



The Nature of The One

Plotinus

The One as the Source of All Reality

It is in virtue of unity that beings are beings.

This is equally true of things whose existence is primal and of all that are in any degree to be numbered among beings. What could exist at all except as one thing? Deprived of unity, a thing ceases to be what it is called: no army unless as a unity: a chorus, a flock, must be one thing. Even house and ship demand unity, one house, one ship; unity gone, neither remains thus even continuous magnitudes could not exist without an inherent unity; break them apart and their very being is altered in the measure of the breach of unity.

Take plant and animal; the material form stands a unity; fallen from that into a litter of fragments, the things have lost their being; what was is no longer there; it is replaced by quite other things- as many others, precisely, as possess unity.

Health, similarly, is the condition of a body acting as a co-ordinate unity. Beauty appears when limbs and features are controlled by this principle, unity. Moral excellence is of a soul acting as a concordant total, brought to unity.

Come thus to soul—which brings all to unity, making, moulding, shaping, ranging to order—there is a temptation to say “Soul is the bestower of unity; soul therefore is the unity.” But soul bestows other characteristics upon material things and yet remains distinct from its gift: shape, Ideal-Form and the rest are all distinct from the giving soul; so, clearly, with this gift of unity; soul to make things unities looks out upon the unity just as it makes man by looking upon Man, realizing in the man the unity belonging to Man.

Anything that can be described as a unity is so in the precise degree in which it holds a characteristic being; the less or more the degree of the being, the less or more the unity. Soul, while distinct from unity’s very self, is a thing of the greater unity in proportion as it is of the greater, the authentic, being. Absolute unity it is not: it is soul and one soul, the unity in some sense a concomitant; there are two things, soul and soul’s unity as there is body with body’s unity. The looser aggregates, such as a choir, are furthest from unity, the more compact are the nearer; soul is nearer yet but still a participant.

Is soul to be identified with unity on the ground that unless it were one thing it could not be soul? No; unity is equally necessary to every other thing, yet unity stands distinct from them; body and unity are not identical; body, too; is still a participant.

Besides, the soul, even the collective soul for all its absence of part, is a manifold: it has diverse powers—reasoning, desiring, perceiving—all held together by this chain of unity. Itself a unity, soul confers unity, but also accepts it. (6.9.1)

It may be suggested that, while in the unities of the partial order the essence and the unity are distinct, yet in collective existence, in Real Being, they are identical, so that when we

have grasped Being we hold unity; Real Being would coincide with Unity. Thus, taking the Intellectual-Principle as Essential Being, that principle and the Unity Absolute would be at once Primal Being and Pure Unity, purveying, accordingly, to the rest of things something of Being and something, in proportion, of the unity which is itself.

There is nothing with which the unity would be more plausibly identified than with Being; either it is Being as a given man is man or it will correspond to the Number which rules in the realm of the particular; it will be a number applying to a certain unique thing as the number two applies to others.

Now if Number is a thing among things, then clearly so this unity must be; we would have to discover what thing of things it is. If Number is not a thing but an operation of the mind moving out to reckon, then the unity will not be a thing.

We found that anything losing unity loses its being; we are therefore obliged to enquire whether the unity in particulars is identical with the being, and unity absolute identical with collective being.

Now the being of the particular is a manifold; unity cannot be a manifold; there must therefore be a distinction between Being and Unity. Thus a man is at once a reasoning living being and a total of parts; his variety is held together by his unity; man therefore and unity are different- man a thing of parts against unity partless. Much more must Collective Being, as container of all existence, be a manifold and therefore distinct from the unity in which it is but participant.

Again, Collective Being contains life and intelligence—it is no dead thing- and so, once more, is a manifold.

If Being is identical with Intellectual-Principle, even at that it is a manifold; all the more so when count is taken of the Ideal Forms in it; for the Idea, particular or collective, is, after all, a numerable agglomeration whose unity is that of a kosmos.

Above all, unity is The First: but Intellectual-Principle, Ideas and Being, cannot be so; for any member of the realm of Forms is an aggregation, a compound, and therefore- since components must precede their compound—is a later.

Other considerations also go to show that the Intellectual-Principle cannot be the First. Intellect must be above the Intellectual Act: at least in its higher phase, that not concerned with the outer universe, it must be intent upon its Prior; its introversion is a conversion upon the Principle.

Considered as at once Thinker and Object of its Thought, it is dual, not simplex, not The Unity: considered as looking beyond itself, it must look to a better, to a prior: looking simultaneously upon itself and upon its Transcendent, it is, once more, not a First.

