is, again, because God isn't an *is*. Thus anything we know or say about God is only meant to give us an idea or a way to know something *about* God. The eastern Christian view is to make this distinction maintaining that God's essence cannot be known. However, what can be known is what is referred to as the energies of God. We will now look at what it really means to refer to the energies of God and, ultimately, their relation to the metaphysics of remaining, procession, and reversion. In discussing the concept of *energeia*, I will be referring primarily to the interpretation given by David Bradshaw because he is the only relevant scholar to compare the *energeia* in Aristotle to the *energeia* of eastern Christianity.

The Greek term used in eastern Christianity is *energeia* and it was first used or coined by Aristotle. Aristotle used the term to signify the active exercise of a capacity, such as for sight or thought, but distinct from the mere possession of the capacity.[213] This distinction between the exercise of a capacity and the possession of a capacity came to be understood by thinkers in late antiquity as between activity and actuality.[214] While it may seem that activity and actuality are

---

[213] Bradshaw (2007: 3).

[214] A correlative term for *energeia* is *dunamis* which is generally translated as power. *Dunamis* also has two distinct meanings, both capacity and potentiality.

quite distinct, for Aristotle they are also sometimes used synonymously.[215] For example, in *Metaphysics* ix.6 Aristotle distinguishes *energeia* from motion or change on the grounds that motion is ordered toward some extrinsic end, whereas an *energeia* has no end. Or better put, the end of the *energeia* is itself.[216] In this passage Aristotle lists seeing, thinking, understanding, living well, and flourishing as activities (*energeiai*) that are fully actual in completing their end. In other words, they contain their own end and are thus complete in each moment of their existence.[217] Thus in each moment that one sees, for example, one also has seen.

The most important use of *energeia*, for these purposes, is in Aristotle's first principle. The Prime Mover is a being whose essence (or substance) is *energeia* (*Met.* xii.6 1071b20). Aristotle's notion may be puzzling, but according to Bradshaw there are three distinct but related notions of the *energeia* here. First, the Prime Mover must explain motion while not being subject to it; thus it is pure actuality in the sense of having no potentiality to change or be acted upon.[218] This pure actuality is the "contemplation" or use of all its activities. In other words, pure actuality is that which has no potential; this is sometimes referred to as second actuality as in *De Anima* (412 a10). Second, since its activity of causing motion is eternal, it cannot have any capacities that have not been realized.[219] That is to say, everything that it can do it has already done or is already doing, hence pure actuality. For the third notion we must look at the Prime

---

[215] Bradshaw (2007: 9). Aristotle refers to the possession of a capacity as containing the knowledge on which to act; this is referred to as the first actuality (*De Anima* 412 a10).

[216] We saw this distinction already in chapter 3 in discussing how Plotinus used, and revised, Aristotle's ideas on actuality and motion in his discussion of the internal act.

[217] Ibid.

[218] Ibid., 13.

[219] Ibid., 14.

Mover a bit more closely. Aristotle's theory of motion required that he conceive how something could move or cause others to change without itself changing. Thus Aristotle tries to answer this by positing, rather famously, that the Prime Mover is self–thinking thought, a being whose "thought is a thinking of thinking" (*Met.* xii.9 1075b34).[220] Therefore, this third notion of *energeia* is that of an activity, namely, the Prime Mover's essence (or substance) as self–thought.

The thinking of the Prime Mover has, for Aristotle, all possible intelligible content, hence its full actuality. In "thinking itself" Aristotle means that the act itself must be the same as its object, for there is nothing other than the object (i.e., all that is intelligible).[221] There is no unrealized potentiality but only the actuality of thought. By identifying the Prime Mover with thought, the Mover not only thinks all intelligible content, but it *is* all intelligible content. While this is not explicit in Aristotle, later Neoplatonists relied heavily on this understanding in formulating their metaphysics.[222]

---

[220] Whether or not this answer satisfactorily explains the Prime Mover as the cause of motion is a rather vexing and controversial question that isn't central to our understanding of *energeia*. See Bradshaw (2004: 22–44) for a rather long treatment of the subject.

[221] Bradshaw (2004: 15).

[222] In fact, many Neoplatonic scholars point to this understanding as Neoplatonism's crowning achievement i.e., combining Platonic ontology with Aristotle's *energeia*. The primary distinction between Platonism and Neoplatonism is that Neoplationism harmonizes both the Platonic and the Aristotelian first principle into the One (Plato's beyond being in *Republic* 509b) and its offspring, intellect (Aristotle's Prime Mover). See Gregory (1998: 6-12). For Aristotle, the first principle is the Prime Mover which fundamentally thinks about itself. Whereas, for Plato the first principle is that which is beyond thought (according to the Neoplatonic interpretation) and thus, not intelligibility (i.e., being), the Neoplatonist, on the other hand, combines the notion of Aristotle's Prime Mover, which is the first being (intellect) in the Neoplatonic hierarchy, with Plato's One that is beyond being, hence the One as the first principle. Therefore, the One in Neoplatonism is meant to be identified with the One in Plato, while the Prime Mover in Aristotle is identified as the intellect (being) in Neoplatonism. This, of course, is exactly what we saw in Plotinus, that the One is that which is beyond being while the intellect is being as such.

The significance here for us is to discern how we are to understand the concept of *energeia*. Activity? Actuality? Of course, it is both, but also neither. Aristotle's notion has a greater philosophical importance than simply an act. Therefore, Bradshaw recommends that the best description would be "pure energy," but this is less than satisfactory, and like some other recent scholars I will leave it untranslated.[223]

### 4.8 Plotinus and the *Energeia*

How do we make sense of the One's being *energeia* yet remaining distinct from all things? The answer to this question, as we have already seen, was given by Plotinus in the double act doctrine. The Intellect comes forth as the external *energeia* of the One, completely dependent on it. Yet Plotinus also assigned a kind of *energeia* to the internal act, of which the external is an image. Plotinus must assign a kind of e*nergeia* to the One in order for its images to have activity. For being to *be*, as we have seen, then the being*ness* of being (i.e., *energeia*) must have its source in the One. Thus the *energeia* of the internal act is nothing but the One's pure energy. The One's pure energy is Thought, Good, Beauty, Love etc., because it is the means by which all else exists. Therefore, this internal energy of the One, while remaining beyond being, must be an energy of which all beings are an image.

---

[223] Bradshaw (2004: 19–21). Scholars are divided on how to translate *energeia*. Bradshaw translates *energeia* as "energies," a term whose derivation from *energeiai* is obvious, but given the common meanings of energies in modern English, this seems like a poor and unhelpful term. Therefore, I will follow Jonathan Beere in his recent work *Doing and Being* where he leaves the term untranslated.

To be sure, we cannot know what the internal act of the One actually *is*, but we can get an image of it by looking at its offspring.[224] We arrive at this rather vague conclusion about what the One is only by being able to observe in ourselves the images (beings) that mirror the One. That is to say, we only understand the One by contemplation, becoming good, striving for beauty, desiring the beloved (and giving of one's self to the beloved) etc., and thus becoming who we (and all beings) are. The external act is that which manifests the One in being; therefore, to participate fully in the act is, in some sense, to know the One. To get as close to the One as we can, we must know or understand the intellect, because the first offspring of the One is that which is the most like it.

With this background of *energeia* we can return to Dionysius' procession and reversion and see its relation to the essence/energies of the One. As we have seen, Dionysius gives descriptions of the One in his treatise, *Divine Names,* while also maintaining the One as beyond being. The names are, according to Dionysius, "... the beneficent processions of God [the One]" (*DN* 1.4, 589d). He goes on to say, "and so all these scriptural utterances [divine names] celebrate the supreme Deity by describing it as a monad or henad, because of its supernatural simplicity and indivisible unity, by which unifying power we are led to unity. We, in the diversity of what we are, are drawn together by it and are led into a godlike oneness, into a unity reflecting God" (*DN* 1.4, 589d). This example is important because it shows that the way to describe the One is by explaining its effects as beings.[225] To be sure, the One still maintains transcendence and indivisibility, yet it has the characteristics, as their source, that in fact are given to beings.

---

[224] Bradshaw (2004: 81).

[225] Ibid., 180.

From this account we can see that Dionysius sees each name for the One as containing two relations. Dionysius says,

> For the unnamed goodness is not just the cause of cohesion or life or perfection so that it is from this or that providential gesture that it earns a name, *but it actually contains everything beforehand within itself–and this in an uncomplicated and boundless manner*–and it is thus by virtue of the unlimited goodness of its single all–creative Providence. Hence the songs of praise and the names for it are fittingly derived from the sum total of creation" (*DN* 1.7, 596d–597a) (italics added)

The transcendence of the One is in no way altered by its relationship to being because the One is not like any being, "for there is no exact likeness between the cause and the things that are caused, save that the things caused contain impressed images of their causes" (*DN* 2.4, 645c). Yet since the effect is an image of the cause, then, it is also true to say that each term applies to both being and its source: "if someone were to say that Life itself lives or Light itself is enlightened, he would not, I think, speak truly--unless he were to say that they do so in a different mode, since the things caused preexist more fully and essentially in their cause" (*DN* 2.8, 645d).

These two relations of the names of the One indicate that the names apply to both the procession from the One, and to the One itself.[226] "All the names befitting God [the One]... are ascribed to the entire fullness of the complete and entire divinity, absolutely, and completely, without division or reservation" (*DN* 2.1, 636c). Since each name is a representation of the One itself, the names are themselves images of the One, and each name is more complete, or fulfilled, in the One itself, paradoxically. Thus to name being (or procession) is in fact to name the One, according to Dionysius. What comes forth from the One is, nonetheless, the One as well as the manifestations of the One. Dionysius claims, as we have already seen, the One "causes, produces, and generates what is being referred to, and, on the other hand, he is the thing itself.

---

[226] Ibid., 181.

He is stirred by it and he stirs it" (*DN* 4.14, 712c). Dionysius is claiming that anything said about the One is not the One. Yet he is also claiming that anything said about being (manifestations of the One) is more accurately said about the One since it is the source of being.

We can see here how Dionysius is further clarifying the positive and negative language that we saw in Plotinus. What we also find in Dionysius is how the concept of procession relates to Aristotle's *energeia.* The *energeiai* of the One are indeed the manifestations of the One in being (i.e., the external act). In fact, Dionysius even seems to use the terms procession and *energeia* equally when he says, "[the One] is present to all by his uncontainable embracing of all and by the providential processions and activities [*energeiai*] He exercises upon all... The straight motion should be considered to be the undeviating procession of His *activities* [*energeiai*]" emphasis added (*DN* 9.9, 916c). From this passage it appears that what proceeds from the One are in fact the energies or activities of the One. If what comes forth from the One (procession) are the energies of the One, then, it would seem to follow that procession (the external act) is the *energeia* of the One. Nevertheless, what Dionysius is emphasizing is that in his ontology any effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and returns to it.[227] Thus the *energeiai* come forth as manifestations of the One, while being both the One and other than the One, and ultimately, returning to the One.

Therefore, the internal act is the One as it is, as the source of being, and the external act is the *energeia* of the One manifested in differentiation, i.e., being. Thus the distinction between them is that the internal act is the undifferentiated *energeia* of the One, whereas the eternal act is the differentiated *energeia* of the One, which is the intellect/being. But notice, being is not,

[227] See Proclus *El. Th*. prop. 35.

therefore, something that is cut off from the One. Rather being actually *is* the One. But the *isness* of being is the One's differentiated presence in reality. For Dionysius, since the One is the source of all things, it is also all things. Thus it is *within* the One that we find that which is beyond being and being itself. The distinction between the internal and external act occurs not between being and that which is beyond being, but *within* the One.

### 4.9 Reversion and *Energeia*

We have seen how procession compares and correlates to *energeia*, but now we will need to visit the other side of the external act, namely, reversion. In considering the place of *energeia* we will look briefly not at the *Divine Names* but instead at two other treatises, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. In these two works Dionysius explains how the angels aid human beings in their journey back to the One. Here we find Dionysius using *energeia* to explain his concept of hierarchy.

> A hierarchy is, in my view, a sacred order and knowledge and activity (*energeia*), the whole of which is assimilated as closely as possible to the divine, and uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the illuminations granted it by God. The aim of a hierarchy is assimilation as nearly as possible to God and union with Him, having Him as the leader of every sacred knowledge and activity (*energeia*)... Therefore, one who speaks of a hierarchy indicates a certain arrangement all of which is sacred, *an image of the comeliness of God [the One]*. It celebrates the mysteries of its illumination in hierarchical orders and states of knowledge, being assimilated so far as is lawful to its source. Perfection for each allotted member of the hierarchy consists in being led upward, in his own proper degree, to the imitation of God. Even more marvelously, it is, as the Scriptures say, to become a 'co–worker of God' and to exhibit in oneself the divine action (*energeia*), which is thus made manifest so far as possible. (*CH* 3.1–2, 164d–165b) (italics added)

Notice that the entire hierarchy is an "image of the comeliness" of the One, and it is assimilated to its source. Insofar as each thing in the hierarchy performs its role, that is to say, insofar as it is

what it is supposed to be, then each thing in the hierarchy shares in the *energeia* of the One. Thus nothing is set apart from everything else; instead the whole hierarchy itself is the image or manifestation of the One.[228] By imitation, or being like the One, each place allotted in the hierarchy becomes part of the *energeia* of the One. But in order for anything to *be* in the hierarchy, it must *act* as it is supposed to act, which befits the particular manifestation of the One which it is.

We might ask, but why is there this hierarchy in Dionysian Neoplatonic metaphysics anyway? What purpose does it serve? Why not just have the One and then everything else, without further distinctions of levels? The answer is that, for Dionysius, the role of the *energeiai* of the One is to purify, illuminate and perfect everything that is.[229] To say it differently, the One is the purification, illumination, and perfection of all things. For anything to exist, it must, by definition, be lacking in some way. That is to say, the intellect lacks precisely because it is not the One, and so on down the hierarchy. The One is the only thing that is complete and lacks nothing. Therefore, for any other, something that is not the One, that other is in need of purification, illumination, and perfection. Because the One lacks nothing, everything that comes into being is lacking that which the One is. This lacking produces a certain longing (or *eros*) for that which it does not have, namely, the One. Therefore, in desiring the One, being is in fact being purified, illuminated, and perfected by returning to its source. Of course, being cannot be purified, illuminated, and perfected to such an extent that it *is* the One, but being gets as close as it possibly can. Being, thus, becomes an image that is purified, illuminated, and perfected by participating in the *energeiai* of the One.

---

[228] Bradshaw (2004: 184).

[229] Ibid.

What the One does, and also is, is to bring about this *activity*. In the hierarchy each level is "for some to purify and others to be purified, for some to illumine and others to be illuminated, for some to perfect and others to be perfected, each imitates God in the way that is appropriate to his own function" (*CH* 3.2, 165b–c). These three *energeiai* are themselves arranged in a harmonious order, and for this reason the beings who manifest them must also be arranged hierarchically.[230] The role of purification, illumination, and perfection is to bring about the act (*energeia*) of reversion of all beings to their source.

> Since God first purifies the minds in whom He has come to be present, then illuminates them, and having illuminated them perfects them into a godlike completion, naturally the hierarchy, being an image of the divine, distributes itself into distinct orders and powers. It thereby manifests palpably by the divine actions (*energeiai*), which are established firmly and without confusion in holy and pure ranks. (*EH* 5.1.7, 508d–509a)

Since the whole hierarchy is an image of the One, then each hierarchical distinction is itself an image of "the divine actions (*energeiai*)."[231]From this account we can see that the *energeiai* are not only performed in the hierarchy but, more importantly, actually are the hierarchy itself. The *energeia* that the hierarchy is is none other than the One itself. This, of course, should not surprise us as we have seen this over and over again in our account of the double act in Plotinus and in the procession and reversion of Dionysius.

If it is true that procession and reversion are essentially the same thing, and if it is true that this *energeia* is the activity of the One while also *being* the One, then it seems we have found a strong similarity between Neoplatonic metaphysics and the doctrine of the essence/ energies of God. In fact, if procession and reversion are both the double act coming forth from

---

[230] Ibid.

[231] Ibid., 185.

the internal act of the One, it would follow that the essence of the unknowable God (beyond being) in *apophatic* theology is the internal act. Consequently, the external act, being both procession and reversion, must be the energies of the One which come forth from the One, are the One, and yet are distinct from the One. We have continually been reflecting and going around the central tenant of Dionysian Neoplatonism, and I would argue, even earlier Greek Christian thought,[232] this mysterious idea that the One both is and, because it is beyond being, *is not.* Thus it seems that all we can say about the One ultimately describes the *energeia* or external act. The intellect is nothing else but the first manifestation of the One, and it is that which is most like it, as an image. In any attempt to understand the One discursively, we ultimately fall back into describing only an image of the One, namely, the external act. Therefore, all we have done to this point is to highlight and explain what the double act/procession and reversion/essence and energies really are in an attempt to have some understanding of Dionysius' distinction between the first principle and being.

**4.10 Negative Theology**

For Dionysius the One is nameless and beyond being, which, as we have seen, he derives from the Neoplatonic tradition. For example, his negative language about the One is a philosophical language he inherits from Plotinus. Here is a a central passage where Dionysius refers to the One as beyond being.

---

[232] For example, the earlier Greek Christian thinker Gregory of Nyssa in, "The Life of Moses" §164 claimed that God is beyond all "knowing, comprehending, and being." However, unlike Dionysius Gregory would not say that God was not, simply because God was beyond all conceivability.

> How then can we speak of the divine names? How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and anticipates all things while itself eluding their grasp and escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding? How can we enter upon this undertaking if the Godhead [the One] is *superior to being* and is unspeakable? (*DN* 1.4, 593a) (italics added)

The One for Dionysius, as in Plotinus, is transcendent, and from this passage this seems to mean that the One is not included in the things of reality.[233] To have "no name" means that the One, for Dionysius, is not any *thing* (i.e., being) at all. Moreover, the One is not merely beyond human thought as if to imply there were some other type of thought which it would not be beyond. The One is not incomprehensible simply due to a human limitation, but instead, the One is beyond being as such, because thought is only directed at being, which is finite and defined.[234] For Dionysius it seems we must not think that the One is merely outside or above being: the One cannot *be*. If the One were merely above being, or cut off from being, then that would be to think of the One as a different type (or "kind")[235] of being. Rather, for Dionysius, the One is not any thing that *is*.

Generally, when speaking about negative theology, scholars mean something like, "we cannot say what God is but only what he is not."[236] If this definition is treating the One as an object of conceptual terms, which in Neoplatonism implies that it is finite, then this certainly isn't what Dionysius is doing. To say what the One is not, for Dionysius, is not to consider the One as some being needing to be distinguished from other beings with different features. Hence,

---

[233] Perl (2007: 13).

[234] Ibid.

[235] Armstrong (1944: 12).

[236] Perl (2007: 13).

the One is not a conceptual object defined by any descriptions or even privations of attributes.[237]

As Dionysius says,

> Since it [the One] is the cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regards to being, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. *Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion*. (*MT* 1.2, 1000b) (italics added)

And, in concluding this short work,

> It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not a number or order, greatness, or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. it does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it spirit, in the sense in which we understand the term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth–it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation: it is also *beyond every denial. (MT* 5, 1048 a–b) (italics added)

Therefore, it seems we cannot say what the One is not, any more than we can say what the One is, because, again, the One is not a thing. To be sure, even postulating the One to be no thing is saying too much.

Similarly, Dionysius does not want to say the One is simply ineffable, unknowable, or incomprehensible.[238] To think of the One as ineffable is to describe an attribute of the One, and

---

[237] Ibid., 14.

[238] Ibid.

this is a contradiction. The problem is that in using language we get an idea of some being that is beyond our grasp and, again, is above, over, or "out" there. But the point here is that we contradict ourselves even when we claim the One is beyond the reach of thought, because to name the One is to think it. The One is not merely unknowable and incomprehensible, but beyond even unknowing and uncomprehending, not merely ineffable, but beyond ineffability.[239] Yet again, even these conceptual words must ultimately be left or transcended.

True negative theology, for Dionysius, does not consist of negating words or thoughts, as we have seen. Instead the purpose of negating is to bring the mind to silence. As Dionysius says,

> ...what happens is this. We use whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God. With these analogies we are raised upward toward the truth of the mind's vision, a truth which is simple and one. We leave behind us all our own notions of the divine. We call a *halt to the activities of our minds* and, to the extent that is proper, we approach the ray which transcends being. (*DN* 1.4, 592d) (italics added)

Dionysius refers to this as the "cessation of every intellectual activity" (*DN* 1.5, 593c). And, in ceasing our intellectual activities we "throw ourselves into the ray beyond being as far as possible" (*DN* 1.4, 592d). Here the emphasis is not on less speech but on complete non-speech and non-intellection (*MT* 3.1, 1033c). Notice that Dionysius is not merely offering some sublime mystical hyperbole, but rather a detailed philosophical conclusion based on Neoplatonic metaphysics, in which being is identified as intellect (or intelligibility). Insofar as we are speaking and thinking, we are limited to the realm of being, and therefore, not attaining the One. If the One could be apprehended by thought or language, then the One would be limited; it would be finite. As we can see, only within this Neoplatonic framework are Dionysius' formulations justified and rightly understood.

---

[239] Ibid.

One might ask, after this analysis of Dionysius, if negative theology is just another way of being an atheist. Thus far we have seen that Dionysius takes seriously the fact of denying the first principle as a being; however, we have not taken into account that Dionysius is equally concerned with transcending that denial as well. To be sure, Dionysius is no theist, in the sense that he does not hold that the One exists. In fact, we might add that many misunderstandings of Dionysius' metaphysics arise if we approach the text from a theistic point of view. On the other hand, according to Dionysius, to say that the One does not exist is no more correct than to say that the One does exist. We must remember that in dealing with Dionysius' first principle we cannot see it as a conceptual object; therefore, both atheism and theism are concepts that do not fit into the ontology of Dionysius' Neoplatonism. Thus the One is not a supreme nor supernatural *being*. While we have found ideas in Plotinus that may imply this concept of denying the first principle completely, as Dionysius is doing, Plotinus does not explicitly deny the existence of the One; he just wants to keep the One "beyond being." But that leaves open the possibility of seeing the One as an "infinite being", as we saw in Armstrong. Dionysius, on the other hand, is explicit in denying even the transcendent One (i.e., transcendent as in "cut-off from the finite"). To be sure, Dionysius certainly has a theory of transcendence; it just looks nothing like an infinite being. It is Dionysius' flat transcendence that I think helps us see how to make Neoplatonic ontology more coherent.

**Chapter 5**

## SYMBOLS, SILENCE, AND MANIFESTATIONS

Dionysius, following Plotinus' metaphysics, believes the One is not any being, as we have seen; however, the One is the source of all things.[240]

> Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good this One, this *Source* of all unity, this supra-existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name. It is and it is as no other being is. Cause of all existence, and therefore itself transcending existence, it alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is. (*DN* 1.1, 588b) (italics added)

Moreover, the One, as the source for all beings, can also be named by all names of beings.

> It [the One] is cause of all beings, but itself, nothing, as transcending all things in a manner beyond being... Since it is the underpinning of goodness, and by merely being there is the cause of everything, to praise this divinely beneficent Providence you must turn to all of creation. It is there at the center of everything and everything has it for a destiny. (*DN* 1.5, 593 c–d)

To clarify, to say the One is a cause is not to ascribe an attribute of causality. To say that the One is a cause is to assert that all beings depend on the One. Furthermore, to ascribe causality to the One, we must be careful not to think of our modern notions of causation. We must look at the concept of causation more carefully as it contains a vital understanding for Neoplatonic philosophy.

We will begin by showing how Dionysius' notion of causation comes through Plotinus and Proclus. Once we have an understanding of the Neoplatonic idea of causation, then we will be able to see how Dionysius' philosophy of symbols relates to Neoplatonic causation. What we

---

[240] Here we find Dionysius' referring to the One as the "source." We have already seen this idea in Plotinus. However, in Plotinus we referred to this concept as ontological priority. Therefore, we can understand the concepts of ontological priority and "source" as being synonymous.

will find is that Dionysius gives a more lucid account of how we are to understand symbols in Neoplatonic philosophy. For for Dionysius we will find, quite explicitly, that every *thing* (sensible thing or word) is an image/symbol of the One simply because it exists.

In Neoplatonism this "causation" by the One is not, and cannot, be the horizontal causation in which one thing causes another with the same ontological order.[241] As Plotinus said,

> Being must not fluctuate, so to speak, in the indefinite, but must be fixed by limit and stability; and stability in the intelligible world is limitation and shape, and it is by these that it receives existence. Of this lineage is the Intellect of which we are speaking, a lineage worthy of the purest Intellect, that it should spring from nowhere else but the first principle, and when it has come into existence should generate all realities along with itself, all the beauty of the Ideas and all the intelligible gods. (V.1.7, 24–28)

The significance of the explanation of causation is to show that in Neoplatonism the One "causing" the intellect (or being) shows that the intellect is determinate and, therefore, dependent on the first principle. Thus on every level of ontology each being is wholly determinate and dependent on that which is its cause. The ontology of each being continues down to the sensible world. That is to say, each level of being is the cause of the next level of being (for Dionysius "being" applies to all levels in the hierarchy) by simply being what it is. As Plotinus says, "the Soul is defined by its parent and, so to speak, given a form" (V.1.7, 41–42). That which is lower exists or *is* only if it receives its being from that which is higher. What we can see here is that this causation is nothing other than Plato's conception of participation. For Plato the effect participates in the cause by being what it is, the effect. For example, consider the *Phaedo* again, "It seems to me, if anything else is beautiful besides the Beautiful itself; and all things I say

---

[241] Perl (2007: 17).

likewise... Nothing else makes it beautiful than the presence or communion of that Beautiful... but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful " (100d 4–8). Here we see that anything that is beautiful must, in some sense, participate in the form of Beauty in order to be what it is. It is only within this Platonic understanding of participation that we see how the One is the cause of all things, as Dionysius also asserts. The One causes being to be not by making it, as it were. Rather the One is the cause only because it is greater ontologically and the source to which all things aspire.

Plato understood this participation as the appearing of a singular form in multiple instances. All appearances of the forms are symbols or images of the form in which it participates. As Plato said, "each form is itself one but, as they appear everywhere by communion with actions and bodies and each other, each appears many" (*Republic* 476a 5–7). These appearances are not to be understood as other beings in addition to the forms, and, as such, do not constitute another "world."[242] Each appearance in the sensible world is a reflection, to use Platonic language, in a mirror. Therefore, the reflection that is seen (i.e., beauty), as in the illustration above, is a reflection of the form Beauty and thus any beautiful thing that exists in the sensible world exists as beautiful only insofar as its beauty is reflecting the Beautiful. So these appearances in the sensible world are not exactly illusions, but they are instead reflections of the real thing. Of course, this also implies that we are not seeing the real thing in itself (*Republic* 478d 5–11). Thus the difference between these ontological levels is not between different kinds of realities, but instead between reality as such and appearance.

[242] Perl (2007: 20).

With this in mind, we can see how Plotinus could be seen to use this exact understanding in explaining the relationship between the intellectual objects (forms) and sensible objects: "it is all present, but it is not all seen in everything, because of the incapacity of what underlies it. But it is present, numerically identical everywhere" (VI.5.11, 30–32). That is to say, the intellectual objects are both transcendent in their nature yet at the same time immanent in the sensible. All particular sensibles are images of that which is higher and these sensibles are simply lesser manifestations of that which is more real. The lower level of ontology is the differentiated apprehension of the very form from the higher level.[243] All lower appearances are nothing other than appearances or presentations to a lesser mode of cognition.[244]

Because the One is the source of intellect it cannot be on the same ontological level. Therefore, in order for the One not to be on the same ontological level as being it must, by necessity, be beyond it. The One is immanent in the intellect in the same way that the Beautiful is immanent in a beautiful sunset, for example. The One, however, also transcends the intellect just as the Beautiful must transcend the mere sensible instance of a beautiful sunset. Thus the One is at once both transcendent and immanent in all beings (intelligibles). It is transcendent in that it is not identical to any being, while at the same time being immanent in being present to all beings. In fact, if the One is not present (immanent) in all beings then those beings cannot be (exist). As Plotinus said,

> The One is there and not there; it is not there because it is not in the grasp of anything, but because it is free from everything it is not prevented from being anywhere. For if, on the one hand, it was prevented, it would be limited by something else... and God would go just so far, and would not be independent but a slave to the beings which come after

[243] Deck (1991: 124).

[244] Ibid.

> him. The things, therefore, which are in something are there where they are; but *everything which is not somewhere has nowhere where it is not.* For if it is not here, it is clear that another place contains it, and it is here in something else, so that the not somewhere is false. If therefore the not somewhere is true and the somewhere is false... it will not be absent from anything. But if it is not absent from anything and is not anywhere, it is everywhere independent. (V.5.9, 13–24) (italics added)

If the One were "separate" or "other" from being, then it would just be another being and thereby limited in relation to other beings.[245] By being transcendent, infinite, and beyond all beings, it remains not separate but present to all beings, (i.e., omnipresent). Moreover, by being present to all beings it also remains completely distinct in its transcendence.

What we see here with the distinction between transcendence and immanence is the reading we referenced in Plotinus, namely, seeing the distinction as not being between the One and being, but rather *within* the One. The transcendent is that which is the One as the undifferentiated source of being as such, whereas the immanent is the differentiated manifestation of the One in being. Or to say it differently, the internal act is the transcendence of the One, while the external act is the immanence of the One in being. The One is completely omnipresent in all being by being immanent, yet also remains transcendent in that the One cannot be limited to the realm of being. The One transcends being only in that it is the undifferentiated source of being, and not as some other *being*. So far we have been using Plotinus to elucidate the Neoplatonic philosophy of causation. Later we will return to Dionysius to support reading Neoplatonism as flat transcendence.