There is no other way of stating Intellectual-Principle than as that which, holding itself in the presence of The Good and First and looking towards That, is self-present also, self-knowing and Knowing itself as All-Being: thus manifold, it is far from being The Unity.

In sum: The Unity cannot be the total of beings, for so its oneness is annulled; it cannot be the Intellectual-Principle, for so it would be that total which the Intellectual-Principle is; nor is it Being, for Being is the manifold of things. (6.9.2)

The One as Simple

Now the being of the particular is a manifold; unity cannot be a manifold; there must therefore be a distinction between Being and Unity. Thus a man is at once a reasoning

living being and a total of parts; his variety is held together by his unity; man therefore and unity are different- man a thing of parts against unity partless. Much more must Collective Being, as container of all existence, be a manifold and therefore distinct from the unity in which it is but participant.

Again, Collective Being contains life and intelligence—it is no dead thing- and so, once more, is a manifold.

If Being is identical with Intellectual-Principle, even at that it is a manifold; all the more so when count is taken of the Ideal Forms in it; for the Idea, particular or collective, is, after all, a numerable agglomeration whose unity is that of a kosmos.

Above all, unity is The First: but Intellectual-Principle, Ideas and Being, cannot be so; for any member of the realm of Forms is an aggregation, a compound, and therefore- since components must precede their compound—is a later.

Other considerations also go to show that the Intellectual-Principle cannot be the First. Intellect must be above the Intellectual Act: at least in its higher phase, that not concerned with the outer universe, it must be intent upon its Prior; its introversion is a conversion upon the Principle.

Considered as at once Thinker and Object of its Thought, it is dual, not simplex, not The Unity: considered as looking beyond itself, it must look to a better, to a prior: looking simultaneously upon itself and upon its Transcendent, it is, once more, not a First.

There is no other way of stating Intellectual-Principle than as that which, holding itself in the presence of The Good and First and looking towards That, is self-present also, self-knowing and Knowing itself as All-Being: thus manifold, it is far from being The Unity.

In sum: The Unity cannot be the total of beings, for so its oneness is annulled; it cannot be the Intellectual-Principle, for so it would be that total which the Intellectual-Principle is; nor is it Being, for Being is the manifold of things. (6.9.3)

The One as Everywhere and Nowhere

We maintain, and it is evident truth, that the Supreme is everywhere and yet nowhere; keeping this constantly in mind let us see how it bears on our present enquiry.

If God is nowhere, then not anywhere has He “happened to be”; as also everywhere, He is everywhere in entirety: at once, He is that everywhere and everywise: He is not in the everywhere but is the everywhere as well as the giver to the rest of things of their being in that everywhere. Holding the supreme place—or rather no holder but Himself the Supreme—all lies subject to Him; they have not brought Him to be but happen, all, to Him- or rather they stand there before Him looking upon Him, not He upon them. He is borne, so to speak, to the inmost of Himself in love of that pure radiance which He is, He Himself being that which He. loves. That is to say, as self-dwelling Act and Intellectual-Principle, the most to be loved, He has given Himself existence. Intellectual-Principle is the issue of Act: God therefore is issue of Act, but, since no other has generated Him, He is what He made Himself: He is not, therefore, “as He happened to be” but as He acted Himself into being.

Again; if He preeminently is because He holds firmly, so to speak, towards Himself, looking towards Himself, so that what we must call his being is this self-looking, He must again, since the word is inevitable, make Himself: thus, not “as He happens to be” is He but as He Himself wills to be. Nor is this will a hazard, a something happening; the will

adopting the Best is not a thing of chance.

That his being is constituted by this self-originating self-tendence—at once Act and repose—becomes clear if we imagine the contrary; inclining towards something outside of Himself, He would destroy the identity of his being. This self-directed Act is, therefore, his peculiar being, one with Himself. If, then, his act never came to be but is eternal—a waking without an awakener, an eternal wakening and a supra-Intellection—He is as He waked Himself to be. This awakening is before being, before Intellectual-Principle, before rational life, though He is these; He is thus an Act before Intellectual-Principle and consciousness and life; these come from Him and no other; his being, then, is a self-presence, issuing from Himself. Thus not “as He happened to be” is He but as He willed to be. (6.8.16)

The One as Source of All Things

Anything existing after The First must necessarily arise from that First, whether immediately or as tracing back to it through intervenients; there must be an order of secondaries and tertiaries, in which any second is to be referred to The First, any third to the second.