Along these lines, Proclus made reference to this idea in what he calls the "participated" and the "unparticipated." It is important to note that Proclus is not generally read by Neoplatonic

---

[245] Ibid.

scholars[246] to make only one distinction between the unparticipated and the participated, as we are doing here. This is because, for Proclus, there must be a third element which he calls the participant. In fact, the general understanding of Proclus is that there are many distinctions between the One and being, and these distinctions become what he calls the Henads. However, for our purposes we will try to use the relationship between the unparticipated and participated as Dionysius understands it because our purpose is to elucidate the Neoplatonic tradition through Dionysius, and not necessarily Proclus. Moreover, these two terms, unparticipated and participated, Dionysius uses to explain how the One is not a being, i.e., the One as unparticipated and being as participated. Proclus made this point by stating:

> All that is unparticipated produces from itself the participated... For on the one hand the unparticipated, having the relative status of a monad (as being its own and not another's, and as transcending the participants), generates terms capable of being participated. For it will give something of itself, whereof the receiver becomes a participant, whilst the given subsists as a participated term.
> Every participated term, on the other hand, becoming a property of that by which it is participated, is secondary to that which is equally present to all and has filled them all from itself. That which is in one is not in the others; while that which is present to all alike, that it may illuminate all, is not in any one, but is prior to them all. (*El. Th.,* prop. 23)

The difference between the unparticipated and the participated that Proclus alluded to here can be understood as making the same point that Plotinus made in distinguishing a sensible image from an archetype.[247] For Proclus, the unparticipated gives "something of itself", which is no other than the participated. The unparticipated, therefore, is "present to all and has filled them all from itself." The cause must be "present to all alike"; this is how Proclus distinguished the

---

[246] Such as, for example, E.R. Dodds (1992: 20).

[247] See Enneads VI. 4.10. We will return to the idea of image in Dionysius below as it plays a very important role in distinguishing the One from everything that is.

unparticipated from the participated. Thus the participated is unique in each effect (this is what Plotinus calls the image), whereas the unparticipated is present in each effect (this is Plotinus' archetype) as the source of the effect. The purpose of the distinction is to make sure the unparticipated is not apart from the participants but instead to guarantee its unconditional presence in every single participant, i.e. image.[248] Proclus went on to state that the unparticipated "...is thus the engendered and is established beyond alternation or diminution, multiplying itself in virtue of its generative potency and furnishing from itself secondary substances" (*El. Th.,* prop. 27). The "secondary substances" are nothing else than the multiple effects of the universal cause.

The transcendent and immanent aspects of the One elucidate how the first principle can be omnipresent within the sensible world while also remaining beyond it. Proclus also made this evident when he stated,

> Every cause which is separate from its effects exists at once everywhere and nowhere...We mean by cause that which fills all things naturally capable of participating it, which is the source of all secondary existences and by the fecund outpouring of its irradiations is present to all them all. But by its mode of being, which has no admixture of spatial, and by its transcendent purity it is nowhere; for if it is separate from its effects it is enthroned above all alike and resides in no being inferior to itself. If it were merely everywhere it would not be omnipresent in that sense in which causes are capable of immanence in their effects, namely by unstinted self-bestowal. In order that as cause it may be present in all that can participate it is prior to all the vessels which it fills, it must be at once everywhere and nowhere. (*El. Th.,* prop. 98)

The idea that the cause is separate from the effects is due to the fact that in no way is the cause conditioned by what follows. The significance here is that the cause is unaffected by each differentiated effect. Nonetheless, each effect must be contained within the cause because each

---

[248] Perl (2007: 23).

effect is the differentiated presence of the cause.[249] We referred to the cause being unaffected by what follows as ontological priority in chapter 2. Plotinus had made the same point when he stated:

> The last and lowest things, therefore, are in the last of those before them, and these are in those prior to them, and one thing is in another up to the first, which is the Principle. But the Principle, since it has nothing before it, has not anything else to be in; but since it has nothing else to be in, and the other things are in those which come before them, it encompasses all the other things. (V.5.9, 6–10)

The One, as we see here, contains the undifferentiatedness of all beings. Moreover, this implies that all that is in the effects, and the effects themselves, are none other than differentiated appearances of the cause.[250] To quote Plotinus again:

> Since in things which are generated it is not possible to go upwards but only to go downwards and move further towards multiplicity, the principle of each group of things is simpler than they are themselves... There must therefore be a concentration in a real one outside all multiplicity and any simplicity whatsoever, if it is to be really simple. (V.3.16, 6–16)

Plotinus argued that the One is that which is all things without distinction (i.e. without multiplicity). In fact, it is the intellect which is all things with multiplicity, "The One cannot be all things, for so it would be no longer one; it cannot be intellect, for in this way it would be all things since intellect is all things; and it cannot be being; for being is all things" (VI.9.2, 44–47). The One, therefore, is all things at once without any differentiation which is what makes them intelligible (i.e. beings). Consider Plotinus again:

> But how is that One the principle of all things? Is it because as principle it keeps them in being, making each one of them exist? Yes, and because it brought them into existence.

---

[249] Ibid.

[250] Deck (1991: 126).

> But how did it do so? By possessing them beforehand. But it has been said that in this way it will be multiplicity. But it had them in such a way as not to be distinct: they are distinguished on the second level, in the rational form of being. (V.3.15, 27–33)

As we have seen, all that is, without any distinction, is the One. But because the One is without distinctions it must be beyond being and thus not any *thing*. "The One: all things and not even one; for it is the principle of all things, not all things, but all things transcendently; for in a way they do occur there; or rather they are not there yet, but will be" (V.2.1, 1–3). To illustrate this point Plotinus famously used an image of different points on the circumference of a circle:

> ...just as the centre of a circle exists by itself, but every one of the radii in the circle has its points in the centre and the lines bring their individuality to it. For it is with something of this sort in ourselves that we are in contact with god [the One] and are with him and depend upon him; and those of us who converge towards him are firmly established in him. (V.1.11, 11–15)

All the points in the illustration of the circle move towards the center, each along its radius. As each point gets closer to the center the circle becomes much smaller. When the points meet at the center the circle ceases to be a circle altogether. The center, of course, is the One, not the circle (not any thing), but the undifferentiated containment of all things.[251]

Conversely, everything else is nothing more than the differentiation or multiplicity of the One. What makes something a being is the fact that it is differentiated from another being, making each intelligible. The differentiation between one being and another also distinguishes each from the One.[252] Each being is not the One in that it is differentiated from others, determinate, intelligible, i.e. being. To say it differently, all things are other than the One, but the One is not other than all things because the One has "no otherness" (VI.9.8, 34).

---

[251] Perl (2007: 25).

[252] Deck (1991: 126).

Being differentiated, each being becomes an appearance of the One. Each being, by being intelligible, is as close as the intellect can get to the One itself. As Plotinus said, "Therefore this multiple Intellect, when it wishes to think that which is beyond, [thinks] that itself which is one, but in wishing to attain to it in its simplicity comes out continually apprehending something else made many in itself" (V.3.11, 1–4). This account explains how the intellect is a trace of the One[253], as we saw in chapter 3. Or, equivalently, the intellect is an expression or image of the One.[254]

Moreover, the One is not to be understood as a thing which "overflows" (V.2.1, 8) by doing something. Instead, the One in its external act simply is the overflow itself in which all being or differentiation comes to be. The One, by being the source of the overflow, is essentially what we have discussed as the internal act, which isn't *doing* anything. Plotinus explained this by emphasizing constantly the One as the "power of all things"[255], and not as any thing. Plotinus gave an illustration of this process by using not the object of light, but light itself:

> For even the light of the sun which it has in itself would perhaps escape our sense of sight if a more solid mass did not lie under it. But if someone said that the sun was all light, one might take this as contributing to the explanation of what we are trying to say; for the sun will then be light which is in no form belonging to other visible things... This, then, is what the seeing of Intellect is like; this also sees by another light the things illuminated by that first nature, and sees the light in them; when it turns its attention to the nature of the things illuminated, it sees the light less; but if it abandons the things it sees and looks at the medium by which it sees them, it looks at light and source of light. But...Intellect must not see this light as external. (V.5.7, 13–23)

---

[253] V.5.5, 14.

[254] V.1.6, 45. See also V.1.7. 1.

[255] See III.8.10. 1; V.1.7. 10; V.3.15. 33; V.4.1. 36; VI.7.32. 31.

The light, as we see here, is not identified as any of the illuminated things, but it is present to them as the condition which makes them visible. So the One is not any intelligible thing but is present to all of them as the condition by which they are intelligible.[256] The light must be present in all forms of seeing as the condition for sight; however, it is not itself itself an object of sight, the way the illuminated things are. Similarly, the One is involved in all thought as the condition for intelligibility but it is not itself the object of the thought, nor can it be. This ontology also explains how being is the appearance of the One since light cannot be seen by itself as just pure light but only as illuminating something, so that all that is visible is a differentiated appearance of the light itself. To say it differently, there is no difference between a cause and its causing because if there were then we would find duality within the One itself which is completely contrary to Neoplatonic metaphysics. Proclus can be understood to make the same point when he stated,

> Every productive cause produces the next and all subsequent principles while itself remaining steadfast. For if it imitates the One, and if the One brings its consequents into existence without movement, then every productive cause has a like law of production. Now the One does create without movement. For if it creates through movement, either the movement is within it, and being moved it will change from being one and so lose its unity; or if the movement be subsequent to it, this movement will itself be derived from the One, and either we shall have infinite regress or the One will produce without movement. (*El. Th.,* prop. 26)

Therefore, each level in the Neoplatonic hierarchy is a manifestation and is nothing more than a differentiated expression of the One.

[256] Perl (2007: 27).

**5.2 Dionysius' One With No/Many Names**

With this firm grasp of the vertical relation within the Neoplatonic hierarchy, we will now look at how Dionysius explains that the One has no names yet also is all names. What we have seen is that in the hierarchy of being, each level is nothing more than a differentiated manifestation of the One. Dionysius states a fundamental Neoplatonic metaphysical principle when he says, "the things that belong to the effects pre-exist in the causes" (*DN* II.8, 645d). The One is the cause of all beings in that the One is present in all things as the determinate, by which each being is.[257] As Dionysus states:

> [the One is]...illumination of the illumined and principle of perfection of the perfected and principle of deification of the deified and simplicity of the simplified and unity of the unified... and, to speak simply, the life of living things and being of beings. (*DN* I.3, 589c)

The One is present to all beings as being, the universal character common to all beings in that they are beings, thus, "God [the One] neither was nor will be nor came to be nor comes to be nor will come to be; rather, he is not. But he is being to beings" (*DN* V.4, 817d). Similarly, to all living things the One is present as life, the One who determined those who are living things from those who are non-living.[258] Moreover, not only does each thing derive being and life from the One but every other distinctive feature as well.

> In the cause of all things the paradigms of all beings pre-exist. Paradigms... are the being–making determinations, pre–existing unitarily in God, of beings, which theology calls pre–determinations and good wills, determinative and creative of beings, according to which the beyond–being both predetermined and produced all beings. (*DN* V.8, 824c)

---

[257] As I said earlier in the chapter, while for Plotinus being is primarily intelligible, in Dionysius being refers to both the intelligible and sensible.

[258] Perl (1997: 29).

These "paradigms" are "in" the One without distinction and are the defining principles in causing things to be. Therefore, the One is present in each thing as its determinative source, or paradigm, which causes it to be what it is. That is to say, all features of all things are the indwelling of the One, by causing them to be the way they are, causing, thus, the One to not only be the being in beings and the life in living things but also "all things in all things" (*DN* I.7, 596c).

The presence of the One in all things is what Dionysius refers to as "powers,"[259] "participations,"[260] "processions,"[261] "providences,"[262] "manifestations,"[263] and "distributions"[264] of the One. All these terms are referencing the One as the causal presence in all things as their determinate. "If we have named the hiddenness beyond being God, or life, or being, or light, or word, we are thinking nothing other than the powers brought forth from it to us, which are deifying, or being–making, or life–producing, or wisdom–giving" (*DN* II.7, 645a). Concomitantly, the One can be named by *all* things, or to say it differently, all names of all things can properly refer to the One since whatever we find in anything is the One in it. To be sure, though the One can be named by everything, nothing can name the One, as Dionysius says:

> Realizing all this, the theologians praise it by every name–and as the nameless One. For they call it nameless when they speak of how the supreme Deity, during a mysterious revelation of the symbolical appearances of God, rebuked the man who asked, 'what is your name?'... This surely is the wonderful 'name which is above every name' and is

---

[259] DN II.7, 645a; XI.6, 956a.

[260] DN II.5, 644a; II.7, 645a; V.5, 820a.

[261] DN I.4, 589d; II.4, 640d; II.11, 649d; V.1, 816b; V.2, 816d.

[262] DN I.8, 597a; V.2, 817a.

[263] DN II.4, 641a.

[264] DN II.5, 644a; II.11, 649c.

> therefore without a name... And yet on the other hand they give it many names... (*DN* I.6, 596a)

Dionysius is adding to Neoplatonic philosophy with the notion that every name refers to the One. Plotinus, as we saw in chapter 2, seemed to limit the names of the One to the Good, the Beautiful, Father, etc. In Dionysius, however, the nameless One can be named by every name because every *thing* can only be if it is an image of its source, the One. Therefore, the name of every *thing* that can be named is a name of the One. Any thing that is, according to Dionysius, can be named, and insofar as something has a name then that name refers to the One. Dionysius' point here is to emphasize that the One is not merely in all things; instead the One is "all things in all things and nothing in any" (*DN* VII.3, 872a). So whatever contains intelligible content (that is to say, has being), that thing in itself is the One-in-it, in its distinctness. Yet the One remains "nothing in any" because the One is not any one thing that can be distinguished from other things within the whole.

The account of the One's names and namelessness is another illustration of the Neoplatonic doctrine of transcendence and immanence. The One is transcendent because the One is no being at all and not included within the realm of reality. The One is immanent by being always present in all things as their determinate. As Dionysius says, "the being of all things is the divinity beyond being" (*CH* I.4, 177d). We understand Dionysius here only by seeing how his theory fits nicely within the Neoplatonic metaphysics of the One as the being that all beings have, by which they are beings, and as such is beyond being in that the One is not one of them; it is not one of the things that have being.[265] Dionysius explains the transcendence and immanence

[265] Perl (2007: 31).

of the One in a way much like Plotinus, but by using the illustration of ambient light rather than Plotinus' illuminated being.

> The goodness of the Godhead which is beyond all things extends from the highest and most venerable substances to the last, and is still above all, the higher not outstripping its excellence nor the lower going beyond its containment, but it both *enlightens* all that are able, and crafts and enlivens and holds together and perfects, and is the measure of all beings. (*DN* IV.4, 697c) (italics added)

The "measure of all beings" comes from Plotinus (V.5.4, 14; VI.8.18, 3), and signifies that the One is the determination of all things and that on which all beings depend. Moreover, we can notice here how the light is not at the peak of the things that are but instead is beyond all things and yet permeates the whole. The light is transcending by not being part of the whole, yet it permeates by being present throughout by illumination, or determination, of the things that are.

Dionysius borrows Proclean language to express his distinction between the transcendent and the immanent when he states that the divine processions are "unparticipatedly participated" (*DN* II.5, 644a). For Dionysius, as in Proclus, processions are participated in that they are the differentiated presence of the One in all things. They are "unparticipatedly participated" because the One is differently present in different things and not confined to any of them. Here we find that Dionysius is in accord with Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus when they are read in this way, by the fact that the One is present in everything, yet remaining distinct. As such, the One is in all things ( being immanent), yet it remains unaffected by anything (being transcendent).[266]

[266] Perl (2007: 31).

### 5.3 The One and the Other

If we read Neoplatonism in light of Dionysius, and if the One is not just in all things but also *is* all things by being in all things as their source or cause, this seems to make the One the whole content of reality. Dionysius says, "God [the One] is all things as cause of all things, and holding together and pre–possessing in himself all principles, all limits of all beings" (*DN* V.8, 824a–b). Therefore, all the various features found in any thing must constitute the entire intelligible content of that thing. Since to be is to be intelligible, this implies that the intelligible must constitute the whole of what any thing is in itself. A being can be nothing else but the "totality of its intelligible determinations" down to its minute detail which distinguishes the particular thing from any other thing.[267] The processions of the One are in all things not as contained but as their entire content. Therefore, the One is the cause of all things, and by being subject to all names, the One is also the differentiated presence of itself. This makes sense insofar as we remember that the One is not an *is,* rightly understood. So any notion of the One as an *is* is correct only within the context of thinking or referring to the One. Of course, the One, by being beyond being, cannot correctly be referred to at all. Thus any reference to the One is nothing but the differentiated presence of the One in being. To say it differently, any language used about the One is really referring to being, which is, once again, the differentiated presence of the One (i.e., its manifestations).

We have found, it seems, that through Dionysius we come to understand more fully how the Neoplatonic metaphysics posits the One as the entire content of reality (i.e., all things) without differentiation. The One is that which is without distinction from any other thing and the

[267] Ibid.

means by which all things are. The One as the cause is the undifferentiated containment of all effects, and these effects (all things) are the presentation of the cause in differentiated multiplicity. In this light, Dionysius says, "the ray beyond being... can neither be thought nor spoken nor contemplated in any way at all because it is transcendent to all things and beyond unknowing, and pre–contained in itself at once in a manner beyond being, all the limits of all substantial knowledges and powers" (*DN* I.4, 592d–593a). This metaphor shows how the One is the source of all that is, yet remaining beyond it in ineffability.[268] The "limits of all substantial knowledges and powers" refers to the intelligible content of all reality; therefore, all is contained in the One "at once" in a way that is beyond being, knowing and thought without distinction.[269] Moreover, Dionysius goes on to say, "the cause of all things... pre–contained in itself all beings, simply and indeterminately" (*DN* I.7, 596c–597a). Consequently, Dionysius says that the One is not just "in" all things but that the One is "all beings and none of beings," (*DN* I.6, 596c) or "all things in all things and nothing in any" (*DN* VII.3, 872a). Notice here the similarities with Plotinus by emphasizing the One's being present in all things as "all things and not even one" (V. 2.1, 1). For Dionysius, the One is all things in all things, in that it is in virtue of whatever intelligible content is found in any thing that it is distinguished from others within the whole of reality and constituted by that distinction.[270]

Consequently, the best description that we can give of the One, according to Dionysius, would be to say "everything." To say it differently, the One is all things, yet without distinctions. All things that exist exist because they can be distinguished from something else that exists. Thus

---

[268] Golitzin (1994: 111).

[269] Ibid.

[270] Perl (2007: 31).

the One is that which *is* all things without differentiation. Moreover, this also implies that the differences between things are really the One, differentiated, just as in order for anything to be, its existence is from the One. So the One is not only the source of everything, but also that which distinguishes something from everything else. As Dionysius states, "[the One is] the Different, since God becomes providentially present to all things and all things in all things for the preservation of all" (*DN* IX.5, 912d). Furthermore, Dionysius claims, "let us consider the divine difference... as his unitary processions of his multiple–generation to all things."[271] We find this point also in Plotinus in his account of the "overflow" from the One as being the One itself. According to Plotinus, the One is not simple but "beyond any simplicity whatsoever" (V.3.16, 15). The cause is that which constitutes the effect, thereby showing that the One is not a "simple monad." Instead the One is neither simple nor differentiated but beyond both and, therefore, the source of both unity and difference. As Dionysius says,

> This--the One... is in its uniqueness the Cause of the multitudes of the good... From it derives the existence of everything as beings, what they have in common and what differentiates them, their identicalness and differences, their similarities and dissimilarities, their sharing of opposites, the way in which their ingredients maintain identity... Hence the innate togetherness of everything.(*DN* IV.7, 704b–c)

The source as the cause of being is the undifferentiated containment of all things; it is not "first" and then produces or undergoes distinction. Rather, the One is "unfolding," "overflowing,"

---

[271] *DN* IX.5, 913b. This "divine difference" is not to be understood as a Trinitarian distinction. Both Golitizin (1994: 51–54) and Perl (2007:122) argue that the One in Dionysius is all three persons of the Trinity. Thus the production of being is common to all three. Dionysius' One is neither many, simple, or complex. "The cause of all things is not one, one of the many, but before every one and multiplicity and determinative of every one and multiplicity"(*DN* XIII.2, 977c–d). Hence, " while hymned as monad and triad the divinity above all things is neither monad nor triad known among us or any other of beings" (*DN* XIII.3, 980d). That is not to say that Dionysius does not have a trinitarian doctrine (see Golitizin p. 54). However, his Trinitarian doctrine does not play a role in his ontology.

multiplying or differentiating, the means by which beings are distinct and thereby become beings.[272]

Dionysius, along with Plotinus, sees the whole of reality as a manifestation of the One. This implies that the entire content of being is the manifestation of the One in a distinct, finite, knowable way. Remember, to be is to be intelligible, and the One is apparent, or manifest, in and as being. What it means to *be* is, therefore, derived from everything that is--distinct, manifest, finite, and knowable.

**5.4 Pantheism?/Dualism?**

With the understanding that reality is the manifestation of the One, we must be careful not to misunderstand the Neoplatonic tradition here. We should not think that the One is "there" behind or "inside" all appearances. To do so would be to fall into the error of conceiving of the One as a "what", an object of thought. With the idea that reality is an appearance of the One, we should think of the One as that which appears and not think of the One as another member of the set of appearances. In other words, the idea here is *not* that the One is and then also appears; rather the One is nothing but what is differently present, or appears, in all things.[273] Again, the *isness* of the One is nothing but its appearance in all things. If the One were to be more than what being is, in being's differentiation, then the One would be something else. If the One is something else, this implies it is another *being*, and that is exactly what the One is not. To think of the appearance as what is appearing is not to think of being and *then* to think of the One. Instead, the One is not another thing but the "overflowing" of all things.

---

[272] Schafer (2006: 67).

[273] Perl (2007: 33).

But if it is true that the One is not something other than being but is "all things in all things", does this not, or so it would seem, imply that Dionysius (and the Neoplatonic tradition) is pantheistic? Or if being is manifestation of the One, then is being merely an appearance and not reality? While these questions may seem like logically implied conclusions from the Dionysian metaphysics, these questions miss an important component of manifestation and intelligibility.

Each being because it is a being is differentiated, finite, and intelligible, and insofar as it has those attributes, it cannot be the One. That is to say, "to be" means to be limited and this is exactly what Dionysius (and the other Neoplatonists) are explicit in denying of the One. Moreover, the One cannot be the content of all things taken in totality because all things are a plurality, or a multiplicity of distinct intelligible beings that are, again, finite. The One in Dionysius is "all beings and none of beings," "all things and nothing in any", and in these cases the all cannot be separate from the "none."[274] Plotinus should be read to make the same point when he stated, "The One cannot be all things, for so it would be no longer one; and it cannot be intellect, for in this way it would be all things since intellect is all things; and it cannot be being; for being is all things" (VI.9.2, 44. Cf. n67). The One is not any thing and neither is it all things in plurality. The One cannot be reducible to being; therefore, the whole of reality is "other" than the One.

If we conclude that Dionysius is not a pantheist, then we might wonder if he is a dualist; by "dualist" here all I mean is that reality would consist of two *things*. But, of course, neither can we say that he is a dualist, since that would be to consider the One as another being, as opposed

[274] Ibid.

to the world. All things are not the One, but the One is not therefore something else.[275] If the One were another thing besides the differentiations, then it would make the One a member of the set and thereby distinct from the other members, making the One finite. If the One were simply "other", then it would be another thing and therefore not truly transcendent. All things are other than the One, but the One is not other than all things. Since the One is not all things, we cannot say that Dionysius is a pantheist, but since the One is not "something" "other" than all things, neither is he a dualist.

Dionysius navigates a metaphysical view that is between dualism and pantheism by using the Platonic concept of images in his doctrine of being as manifestation of the One. The relationship between an image and that of which it is an image is not a relationship between two beings. The image is not another being in addition to that which is imaged. But neither is this a reduction of the image to what it is imaging. Plato can be understood to make the same point in describing the sensibles as images of the forms; they are not the forms themselves but neither are they nothing. The images are and are not reality; this is Plato's notion of the in–between status of sensibles. On the one hand, for Dionysius, beings are not additional to the One, in such a way that we have two things. On the other hand, neither is it the case that only the One exists, as we find in a pantheistic philosophy. Therefore, wherever we look we are not looking at the One because each being is not the One. However, wherever we look we are seeing the One as an image or presentation of the One, for every being is nothing other than an image of the One. Clearly Dionysius does not believe the world is not real. To be real is, according to Platonism, to be intelligible, but for Neoplatonism reality is an image and to go beyond images (or

[275] Ibid.

appearances) is to go beyond being. Only through this Neoplatonic framework can we see how to understand the One in relation to being without collapsing his metaphysics into just the One (some form of pantheism) or making the One a being (a kind of dualism). With Dionysius' metaphysics in mind we can now look to the concept of images of the One to further elucidate the role being plays *within* the One, the One yet remaining beyond being.

**5.5 Similar and Dissimilar Images**

As we have seen thus far, in Neoplatonic metaphysics being is the image or symbol of the first principle, the One. Moreover, not only is being the manifestation of the One, but, according to Sarah Rappe, "the language of Neoplatonism is also the language of symbol."[276] If the concept of symbolism is so fundamental to Neoplatonism, then it seems there must be some account for what is meant by "symbolism." If being as such is symbolic, then it would follow that there can be no knowledge of the One that is not symbolic. On these grounds we can see why the concept of symbolism plays such a prominent role in Dionysian metaphysics. What was implicit in Plotinus becomes explicit in Dionysius' philosophy of symbolism.

According to Dionysius, symbols are necessary for human beings who desire to know philosophical truths.[277] In fact, because Dionysius views symbols as fundamental to knowing truth, then all names refer to the One. For example, in *Divine Names* I.6, Dionysius explains how "the theologians [scriptural writers]... hymn [the One] as nameless and from every name," and with complete fluidity he goes from discussing the names of the One, such as Being, Life, Good,

---

[276] Rappe (2000:117).

[277] *CH* I.3, 121c-124a.

etc. to a list of sensible names taken from things: "sun, star, fire, water, wind, dew, cloud, rock itself, and stone, all beings and none of beings" (*DN* I.6, 596c). For Dionysius, all names are symbols.

This fluid continuity comes from an explicit passage in the *Celestial Hierarchy* where Dionysius refers to similar and dissimilar representations of the One.[278] Dionysius says, "The mode of sacred revelation is twofold: on the one hand as like, proceeding through similar sacred--stamped images, but on the other through dissimilar shape--makings, fashioned to what is altogether unlike and incongruous" (*CH* II.2–3, 140c). The distinction here between the "similar" and the "dissimilar" is between noble or exalted things (such as angels) and repugnant things (such as wild beasts and inanimate things). This distinction parallels that of the intelligible and the sensible, but Dionysius goes on to explain that the seemingly "similar" are, in fact, quite misleading.

> Of course the mystical traditions of the revelatory oracles [holy scriptures] at times hymn the blessedness of the thearchy beyond being as Word and Intellect and Being... and they shape it as Light and call it Life, such sacred formations being *more reverent and seeming somehow superior to the shapings connected with matter, but even so deficient* in relation to the truth of the thearchic likeness. For it is above all being and life, no light characterizing it, every word and intellect incomparably short of its likeness. (*CH* II.3, 140cd) (italics added)

The One, as such, is not a being or object of thought, and so it is as incorrect to think of the One as Word, Mind, or Being as it is to think of the One as lion, stone, fire, or worm.[279] All descriptions of the One, the exalted and noble, no less than the lowly and sensible, are inadequate, and thus "dissimilar."

---

[278] Ivanovic (2010: 51).

[279] *CH* II.5, 145a. In this passage Dionysius refers to the description of the One as a worm in Psalm 22.6.

Along these lines we can also see why Dionysius claims that the obviously dissimilar expressions are more accurate because they more clearly portray the infinite difference of the One from everything that is: "If the negations are true of divine things, but the affirmations are unsuitable to the hiddenness of ineffable things, the revelation concerning invisible things through dissimilar formations is rather more appropriate" (*CH* II.3, 141a).[280]

From the claim that all expressions are infinitely inadequate to the One, Dionysius goes on to say, "Further, it is necessary to understand this too, that not even one of beings is altogether deprived of participation in the Beautiful, since as the truth of the oracles [holy scriptures] says, 'all things are very beautiful'" (*CH* II.3, 141c, quoting Genesis 1.31 in the LXX). Everything that exists is, therefore, beautiful, and because something exists only insofar as it is a manifestation of the One, then nothing is completely "dissimilar."[281] The only way any being would be completely dissimilar is if the One were another *being* that is set apart from everything else, or completely transcendent. But we must remember that the One is "all things in all things and nothing in any" (*DN* VII.3, 872a). Therefore, it is as correct to say that the One is a lion, stone, fire, and worm as it is to say that the One is Word, Mind, and Being. Every expression of the One, the lowly and sensible along with the exalted and intelligible, participates in the One and is, once again, "similar."[282]

All things, either intelligible or sensible, are "similar" and "dissimilar", and this is precisely what Dionysius means by symbols. All beings, as finite, are not the One, and therefore infinitely "dissimilar." However, as beings, all things are presentations of the One and in this

---

[280] Ivanovic (2010: 52).