Standing before all things, there must exist a Simplex, differing from all its sequel, self-gathered not inter-blended with the forms that rise from it, and yet able in some mode of its own to be present to those others: it must be authentically a unity, not merely something elaborated into unity and so in reality no more than unity’s counterfeit; it will debar all telling and knowing except that it may be described as transcending Being- for if there were nothing outside all alliance and compromise, nothing authentically one, there would be no Source. Untouched by multiplicity, it will be wholly self-sufficing, an absolute First, whereas any not-first demands its earlier, and any non-simplex needs the simplicities within itself as the very foundations of its composite existence.

There can be only one such being: if there were another, the two [as indiscernible] would resolve into one, for we are not dealing with two corporal entities.

Our One-First is not a body: a body is not simplex and, as a thing of process cannot be a First, the Source cannot be a thing of generation: only a principle outside of body, and utterly untouched by multiplicity, could be The First.

Any unity, then, later than The First must be no longer simplex; it can be no more than a unity in diversity.

Whence must such a sequent arise?

It must be an offspring of The First; for suppose it the product of chance, that First ceases to be the Principle of All.

But how does it arise from The First?

If The First is perfect, utterly perfect above all, and is the beginning of all power, it must be the most powerful of all that is, and all other powers must act in some partial imitation of it. Now other beings, coming to perfection, are observed to generate; they are unable to remain self-closed; they produce: and this is true not merely of beings endowed with will, but of growing things where there is no will; even lifeless objects impart something of themselves, as far as they may; fire warms, snow chills, drugs have their own outgoing efficacy; all things to the utmost of their power imitate the Source in some operation tending to eternity and to service.

How then could the most perfect remain self-set- the First Good, the Power towards all, how could it grudge or be powerless to give of itself, and how at that would it still be the Source?

If things other than itself are to exist, things dependent upon it for their reality, it must produce since there is no other source. And further this engendering principle must be the very highest in worth; and its immediate offspring, its secondary, must be the best of all that follows. (5.4.1)

Everything moving has necessarily an object towards which it advances; but since the Supreme can have no such object, we may not ascribe motion to it: anything that comes into being after it can be produced only as a consequence of its unfailing self-intention; and, of course, we dare not talk of generation in time, dealing as we are with eternal Beings: where we speak of origin in such reference, it is in the sense, merely, of cause and subordination: origin from the Supreme must not be taken to imply any movement in it: that would make the Being resulting from the movement not a second principle but a third: the Movement would be the second hypostasis.

Given this immobility in the Supreme, it can neither have yielded assent nor uttered decree nor stirred in any way towards the existence of a secondary.

What happened then? What are we to conceive as rising in the neighbourhood of that immobility?

It must be a circumradiation—produced from the Supreme but from the Supreme unaltering—and may be compared to the brilliant light encircling the sun and ceaselessly generated from that unchanging substance.

All existences, as long as they retain their character, produce—about themselves, from their essence, in virtue of the power which must be in them—some necessary, outward-facing hypostasis continuously attached to them and representing in image the engendering archetypes: thus fire gives out its heat; snow is cold not merely to itself; fragrant substances are a notable instance; for, as long as they last, something is diffused from them and perceived wherever they are present.

Again, all that is fully achieved engenders: therefore the eternally achieved engenders eternally an eternal being. At the same time, the offspring is always minor: what then are we to think of the All-Perfect but that it can produce nothing less than the very greatest that is later than itself. The greatest, later than the divine unity, must be the Divine Mind, and it must be the second of all existence, for it is that which sees The One on which alone it leans while the First has no need whatever of it. The offspring of the prior to Divine Mind can be no other than that Mind itself and thus is the loftiest being in the universe, all else following upon it—the soul, for example, being an utterance and act of the Intellectual-Principle as that is an utterance and act of The One. But in soul the utterance is obscured, for soul is an image and must look to its own original: that Principle, on the contrary, looks to the First without mediation—thus becoming what it is—and has that vision not as from a distance but as the immediate next with nothing intervening, close to the One as Soul to it. (5.1.6)

The offspring must seek and love the begetter; and especially so when begetter and begotten are alone in their sphere; when, in addition, the begetter is the highest good, the offspring [inevitably seeking its Good] is attached by a bond of sheer necessity, separated only in being distinct. (5.1.6).

Plotinus. *The Six Enneads*. Trans. Syephen MacKenna. London: Medici Society, 1917.

© SophiaOmni, 2001. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.