[281] Perl (2007: 98).

[282] Ivanovic (2010: 52).

way are "similar."[283] Now this may not sound like our general use of the term symbol. For example, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* a symbol is something that: 1. represents or stands for something else; 2. a mark or character used as a representation of an object, function, or process; 3. a shape or sign used to represent something such as an organization.

From these definitions we can see clearly that the third definition is not in accord with Dionysius' view of symbols. Certainly the One is no thing like an organization that is being represented by a sign.[284] The second seems closer to Dionysius' view, because the symbols are representing something by a word or name. Finally, it seems the first definition would be the closest, but with some trepidation. A symbol in the sense of the first definition is correct in that all symbols can be seen as presentations, or manifestations of the One. However, what is not correct about the first definition is that it gives no account that the symbol is the differentiated presentation of its source. Thus each definition seems inadequate in expressing Dionysius' concept although the first seems to be the closest. Nevertheless, what we find here with Dionysius' notion of symbol is nothing other than what we have already seen with regard to being, namely, that all things are symbols (or images)[285] of the One. Thus all that exists is the manifestation of the One in the intelligible as well as in the sensible world. Here we find in Dionysius a new addition to Neoplatonism, namely, the One is directly manifested in the intelligible *and* the sensible world. In Plotinus the One is manifested primarily in the intelligible

---

[283] Ibid.

[284] This definition seems to be primarily about signs we may see on emblems or flags. For example, the red cross symbol would fit under this definition.

[285] I am using the concept of symbol to include that of an image. In Greek Dionysius uses the term *eikon* (icon or image) as well as *sumbolon* (symbol). While the Greek word *sumbolon* generally refers only to sensible expressions of things, Semmelroth (1952: 6) says that for Dionysius, "The conceptual expression still always itself remains a symbol."

(i.e., the Forms), and thus only manifested in the sensible world in a mediated way. Dionysius, however, clearly sees the One as directly manifested without any intelligible mediation. Thus what we have found is that symbols, in Dionysian metaphysics, include both names and things.

### 5.6 Revealed and Concealed

These symbols, by being both similar and dissimilar, reveal and conceal that which they symbolize, and this further elucidates what it means to be a symbol.[286] Because every being is a differentiated expression, or presentation, of the One, then being is a revealing of the One in a manifestation. Thus any manifestation reveals the One, simply by being what it is. To know something is, in this sense, to know the One as manifested in that thing. Following the Platonic theory of participation, for Dionysius the reason that all things are symbols of the One is that the symbolized is not extrinsic to, but present in, the symbol; this is how the symbol is a presentation of the symbolized.[287] This presentation of the symbol is the activity of the being which is manifested because of its source, the One. But this revealing is precisely also a concealing of the One. By being differentiated, as finite, as a presentation, every being or symbol is not the One as such, and therefore leaves the One, as it were, in darkness, inaccessible. As Dionysius says, "Darkness becomes invisible by light, the more so as there is more light. Knowledge makes unknowing invisible, the more so as there is more knowledge" (*Ep.* I, 1065a). For Dionysius, light which gives vision makes darkness invisible. So to understand a symbol, or manifestation, is to understand a being and therefore not the One. The symbol, by being able to be perceived (this applies to intelligibility as well as sensibility), conceals the One from the knower/seer.

[286] Klitenic Wear (2007: 104).

[287] Semmelroth (1952: 6).

Speech and silence are parallel to light and darkness. To know anything is *ipso facto* to not know the One.[288] Thus we can see why revealing is also concealing.

It is also true to say that in concealing the One (the light), the One is also revealed.[289] The only way to see darkness, is, in fact, not to see. As Dionysius says, "We pray to come to the darkness above seeing and knowing by not seeing and not knowing itself" (*MT* II, 1025a). Thus not to see *is* to see darkness.[290] That is to say, for darkness to remain unseen (i.e., concealed) is for it to be revealed as darkness. All symbols, therefore, by being finite are not the One; yet in concealing the One, the One is revealed as beyond being and thought.[291] In other words, the One cannot be revealed to us unless it is also hidden from us. Thus light and darkness give us an account of how to understand what is revealed, and what is hidden. As Dionysius says,

> This is the Light which, by way of representative symbols, makes known to us the most blessed hierarchies... But we need to rise from this outpouring of illumination so as to come to the simple ray of Light itself. However, this divine ray can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils which the Providence of the Father [the One] adapts to our nature as human beings. (*CH* I.2, 121b)

Only in being concealed by a "variety of sacred veils" can the One be revealed in any way. If the One were not concealed, then it would be revealed, but this would be to make it a being and not the One as Dionysius understands the One. If the One can be known at all, what is known is precisely the unknowability of the One. If it were the case that we could know the One, then since the One could be known, it would in fact also be a being because to be is to be intelligible. Rather, what we can know about the One is only what is revealed through symbols, which are the

---

[288] Perl (2007: 98).

[289] Semmelroth (1952: 6).

[290] Perl (2007: 104).

[291] Marion (2001: 140).

differentiated manifestations of the One. But these manifestations also conceal the One because they are finite representations of what is infinite.

Since whatever is revealed must be concealed if we are to have any knowledge about the One, the only means to knowing the One, then, is symbolical. Thus we can see why all that is *is* nothing but a symbol of the One. Everything that exists is a symbol of the One and represents the One in being, no matter what its form. The symbol is the means by which the One is known without making the One an object; the symbol also maintains the hiddenness and unknowability of the One. Here we see how the Dionysian idea of symbolism is fundamental to understanding his Neoplatonic argument that the One is given in each and every intellection as well as perception, yet remaining inaccessible to both.

All knowledge about the One, thus, is not knowledge of the One. To move beyond symbol would be, in essence, to *unknow*. To remove being (or symbol) is to remove all content for knowledge. "We take away all things, so that we may unhiddenly know that unknowing which is hidden by all that is known in all beings, and may see the darkness beyond being which is concealed by all light in beings" (*MT* II, 1025b). To remove all symbols is not to gain a knowledge of the One unveiled, because that would imply that the One is an object (i.e., a being) of knowledge. Rather, the cessation of intellectual (and sensible) activities is to move beyond the intellect into the darkness of unknowing.

### 5.7 Symbol as Double Meaning

The concept of concealing and revealing as the essence of symbolism, in Dionysius, can be seen very explicitly in the Greek word, *proballein.* Dionysius uses the term in two related

ways to portray the same fundamental reality from distinct points of view, namely, both the veiling and unveiling of the One through all that is.[292] Etymologically, this word means to "throw forth" and thus means both to "present, put forward, expose" and also "shield, screen, set up a defense."[293] In fact, Plotinus used the term as well to identify the forms as the beautiful and then he says, "That which is beyond all the nature of the Good, having the beautiful held as a screen [*proballein*] before it" (I.6.9, 37–39). From this passage, according to Fran O'Rourke, it is not clear that Plotinus intends the double meaning listed above; however, if we were to read Plotinus in light of this double meaning, it would be in accord with his view that the beautiful manifests the Good, and, since it is not the Good as such, also hides or conceals it.[294] In other words, it is not certain that this is what Plotinus means, but this reading, which is certainly plausible, is consistent with Plotinus' metaphysics of the Good and the Beautiful.

Dionysius uses this term quite frequently to portray this double meaning in symbols as revealing and concealing the One. For example, in *Ep*. IX, after a list of the symbols of the One found in the holy scriptures, he goes on to say:

> sacred compositions of daring God-formation, manifest presentations [*proballein*] of hidden things, and multiplications and divisions of single and indivisible things, and multiform shapings of formless and shapeless things; if anyone is able to see their hidden inner comeliness, he will find them mystical and deiform and filled with much theological light. For let us not think that the appearances of the compositions [symbols] are formulated for their own sakes, but that they screen [*proballein*] the knowledge of the unspoken and invisible to the many, lest the all-sacred things be accessible to the profane; but they are unhidden to only the genuine lovers of divinity, who do away with all childish imagination about sacred symbols and are able to cross over, by simplicity of

---

[292] O'Rourke (1992: 9).

[293] see *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

[294] O'Rourke (1992: 10). He also refers to VI.7.16, 1 and V.5.12, 36–38 as further evidence for his conclusion.

> intellect and fittingness of contemplative power, to the simple and supernatural and exalted truth of the symbols. (*Ep.* IX.1, 1105bc) (Jones translation)

By "let us not think" Dionysius could be read in three distinct ways. First, it could be that the screen makes the One invisible and hidden to everyone. Second, "let us not think" may refer to the "for their own sake" which would seem to imply that that it is hidden from some, namely, the profane. Finally, third, it could be that the screen makes it unclear to everyone, with the possibility of becoming more clear. Its becoming more clear would be to all who are the "genuine lovers of divinity," which could, over time, include all of us.

The common reading of this passage takes the symbols to present knowledge of the One to the intellectual elite, and thus screen it from the multitudes; this would be the second reading mentioned above.[295] While that is a possible reading, it may not be the best reading of the passage. If we consider the double meaning mentioned above, that of symbols being concealed and revealed, we could also say that the symbols are "manifest screens of hidden things," screening the hidden and simple by being manifest and multiple, and they "present the knowledge of the unspoken and invisible to many."[296] If it is fundamental that symbols both conceal and reveal, as we have seen, then it seems that here the better understanding would be not that it is concealed from some and revealed to others. In fact, according to Golitzin, Dionysius is referring to the spiritual life to which all are called.[297] Golitzin states, "It does not appear to us that the Areopagite is doing much more than referring here to the basic fact of the spiritual life. There are degrees of knowledge, of receptive truth, and of advancement in it... The

---

[295] See, for example, Rorem (1993: 25).

[296] O'Rourke (1992: 11).

[297] Golitzin (1994: 53).

"sacred veils"... embrace an ascending series of revelations adapted to the believer's progress in love, simplicity, purification from selfish imagination, and consequent capacity for contemplation."[298] In other words, all are called to "cross over" to the "truth" of the symbols, to ascend toward this unknowing in reception of the symbolic. The distinction between the "genuine lovers of divinity" and "the profane" is between the degrees of progress in that ascent towards the One. Dionysius even goes on to say, "the world–ordering itself of all that appears presents [*proballein*] the invisible things of God [the One]" (*Ep.* IX.2, 1108b). The use of "presents" here instead of "screens" is because of the reference to Romans 1.20, which states, "Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities--God's eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made."[299] Here we find both meanings being used, namely the things that appear at once present and screen the invisible things of the One.[300]

We also find this double meaning in the *Divine Names*. "Before all the other participations of being are presented [*proballein*]... the beyond–goodness–itself is hymned... as presenting [*proballein*] the first gift of being itself" (*DN* V.5, 820a–c). The being of all things is presented in such a way that it screens as well as is a screen which manifests the One. Dionysius goes on to explain how we know the One.

> It is never true to say, that we know God [the One], not from his nature, for this is unknowable and surpasses all reason and intellection but from the order of all beings, as presented–as–a–screen [*proballein*] from him, and having certain images and likenesses of his divine paradigms, we go up, by way and order according to our power, to the beyond all things, in the taking away and transcendence of all things and in the cause of

---

[298] Ibid.

[299] O'Rourke (1992: 11).

[300] Ibid.

> all things. Wherefore both in all things God [the One] is known and apart from all things. (*DN* VII.3, 869c–872a)

Here we see that the order of all things is a presentation which screens the One from all being.[301] Moreover, Dionysius goes on to claim that the One is known by *every* mode of cognition and also by none, that he is "known to all from all and to none from any" (*DN* VII.3, 872a). All things express this double meaning in being presentations and screens of the One (i.e., symbols), revealing and concealing at once. That is to say, all things, once again, are a presentation and a concealment of the One.

### 5.8 To Know is the Unknow

Perhaps the best example of this symbolic revealing/concealing nature is seen in the angelic beings.[302] Dionysius says of the angels, "From the Good it is given to them to reveal in themselves the hidden Goodness, and to be angels as annunciating the divine silence, and as presenting clear lights interpretive of that which is in the sanctuaries" (*DN* IV. 2, 696bc). In speech and silence we find a new pair of contrasting terms, but the idea Dionysius is expressing is the same. The angels are to reveal what is hidden, announce the divine silence, and as such they present as screens lights which interpret what is inaccessible.[303] All these paradoxes explain the message Dionysius is conveying, namely, that symbolism is "to hide what it reveals by revealing it and to reveal what it hides by hiding it."[304] In light of Dionysius' metaphysics

---

[301] Ibid.

[302] Ibid., 12.

[303] Ibid.

[304] Klitenic Wear (2007: 102).

according to which all things are manifestations of the One, then what is true of the angels is no less true about everything else that *is*. To exist at all (to be) is to be a symbol of the One, which is as speech to reveal the hidden and, just because whatever is said also conceals, to announce the divine in silence.

If we identify this revealing and concealing as what Dionysius means by symbols, it would follow that there is no opposition between the knowledge we gain of the One through being and the unknowing or taking away of that knowledge because of being. To grasp a symbol as a symbol is, frankly, to look through it. That is to say, we must not attend to the symbol as an object in itself for that would be to misunderstand what a symbol is. Rather, we must attend to the meaning which the symbol represents, which is to say, the meaning that is concealingly revealed in the symbol. Take, for example, a person who cannot read.[305] A written word is nothing more than an object that consists of ink on paper to a person who does not understand the meaning. But to a reader, in the act of perceiving a word on paper, the word as such is not focused upon; instead, the reader focuses on the meaning. The more the reader does not merely think of the the word as an object in itself, the more she is immersed in the meaning, the better she is reading and knowing the word as standing for the object that it is representing (or presenting).[306] The non-reader might think the reader is in fact missing the word in favor of something else, but this is exactly the point; the only way to rightly perceive the word is, in some

[305] Perl (2007: 108).

[306] Ibid.

sense, to unknow it (as it is solely on the page). The reader is the one who, in perceiving the word, unknows it in itself, and thus truly or rightly understands the word as word.[307]

As Dionysius says, "It is necessary for us, contrary to the popular assumption about them, to cross over into the sacred symbols in a way befitting the sacred, and not despise them, because they are the offspring and impressions of the divine characters, and manifest images of the unspoken and supernatural visions" (*Ep.* IX. 2, 1108c). Here we see that Dionysius does not in anyway despise the sensible, but instead, we are to penetrate deeply into the symbols themselves. To enter into symbols means that we are to rise to unknowing, to remove all veils, to take all things away. By entering into symbols we are recognizing what the veils actually are, symbols of the One. The veil is the means by which we penetrate into the One. To take away the veil is not to get rid of the veil; rather it is to know that the veil *is* and yet also *is not* the One. Thus we find a union of the known and unknown in which all beings are most perfectly known in being unknown.[308] Hans von Balthasar makes this same point when he says regarding Dionysius, "The same knowledge of God demands both a deeper penetration into the image [symbol] and also a more sublime transcendence beyond it, and the two are not separated one from another but are the more fully integrated, the more perfectly they are achieved."[309]Thus the goal of Dionysian symbols is that we move beyond the symbols by going through them, in which the One is

---

[307] Ibid. We must note, however, that this analogy has a limitation. In the case of reading, the reader does get the meaning of the words on the page. In the case of the words about the One, their meaning is that they both conceal and reveal. The main point of the analogy is the necessity of reading words on a page in order to understand. Similarly, for Dionysius, symbols are the means by which we gain an understanding about the One, in that the symbol both reveals and conceals the One.

[308] Klitenic Wear (2007: 105).

[309] Balthasar (1984: 69).

revealed and concealed by all things. By going "through" the symbol I do not mean that we are to get past or beyond the symbols. Instead to penetrate through a symbol means to understand what the symbol fundamentally is. It is an image of its source, and by being what it is, it both reveals and conceals the One. To penetrate deeper into the images of the One means to see all things as what they truly are, which are, namely, images that reveal and conceal their ultimate source, the One. Therefore, to look at them would be to recognize and see the image as a good *thing* because it *is*. To look through the images would be to see that the *good* in any *thing* is really the good of the One. To ascend to unknowing is to see the darkness hidden and revealed by light, to hear all things "announce the divine in silence."

**5.10 Darkness and Silence**

Thus far we have seen how the One is manifested in the world by means of all things that are. Therefore, any knowledge that we have of the One is only by means of symbols. How are we, then, to understand this announcement of the divine silence? Dionysius gives, in a famous passage, an account of this announcement when he says,

> ...my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood [revealed], and everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him [the One] who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and free from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is. (*MT* 1.1, 997b–1000a).

According to Dionysius, there are two ways of knowing the One: through knowing and unknowing (*MT* I.2, 1001a). But the latter way is considered the "more divine" way because it is the fruit of the union with the One (*MT* I.2, 1001a). Since the One is not a being, then anything

we know about it is not the One, but instead a symbol or image of it. Thus anything we know is a symbol and these symbols conceal the One. The way of knowing is important because it is only through knowing being that we can get to the point of unknowing. In other words, *kataphatic* knowledge is required before we can begin *apophatic* unknowing. Thus far we have focused primarily on being, and how being (symbols) reveal and conceal the One. But it is this "unknowing" that we must seek to understand if we are to have any grasp of what Dionysius means by leaving everything behind and ascending to the One which is "above everything that is."

In his *Letters* Dionysius explains that this notion of unknowing is more than just a sense of privations.

> Darkness is banished by light, and the more so as light increases. Ignorance is banished by knowledge, and the more so as knowledge increases. If you use these same negative images supereminently... you can make the negations at a higher level of truth, so that the ignorance which concerns God exceeds the understanding of those who possess the light and knowledge pertaining to the world of beings. (*Ep.* 1, 1065a)

The idea of ignorance here is what Dionysius, in other places, refers to as the "knowing beyond the mind" (*MT* I.2, 1000d), "unseeing and unknowing..." which enables us "to see and know that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge" (*MT* I.4, 1025ab). It seems that this "unknowing" is, in some sense, a kind of knowing, which is to say, it contains some form of content.[310] To know that we cannot know the infiniteness of the One is a form of knowing, i.e., a Socratic knowing. Moreover, to know that we do not know the One is not to be understood as some irrational ignorance. Rather, to unknow is instead the result of the very difficult task of returning to the One. It is this sense of returning that Dionysius references when he says, "...such a one,

[310] Williams (2000: 78).

precisely because one neither sees him [the One] nor knows him, truly arrives at that which is beyond all seeing and all knowledge" (*Ep.* 5, 1073a). We find in Dionysius' fifth letter that we know the One is invisible and unknowable because of the excess of light (*Ep.* I) which comes forth from him.[311] To be sure, to know that we do not know the One is much more than something grasped by reason. Rather, it is an empirical knowledge that we cannot know the One, which comes from experience of the One, for, as he says, "those who neither see nor know and therefore truly arrive are those who have taken for their abode the divine darkness... where God [the One] is said to live" (*Ep.* 5, 1073a). So unknowing is not an intellectual understanding of the One, but instead it is when we return to the divine love, as we saw in chapter 4.

The unknowing that Dionysius is referring to here is directed, as we have seen, to that which is beyond being. For Dionysius, the One is better known, as it were, by unknowing, and this unknowing is accomplished by a means of stripping away our intellection about the One. By means of stripping away any knowledge or thoughts of the One, we begin to find the fundamental role that silence plays. In the introduction to the *Divine Names*, Dionysius gives us this radical negation by means of unknowing, when he says,

> ...we must not dare to resort to words or conceptions regarding that hidden divinity which transcends being, apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed. Since the unknowing of what is beyond being is something above and *beyond speech, mind, or being itself*, one should ascribe to it an understanding beyond being. (*DN* 1.1, 588a) (italics added)

The highest achievement the individual can make is not by knowing metaphysical truths; rather it is in unknowing. For Dionysius the goal of all speech is simply to arrive at a place of silence. It is not just that speech cannot approach the divine; instead silence is a state of being to

---

[311] Ibid.

be attained. Which is to say, silence is an expression of unity and simplicity which the soul itself must acquire in its journey of return to the One.[312] We must transcend ourselves and settle into a place of silence which is beyond all thought. Thought and speech cannot attain the unity and simplicity, which is, as we have seen, the One. We must, therefore, in Dionysian fashion rid ourselves of any dualistic conceptions so that we may be as simple and unified as possible.

### 5.10 Symbol *as* Silence

For Dionysius, as well as Plotinus, the One is not only beyond all affirmations but also beyond all negations. However, that is to say that the negations of the One are not merely meant to be the opposite of the affirmations, but completely beyond all affirmations and negations.

> Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regards to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion. (*MT* I.2, 1000b)

The One, therefore, is not only ineffable and unknowable but also beyond ineffability and unknowability. *Apophatic* thought consists, for Dionysius, not in negative statements about the One, which would mean the One is defined as over or the opposite of being, but instead in utter and complete silence. To follow Dionysius here requires that we enter into this practice of "announcing silence."

> With our minds we make prudent and holy, we offer worship to that which lies hidden and beyond thought and being. With a wise *silence* we do honor to the inexpressible. We are raised up to the enlightened beams of the sacred scriptures, and with these to illuminate us, with our beings shaped to songs of praise, we behold the divine light, in a

[312] Williams (2000: 101).

> manner befitting us, and our praise resounds for that generous Source of all holy enlightenment. (*DN* I.2, 589b) (italics added)

Dionysius is using metaphysics to help his readers to move beyond thought and philosophy to the unknowable. The affirmations and negations are important in that they help point the way to the Source of all being. However, these affirmations and negations are not ultimately what the One is; instead, the One is not an *is* to be known, or even unknown. Thus we must abandon all affirmations and negations if we are to return to the One.

Union (or return) with the One comes from the cessation of all intellectual activity (*MT* I. 3, 1001a). And this is for the same reason we find in Plotinus. If the One were anything accessible to the intellect, then the One would be determinate.

> Someone beholding the One and understanding what he saw has not actually seen God [the One] himself but rather something of his which has being and which is knowable. For he himself solidly transcends mind and being. He is completely unknown and non–existent. He exists beyond being and he is known beyond the mind. And this quite positively is complete unknowing as knowledge of him who is above everything that is known. (*Ep.* I.1, 1065a)

As we have seen, to be is to be intelligible, which is what makes something what it is and not anything else. Consequently, the One is not intelligible and thus it is not any thing. Concomitantly, the fact that anything is differentiated from anything else is only because its source, the One, is in it. As Dionysius says, "the being of all things is the divinity beyond being" (*CH* IV.1, 177d). The One, not any thing, is the source of all things.

> In the cause of all things the paradigms of all beings pre–exist, in one embracing union beyond being... Paradigms, we say, are the being–making of all beings, which pre–exist uniformly in God [the One], which theology calls pre–determinations... determinative and creative of beings, according to which the Beyond Being both predetermined and produced all being. (*DN* V.8, 824c)

Notice how Dionysius is ascribing difference to the One insofar as it is the source for all things. The One is different because, "he is present providentially to all things, and becomes all things in all things for the preservation of all... Let us consider the divine difference not as some alteration of its super–unchangeable identity, but as the single multiplication of itself and the uniform processions of its fecundity to all" (*DN* IX.5, 912d). The One, hence, is completely other than all that *is* due to its transcendence, and yet it is also completely immanent in that nothing is anything apart from it. The One is no thing and all things, or as Dionysius says, "all beings and none of beings" (*DN* I.6, 596c). The One is at once both completely unknowable and completely manifest.

> God [the One] is known in all things and apart from all things; and he is known by knowledge, and by unknowing, and of him there is no intellection, and reason, and science, and touching, and sense perception, and opinion, and imagination, and name, and all other things; and he is neither thought, nor spoken, nor named; and he is not any of the things that are, nor is he known in any of the things that are; and he is all things in all things and nothing in any, and he is known to all from all and to none from any. (*DN* VII. 3, 872a)

All being is manifestation of the One, and the unfolding of the One into multiplicity, which is being, entails that every experience (cognitive or empirical) is an experience of the One. And since the One is not any being whatsoever, then no cognition or empirical experience can let us understand the One. Consequently, this is nothing else than what we already said, namely, all that *is* is a symbol or image of the One.

### 5.11 Being as Symbol and Silence

It would be incorrect to read Dionysius as just another advocate for negative theology,[313] as if to say that we must get rid of all images and symbols and seek to attain a non-symbolic vision or union with the One. Dionysius *is* advocating that we penetrate deeper into the images and transcend them. However, the One is no more not a being than a being; symbolic and the non-symbolic are not separate from one another but are fully integrated.[314] On these grounds, we can see that the "announcement of divine silence" is not something that can be separated from symbols. The symbols, or beings, cannot be discarded as if we could be left with just the One. We cannot get to the One *behind* the symbols, not because of our inability, but instead precisely because there is nothing that *is* there for us to know. Our access to the One can only come through the symbol and silence. The "divine silence" is the realization that everything that is affirmed about the One can also be denied, leaving us with nothing to say. To know the "divine silence" is to know that there is nothing to know.

In silence we do not arrive arrive at some greater truth than we find in symbols, as if to say that the silence is beyond the symbol. Rather, both the symbols and the silence reveal and conceal. They reveal to us something about what the One is, because all that *is* is a representation of the One, yet they conceal in that anything we know about the One is not really the One. Thus even in silence we do not get something that is more true about the One than we find in symbols. Rather the silence both reveals and conceals that which we know from symbols. Because everything that is is finite, determinate, creaturely, and not the One, then the One remains concealed in being. As Dionysius says, "it is not possible for the thearchic ray to illuminate us

---

[313] Balthasar (1984: 169).

[314] Ibid.

otherwise than anagogically cloaked in the variety of sacred veils" (*CH* I.2, 121b). This excludes any encounter with the One that is independent of symbols.[315] Rather it is only *in* and *through* the symbol that we can encounter the One, precisely because it is the symbol itself that reveals (and conceals) the One to all beings. Since to be is to be determinate, the only things that we can know are the symbols themselves, and the denial of the symbols. In silence we know the denial of the symbol, realizing that the One is not the symbol. Silence reveals to us that we do not know that One because everything that *is* is not the One. Thus silence reveals and conceals similarly to symbols. As Dionysius says, "For if all knowledges are of beings and have their limit in beings, that which is beyond being is also above all knowledge" (*DN* I.4, 593a).

This encounter with the One that is *only* in and through images is something new that Dionysius adds to Neoplatonic thought. For Plotinus the goal of the images, or philosophy in general, is to get us on the path to encountering the One. According to Plotinus it seemed that the images must ultimately be left behind in order to "encounter" the One. We referred to this as Plotinus' mystical union (or experience) with the One.[316] The goal, however, is that we will eventually leave the realm of the images. On the one hand, Plotinus does argue that everything, including sensible things, contemplates the One.

> Suppose we said, playing at first before we set out to be serious, that *all things* aspire to contemplation, and direct their gaze to this end--not only rational but irrational living things, and the power of growth in *plants*, and the earth which brings them forth--and that *all* attain to it as far as possible for them in their natural state, but different things contemplate and attain their end in different ways... (III.8.1, 1-6)

---

[315] Ibid.

[316] See p. 79-84.

However, on the other hand, Plotinus also explicitly states that we must leave behind the body and all sensibilities in order to ascend to the One.

> How is it then, that one does not remain there [in mystical union with the One]? It is because one has not yet totally come *out of this world*. But there will be a time when the vision will be continuous, since there will no longer be any hindrance *by the body*. (VI.9.10, 1-4) (italics added)

Plotinus wants to get "out of this world", yet he also maintains that every "thing" contemplates the One. But then again, Plotinus does say that he is "playing" in regards to his thoughts about "all things." Maybe Plotinus does not really mean that all things literally contemplate; rather he could be making a reference to how humans play before the gods (III. 2. 17, 47-52), and therefore everything that is is only there for the gods' enjoyment.[317] Another possibly would be to think of "playing" as suggesting that to say all things contemplate is a metaphor for understanding Neoplatonic omnipresence.[318] That is to say, Plotinus is "playing" in trying to ponder the idea that the One is expressed in all things (intelligible *and* sensible), or more accurately, that everything is expressed *within* the One.

What is important to notice in this passage is that Plotinus is clearly trying to grapple with how everything is a symbol or image of the One. But however we understand Plotinus in the quotes above, it seems that the reason that flat transcendence doesn't fit as clearly in Plotinus as it does in Dionysius is that Plotinus' metaphysics is not as consistently worked out. Plotinus wants to maintain that everything is a image of the One, yet he also wants to get out of this world without any bodily hindrance. But this should not surprise us considering what we have already

---

[317] Armstrong suggests that this understanding of what he means by "playing" comes from Plato's *Laws* IV.712b 1-2, wherein Plato explains that man's highest activity is to "play" before the gods.

[318] This idea was suggested to me by Prof. Spellman in conversation.

seen in Plotinus' philosophy. As we saw in chapter 1, Plotinus is plowing a field for the first time, and this means he will have some difficulties in making the soil manageable, as it were. Dionysius, however, benefits from the metaphysical work done by Plotinus and other Neoplatonists, and this enables Dionysius to more easily walk the land, thereby elucidating a more coherent metaphysical theory. In Plotinus, we find a philosopher who is not sure how to appropriately account for the relation of sensible world with to the intelligible world. For example, Plotinus' most famous student, Porphyry, once remarked that Plotinus was uncomfortable in his body and desired to be free of any bodily limitations.[319] In Dionysius, conversely, we find a philosopher who sees the intelligible primarily in and through the sensible. Thus Dionysius is better able to understand the relation between the One and the sensible world without also having this inclination that the philosopher must break free from the body to ascend to the One.[320](Unlike Plotinus, Dionysius isn't pulled in different directions). Thus in Dionysius it is clear that both the intelligible and the sensible (every *thing*) should be understood to conceal and reveal the One.

The ascent to the One is, therefore, not for Dionysius an elimination of symbols but rather a movement into the symbols, to understand them as what they are, symbols of the One. "We must, then, contrary to popular assumption about them, cross over into the sacred symbols

---

[319] "Porphyry: On the Life of Plotinus and His Works" ch. 23.

[320] I think another reason that flat transcendence is seen more easily in Dionysius could be his religious persuasion. For Dionysius, the theological doctrine of the Incarnation gives him a dogmatic belief in the sacredness of all *things*, sensible and intelligible, that Plotinus did not possess. In and through the Incarnation, Dionysius believes that every *thing* has been redeemed from corruption. Therefore, each and every image of the One is sacred and reveals (while also concealing) its source. Dionysius' theological arguments, however, are outside the scope of my metaphysical inquiry.

in a way befitting the sacred, and not despise them, because they are the offspring and impressions of the divine marks, and manifest images of the ineffable and supernatural visions" (*Ep.* IX.2, 1108c). For Dionysius, the experience we can have of the One is by experiencing symbols as the presence of the One, present in and through them, not as separate and apart. The One is accessible and revealed through the means by which the One is concealed. The secret is not hidden and esoteric; it is open and revealed.

To return to a previous quote, due to its significance, Dionysius says of these symbols that characterize the One:

> [They are] sacred compositions of God [the One] as manifest presentations of hidden things, and multiplications and divisions of single and indivisible things, and multiform shapings of formless and shapeless things; if anyone is able to see their hidden inner beauty, he will find them all mystical and deiform and filled with much theological light. For let us not think that the manifestations of the compositions have been formulated for themselves, but that they shield the ineffable and invisible knowledge to the many, lest the all holy things be accessible to the profane; but they are unveiled only to the genuine lovers of divinity, who do away with all childish imagination about the sacred symbols and are able to cross over by simplicity of mind and fittingness of contemplative power to the simple and supernatural and exalted truth of the symbols. (*Ep.* IX.1, 1105bc) (Jones translation)

Dionysius says here that the symbols are "manifest presentations" of the One. The divine silence is not something that is beyond words or symbols; rather, the silence is, paradoxically, in the words and also is the denial of the words or images themselves, in that they reveal and conceal. Both speech and silence reveal and conceal the One, and they do so by both affirmation and denial. The divine darkness is not something that is behind or outside the light, but rather "the divine darkness is the inaccessible light in which God [the One] is said to dwell" (*Ep.* V. 1073a). All things, by implication, reveal in themselves the hidden goodness because they each proclaim

the divine silence. Thus the relationship between the symbol and symbolized does not fall into a dualistic framework in which we have two *things.*

### 5.12 Speech Revisited

If the One is properly unknown, inaccessible, immeasurable, unnameable, unsearchable, ineffable, and unutterable, would the wisest course be silence (even though silence is not any more true in reference to the One)? But Dionysius does have a speech that is *after* silence. Consider, for example, the role or place of angels in Dionysius' hierarchy. We are told that the human ascent to the One ends in silence (*CH* IV.2, 180a), but angels are said to have a "higher" grasp of the One than humans.[321] From this it would seem to follow that the angelic realm would be a realm of deeper silence but instead we learn that the highest angels are engaged in singing (worshipping) the One in praise (*CH* VII.4, 212b).[322]

For Dionysius unmeasurable truth is expressed in proportion to the capacities of finite beings. In an extended discussion (*DN* I.1, 585–588a), Dionysius makes contrasts between the words of human wisdom and the words of the Spirit as given to human beings in the holy scriptures, between the words applied to beings and these same words applied to that which is beyond being.[323] These distinctions are important because they show us that the *meanings* of our words do not apply to that which is beyond being. The meaning of words for Dionysius is such that, as we have seen, they both veil and reveal the truth. The reason for speech, then, is to help us have some concept of the One, yet not forgetting that our concept is inadequate.

---

[321] Williams (2000: 85).

[322] Ibid.

[323] Ibid., 86.

Philosophically, any knowledge of the One as beyond being merely entails that our language logically cannot explain the One, apparently leaving only silence.[324] In fact, Dionysius considers silence to refer to the aspect of the One that is transcendent, and speech to be that which is immanent, "And if all knowledge is of that which is and is limited to the realm of the existent [immanent], then whatever transcends being must also transcend knowledge" (*DN* I.3, 593a).[325] We might conclude from this passage that Dionysius sees the transcendence of the One as hierarchically superior to the immanent. But that would be a misreading of Dionysius because he does not want to make a separation in the One between the transcendent and the immanent. To make this type of distinction would form a type of subordinationism within the One, and to use the Trinity as an example, it would make God the Father superior to the Son and the Spirit. Dionysius wants to maintain that it is the entire Godhead that remains, proceeds, and returns.[326] For our purposes what we find is a "flattening" of the One in that the transcendence of the divine is not superior to or prior to the immanent.[327]

So it would be incorrect to infer from this account that Dionysius favors silence over speech. Most notably, Dionysius sees the place of praise as a theological mode of speech that is provided for humans (as well as angels) to use.[328] Speech, alongside silence, is used as a vital

---

[324] Ibid.

[325] Gersh (1978: 283).

[326] Rorem (1993: 52).

[327] Gersh (1978: 286). Gersh goes on to argue that Dionysius (and his successors) make this most important modification to Neoplatonism, namely, that there is no hierarchy between transcendence and immanence.

[328] Dionysius explains the use of praise throughout the *Divine Names.* See especially, *DN* I.1, 585b, 589b.

tool in the return to the One, by instruction and reading of the holy scriptures.[329] In fact, it is through speech that one "announces the divine silence." Symbols are both verbal and visual modes of *silence* in that they are not meant to be put aside but that in which we encounter the One.[330] "Greatness and smallness, sameness and difference, similarity and dissimilarity, rest and motion--these all are titles applied to the Cause of everything. They are divinely named images and we should contemplate them as far as they are revealed to us" (*DN* IX.1, 909b). It is in speech that we are enabled to participate in the task of mediating the truth, not only for ourselves but also to others, which constitutes not only a theophany, as we have seen, but also a theosony.[331]

Thus speech is not a violation of silence but instead the context in which silence abides.[332] Speech and silence are not to be understood as diametrically opposed to each other. Silence produces the means by which speech both reveals and conceals the One. Speech can reveal and also conceal by means of affirmation or negation; however, in silence we are reminded of the ultimate ineffability that we could not otherwise know if it weren't for speech. Thus, once again, speech and silence both conceal and reveal the truth.

The need for both speech and silence is reminiscent of a passage in the Buddhist scriptures, *Vimalakirtinirdesa–sutra,* in which Sariputra (the elder) attempts to abandon speech at the onset.

---

[329] Williams (2000: 87).

[330] Saffrey (1982: 68).

[331] Theosony is the divine sound (which includes speech, visual, and silence) to aid the return to the One.

[332] Williams (2007: 88).

> Thus the venerable Sariputra said to the goddess, "Goddess, how long have you been in this house?"
>
> The Goddess replied, "I have been here as long as the elder has been in liberation."
>
> Sariputra said, "Then you have been in this house for quite some time?"
>
> The goddess said, "has the elder been in liberation for quite some time?"
>
> At that the elder Sariputra fell silent.
>
> The goddess continued, "Elder, you are 'foremost of the wise!' Why do you not speak? Now, when it is your turn, you do not answer the question."
>
> Sariputra: Since liberation is inexpressible, goddess, I do not know what to say.
>
> Goddess: All the syllables pronounced by the elder have the nature of liberation. Why? Liberation is neither internal nor external, nor can it be apprehended apart from them... Therefore, reverend Sariputra, do not point to liberation by abandoning speech![333]

We must be careful in evaluating silence to not make the mistake that Sariputra made. Dionysian silence is not meant to be understood as the juxtaposition to speech. Rather, we find the place of silence only when we find the proper place of speech, which is, as a symbol to reveal and to conceal.

[333] Translated by Thurman (1984: 59), quoted in Garfield (2002: 170).

**Conclusion**

The account of the metaphysical view in this dissertation has been a musing over what it means to say that the One is "beyond being." We have done this by analyzing what it means "to be" in the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy. We began by noticing the metaphysical premise that being *is* intelligibility. It is found, implicitly, as early as Thales of Miletus and explicitly in Parmenides and Plato. Plotinus and Dionysius received this tradition, and, as I argued, attempt to give a metaphysical account of the relationship between being and its source, the One. The argument is that being is intelligibility and that the One *cannot* be a being since the One is fundamentally not intelligible. Thus if the One is not intelligible, then how are we to understand the relationship between being and the One?

In this dissertation I have proposed, first, a clear account of how the One is not "cut-off" from being. My argument has been to show how being can *be* only insofar as it is *within* the One. Thus the One is not to be considered as completely distinct from being as if to posit two ontological categories: the One and everything else. I have shown that the One is the undifferentiated source of everything, whereas being is the differentiated manifestation of the One in intelligibility. I did this by showing how any distinction between what the One *is* and being (everything else) occurs *within* the One, as opposed to between an infinite being and finite being(s).

Second, I argued that Plotinus' double act theory of emanation is, in fact, metaphysically equivalent to Dionysius's ontology of remaining, procession, and reversion. Therefore, the metaphysics of the internal and external act in Plotinus occur within the One in the same way that Dionysius' remaining, procession, and reversion also occur within the One. I then argued

how the Eastern Christian concept of the distinction between the essence and energies of God (the One) is also ontologically, though not theologically, equivalent to Plotinus' double act and Dionysius' remaining, procession, and reversion. Furthermore, I argued how these metaphysical theories in fact help illuminate each other in our analysis of being. My focus was to look at the Neoplatonic notion of the One as "beyond being" as understood in both positive and negative language, and by that idea to understand the way in which the One is transcendent.

Finally, I proposed that when we see being as the differentiated manifestation of the One, we recognize that everything that exists is a symbol or image of the One. I took the idea of symbols in Dionysius, and I elucidated how being is a symbol in both speech and silence. I further argued that being both reveals and conceals its source, the One, by being what it is, a manifestation of the One.

Since being is intelligible, then it follows that it is multiple and determinate, and as a result of being differentiated, it is dependent and derived. From this Neoplatonism (and maybe Plato) arrives at the idea of the One, which is "beyond being" in an absolute sense. Therefore, Neoplatonism surpasses any "onto-theology" which attempts to conceptualize the One as some kind of first or highest being. It also surpasses in a more *apophatic* way the One as a being that is beyond being as in, for example, Armstrong's argument. His "being beyond being" is supposed to be completely superior to finite being because it is a different "kind" of being altogether. For Plotinus and Dionysius, however, the One is conceived as being so transcendent that it actually is immanent. For Dionysius' Neoplatonism, transcendence in no way separates the One from being, which would cause being to be cut off from the One. The absolute transcendence of the One for Dionysius is that which is manifested in *all things.* As Dionysius says, "[The One is] all things

in all things and nothing in any" (*DN* VII.3, 872a). The One is, as the source of everything, that which is intelligible, yet the One remains unintelligible in that it cannot be grasped in and of itself. What can be known about the One? Everything that is is a manifestation, an image or symbol of that which is inexpressible. In other words, the One is the undifferentiated which is manifested as differentiated in everything (being).

When we evaluate any claim, such as Armstrong's, that attempts to interpret Plotinus (or Neoplatonism) as positing some "infinite being", then we can recognize that being is, by necessity, finite. Within Neoplatonism it is not possible to posit an infinite being without breaking the most basic fundamental metaphysical premise that being is intelligible. Because being is intelligible and finite, then to say that the One is "beyond being" must mean exactly what it says. The One is *not* a being. To posit a "being beyond being" is to introduce a reading of Neoplatonism that fundamentally misunderstands what the One is not and what being is.

When we begin to see the world in this Dionysian sense, what happens is that everything becomes lifted up to the status of the One, as it were. In order for anything to be, it must, necessarily, come from the One. In other words, anything that is *is* good and must come from the One. So to look at everything that exists in this Dionysian way is to see everything as important because it is a manifestation of the One. Everything that exists is good because it is a manifestation of the undifferentiated source. Therefore, everything that is *is* an image or symbol of the One. Dionysian metaphysics can help us to see that all things, including animals, plants, and minerals, are manifestations of the One in reality, and thus, to some degree, think, live, and love, simply because they *exist.* With this in mind, my view of Dionysius would see all of nature as sacred as opposed to some reductionistic view which sees nature as something to be exploited,

used, or destroyed. Dionysius and Plotinus offer us a view of reality that is compelling and philosophically grounded in the concept that everything that exists (being) is the presence and manifestation of the transcendent One. Everything that is *is* the One differentiated. In this dissertation I have shown, to put it succinctly, that being is the One but the One is not being.

**Bibliography**


Adamson, Peter. (2008) 'Neoplatonism', *Phronesis* 53: 433-448.

Aristotle. (1984) *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation,* 2 vols. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Oxford University Press.

Armstrong, A.H. (1940) *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ (ed.) (1967) *The Cambridge Companion of Late Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ (trans) (1968-88) *Plotinus.* 7 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

_____ (1979) *Plotinian and Christian Studies*. London: Aldershot Press.

_____ (1982) "Negative Theology, Myth and Incarnation." In *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, edited by Dominic O'Meara, Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Armstrong, A.H. and Pieter Willem van der Horst, eds. (1986) *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman.* New York: Crossroads Publishing.

Augustine. (1993) *Confessions.* Trans. F.J. Sheen. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company.

Balthasar Hans. (1995) *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa.* San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

_____ (1984) "Denys." In *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,* vol. 2. New York: Ignatius Press.

_____ (2003) *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Beere, Jonathan. (2009) *Doing and Being.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bebis, George S. (1974) "The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of Dionysius the Areopagite: A Liturgical Interpretation." *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 19: 159-75.

Beierwaltes, W. (1986) "The Love of Beauty and the Love of God." In *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, edited by A.H. Armstrong, 293-313. New York: Crossroad Publishing.

Blumenthal, H.J. (1993) *The Divine Iamblichus: Philosopher and Man of Gods.* London: Bristol Classical Press.

Bradshaw, David. (2004) *Aristotle East and West.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Brehier, Emile. (1958) *The Philosophy of Plotinus*. Trans. Joseph Thomas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bussanich, J.R. (1988) *The One and its Relation to Intellect in Plotinus.* Leiden: Brill.
_____ (1996) "Plotinus' Metaphysics of the One." In the *Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* 38-65.

_____ (2008) (Review) "Plotinus on Intellect," *The Classical Review* 5 (2): 439-441.

Carabine, D. (1995) *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*. Louvain: Eerdmans Publishing.

_____ (1988) "Apophasis East and West." *Recherches de Theologie Ancienne et Medievale* 55: 5-29.

Carrol, William J. (1983) "Unity, Participation and Wholes in a Key Text of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *Divine Names*." *The New Scholasticism* 57: 253-62.

_____ (1983) "Participation and Infinity in Dionysius the Areopagite." *Patristic and Byzantine Review* 2: 53-64.

Cary, Philip. (2000) *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Charles, D. (1984) *Aristotle's Philosophy of Action.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Clark, Stephen. (2009) (Review) "Plotinus on Intellect," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 59 (235): 357-359.

Clarke, W.N. (1959) "Infinity in Plotinus: A Reply." *Gregorianum* 40: 75-98.

Clearly, John C. (2004) *Traditions of Platonism*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Coakley, Sarah and Charles Stang. (eds.)(2009) *Re–Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite.* Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell Publishing.

Corrigan, Kevin. (1996) "Solitary's Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Dionysius the Areopagite." *Journal of Religion* 76: 28-42.

Copleston, Frederick. (1982) *Religion and the One*. New York: Crossroad.

Cooper, J. (ed.) (1997) *Plato's Complete Works.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Davis, Oliver and Denys Turner. (eds.) (2002) *Silence and the Word.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davidson, D. (1980) "The Individualization of Events." In D. Davidson, *Actions and Events*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 163-80.

Dawes, Elizabeth and Norman Baynes, trans. (1996) *Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies.* Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Deck, J.N. (1967) *Nature, Contemplation, and the One.* Toronto: Toronto University Press.
_____ (1982) "The One, or God, Is Not Properly Hypostasis: A Reply to Professor Anton." In *The Structure of Being.* Ed. by Baine Harris. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

De Vogul, C.J. (1981) "Greek Cosmic Love and Christian Love of God. Boethius, Dionysius the Areopagite, and the author of the Fourth Gospel." *Vigiliae Christianae* 35: 57-81.

Dillon, J. (1977) *The Middle Platonists.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

_____ (1985) "The Magical Powers of Names in Origen and Later Neoplatonism." In *Origeniana Tertia,* edited by Richard Hanson and Henri Crouzel. Rome: Edizioni dell' Ateneo, 203-16.

Dodds, E.R. (1963) *Proclus: The Elements of Theology. A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction and Commentary.* 2nd. Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

_____ (1965) *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____(1951) *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Douglass, J.W. (1963) "The Negative Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite." *Downside Review* 81: 115-24.

Duclow, Donald F. (1972) "Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena, Nicholas of Cusa: An Approach to the Hermeneutics of the Divine Names." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 12: 260-78.

Dupre, Louis. (1972) *The Other Dimension*. New York: Doubleday Publishing.

Emilsson, E.K. (2007) *Plotinus on Intellect.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

_____(1988) *Plotinus on Sense Perception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Esbroek, M. van. (1993) "Peter the Iberian and Dionysius the Areopagita: Honigmann's Thesis Revisited." *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 59: 217-27.

Finamore, John. (1985) *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul.* Chicago: Scholars Press.

Finan, Thomas and Vincent Twomey. (1992) *The Relationship Between Neoplatonism and Christianity.* Dublin: Four Courts Press.

Findlay, J.N. (1970) "Toward a Neo–Neo–Platonism." In *Ascent to the Absolute.* London: Allen and Unwin Press.

_____ (1974) *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Press.

_____ (1975) "The Three Hypostases of Platonism." *Review of Metaphysics 28:* 660–80.

Florovsky, Georges. (1987) *The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers.* Belmont, MA: Notable & Academic Books.

Franke, William, (ed.) (2007) *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts. Volume 1: Classical Formulations.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Garfield, Jay. (2002) *Empty Words.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Gersh, S. (1978) *From Iamblichus to Eriugena.* Leiden: Brill Press.

_____ (1984) "Ideas and Energies in Pseudo–Dionysius the Areopagite." *Studia Patristica* 15: 297–300.

Gerson, L.P. (1990) *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology*. New York: Routledge Press.

_____(1994) *Plotinus*. London: Routledge Press.

_____ (ed.) (1996) *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gill, Christopher and T.P. Wiseman. (eds.) (1993) *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World.* Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Golitzin, Alexander. (1994) *The Mystagogy of Dionysius the Areopagite.* Thessalonika: Patriarchikon Idruma Paterikon Meleton.

_____ (1995) Review of *Pseudo–Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence,* by Paul Rorem. *Mystics Quarterly* 21: 28–38.

Goldman, A.I. (1970) *A Theory of Human Action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Gregory, J. (ed.) (1999) *The Neoplatonists.* London: Routledge Press.

Gregory of Nyssa. (1978) *The Life of Moses*. Trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Fergeson. New York: Paulist Press.

Hadot, P. (1998) *Plotinus on the Simplicity of Vision.* Trans. M. Chase. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

_____ (1995) *Philosophy as a Way of Life.* Selection ed. A.I. Davidson, trans. M. Chase. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing.

_____ (2002) *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Trans. M. Chase. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press.

Haefner, Alfred E. (1934) "A Unique Source for the Study of Ancient Pseudonymity." *Anglican Theological Review* 16: 8-15.

Hancock, C.L. (1992) "Negative Theology in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism." In *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism,* edited by Richard T. Wallis, 167-86. Albany: SUNY Press.

Harris, R. Baine. (ed.) (1976) *The Significance of Neoplatonism.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

_____ (ed.) (1982) *The Structure of Being.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

_____ (ed.) 2002) *Neoplatonism and Contemporary Thought.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Hartshorne, Charles. (1987) "Pantheism and Panentheism." *Encyclopedia of Religion.* New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 165-171.

Hathaway, Ronald. (1969) *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo–Dionysius.* The Hague: M. Nijhoff.

Hauken, A.I. (1984) “Incarnation and hierarchy: the Christ according to Pseudo-Dionysius.” *Studia Patristica* 15.1: 317-320.

Horst, Pieter Willem va der. (1988) “The Unkown God (Acts 17.23).” In *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World*, edited by R. van den Broek, T. Baarda, and J. Mansfield, 19-42. Leiden: E.J. Brill Press.

Ivanovic, Filip. (2010) *Symbol & Icon.* Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications.
_____ (2011) *Dionysius the Areopagite between Orthodoxy and Heresy.* UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

James, W. (1982) *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* New York: Penguin Classics.

Jones, J.D. (1977) “The Character of the Negative Theology of Pseudo–Dionysius.” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 51: 66–74.

_____ (1980) *Pseudo–Dionysius the Areopagite. The Divine Names and Mystical Theology, Translated from the Greek with an Introductory Study*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.

_____ (1982) “A Non-Entitative Understanding of Be-ing and Unity: Heidegger and Neoplatonism.” *Dionysius* 6: 94-110.

Kenny, J.P. (1991) *Mystical Monotheism.* Providence, RI: Brown University Press.
_____ (1993) “The Critical Value of Negative Theology.” *Harvard Theological Review* 86: 439-53.

_____ (2000) “Ancient Apophaticism.” In *Gnosticism and Later Neoplatonism,* edited by John Turner and Ruth Majercik, 258-75. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

Kharlamov, Vladimir. (2009) *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

Klitenic Wear, Sarah and John Dillon (2007). *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonic Tradition.* Aldershot: Ashgate Press.

Levine, Michael. (1994) *Pantheism: A Non-Theistic Concept of Deity*. London: Routledge.

Leclerq, Jean. (1987) “Influence and Noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages.” In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,* 25-32. New York: Paulist Press.

Lewy, H. (1978) *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic, and Platonism in the Later*

*Roman Empire.* Paris: Etudes augustiniennes.

Lilla, Salvatore. (1980) "The Notion of Infinitude in Ps.-Dionysius Arepagita," *Journal of Theological Studies* 31: 93-103.

_____ (1992) "Dionysius the Arepagite, Pseudo-." In *Encyclopedia of the Early Church,* 238-40. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lloyd, A.C. (1990) *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

_____ (1967) "The Later Neoplatonists." In *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy,* edited by A.H. Armstrong, 269-85. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lossky, Vladimir. (1976) *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church.* New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Louth, Andrew. (1989) *Denys the Areopagite*. London: Morehouse Publishing.

_____ (1981) *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition.* New York: Oxford University Press.

_____ (1982) "The Influence of Denys the Areopagite on Eastern and Western Spirituality in the Fourteenth Century." *Sobernost* 4: 185-200.

_____ (1986) "Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite." *Journal of Theological Studies* 37: 432-38.

Loy, David. (1988) *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*. London: Yale University Press.

MacKenna, S. (trans.) (1991) *Plotinus: The Enneads.* Abridged. New York: Penguin Classics.

Macquarrie, J. (1984) *In Search of Deity: An Essay in Dialectic Theism.* London: SCM Press.

Marion, Jean–Luc. (2001) *The Idol and Distance.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Mamo, P.S. (1976) "Is Plotinian Mysticism Monistic?" In R. B. Harris, *The Significance of Neoplatonism*. Norfolk, VA: Old Dominion University.

*Maximus the Confessor*. (1996) Trans. Andrew Louth. New York: Routledge Press.

McEvilley, Thomas. (2002) *The Shape of Ancient Thought*. New York: Allworth Press.

McDermott, Robert. (1987) "Monism." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 57-65.

McGinn, Bernard. (1991) *The Foundations of Mysticism.* New York: Crossroads Publishing.
_____ (1994) *The Growth of Mysticism.* New York: Crossroads Publishing.

_____ (1996) "God as Eros: Metaphysical Foundation of Christian Mysticism." in *New Perspectives on Historical Theology,* edited by Bradley Nassif, 189-200. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Press.

_____ (2001) *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart.* New York: Crossroads Publishing.
McGinn, Bernard and Moshe Idel, (eds.) (1989) *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith.* New York: Macmillan Press.

McGinn, Bernard and John Meyendorff, (eds.) (1985) *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century.* New York: Crossroad Publishing.

Meyendorff, John. (1969) *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*. Washington: Corpus Books.

Mortley, Raul. (1986) *From Word to Silence* vol. 2. Frankfurt, Germany: Hanstein Bonn.

Nehemas, Alexander. (1999) 'Participation and Predication' in *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Nygren, Anders. (1937) *Agape and Eros*. New York: Macmillan Press.

O'Daly, G.J.P. (1973) *Plotinus' Philosophy of the Self.* Shannon: Irish University Press.

O'Meara, D.J. (1985) "Plotinus on How Soul Acts on Body." In D.J. O'Meara (ed.) *Platonic Investigations.* Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 247-62.
_____ (ed.) (1992) *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought.* Albany, NY: SUNY.

O'Rourke, Fran. (1992) *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas.* Leiden: Brill Press.

Otten, Willemien. (1999) "In the Shadow of the Divine: Negative Theology and Negative Anthropology in Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena." *Heythrop Journal* 40: 438-55.

Packwood, Joshua. (2011) *Plotinus and the One: A Mystical Union.* Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. (1987) “The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality.” In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,* 11-24. New York: Paulist Press.

Perl, Eric. (2007) *Theophany.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Plato: Complete Works. (1997) Edited by John Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

*Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. (1987) Trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem. New York: Paulist Press.

Putman, C.C. (1960) *Beauty in the Pseudo-Denis.* Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

Rappe, S. (2000) *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reale, Giovanni. (1997) *Toward a New Interpretation of Plato*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press.

Remes, P. (2007) *Plotinus on Self and Person: The Philosophy of the ‘We’*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reese, W.L. (1980) *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought.* Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

Riodian, Wiliam. (2008) *Divine Light*. San Francisco, Ignatius Press.

Rist, J.M. (1967) *Plotinus the Road to Reality.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
_____(1989) “Back to the Mysticism of Plotinus: Some more Specifics,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27, 183-97.

Rorem, Paul. (1993) *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary of the Text and an Introduction to Their Influence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Russell, Norman. (2004) *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ryle, Gilbert. (rpt. 2008) *The Concept of Mind*. University of Chicago Press.

Schafer, Christian. (2006) *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite.* Leiden: Brill Press.

Sells, Michael. (1994) *Mystical Language of Unsaying.* University of Chicago Press.

Semmelroth, Otto. (1949) *Erlosung und Erloser in System des Ps. Dionysius Areopagita. Scholastik* 24: 367–403.

_____(1952) *Theologia symbolike des Ps. Dionysius Areopagita. Scholastik* 27: 1–10.

Shaw, Gregory. (1995) *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamilichus.* Pittsburgh: University Park Press.

———— (1999) "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7.4: 573–99.

Sheldon–Williams, I.P. (1964) "The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of Pseudo–Dionysius." *Downside Review* 82: 293–302.

_____(1966) "The Pseudo–Dionysius and the Holy Hierotheus." *Studia Patristica* 8.2: 108–17.

_____(1967) "The Pseudo–Dionysius." In *The Cambridge History of later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy,* edited by A.H. Armstrong, 457–72. London: Cambridge University Press.

_____ (1972) "Henads and Angels: Proclus and the Ps. Dionysius." *Studia Patristica* 11: 65–71.

Sherrard, Philip. (1987) *The Rape of Man and Nature: An Enquiry into the Origins and Consequences of Modern Science.* Ipswich: Golgonooza.

_____ (1992) *Human Image: World Image. The Death and Resurrection of Sacred Cosmology.* Ipswich: Golgonooza.

Siorvanes, L. (1996) *Proclus: Neo–Platonic Philosophy and Science.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Stang, Charles. (2012) *Apophasis and pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stein, E. (1946) "Ways to Know God: The Symbolic Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite and Its Factual Presuppositions." *The Thomist* 9: 379–420.

Taylor, Charles. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University.

Tollefsen, T.T. (2012) *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thurman, Robert. (1984) *Essential Buddhism.* San Francisco: HarperOne Publishing.

Turner, Denys (1995) *The Darkness of God.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Van den Berg, R.M. (2009) (Review) "Plotinus on Intellect," *Mynemosyne* 62 (2): 315-317.
_____ (2001) *Proclus' Hymns*. Leiden: Brill Press.

Wagner, Michael. (ed.) (2002) *Neoplatonism and Nature: Studies in Plotinus' Enneads*. New York: SUNY Press.

Wallis, R.T. (1995) *Neoplatonism.* 2nd. Ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

_____ (ed.) (1992) *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

_____(1986) "The Spiritual Importance of Not Knowing." In *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality.* Edited by A.H. Armstrong. New York: Crossroad Publishing.

Whittemore, R.C. (1966) "Panentheism in Neoplatonism." *Tulane Studies in Philosophy 4*: 47-70.

Williams, A.N. (1999) *The Ground of Union.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams, J.P. (2000) *Denying Divinity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams, Rowan. (1979) *The Wound of Knowledge.* London: Dartman, Longman & Todd Press.

Yannaras, Christos. (1986) *On the Absence and Unknowability of God*. Trans. Haralambos Ventis. London: T&T Clark International Press.

_____ (1975) "The Distinction between Essence and Energies and Its Importance for Theology." *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly 19*, 232-45.