

ONE AND INFINITY: approaching *The Enneads* of Plotinus.

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[*Enneads* references are to the Mckenna translation, Larson Publications, 1995.]

ENNEADS BACKGROUND

Open to almost any tractate in *The Enneads* of Plotinus and read a self-contained, beautiful and inspired poetic discourse. Or delve deeper, and find landmark non-denominational mystical philosophical treatises, worthy of prolonged analysis. Even today, with a great wealth of modern nondual teachings and ancient wisdom, the *Enneads* provide daring insights into the vastness of Reality hardly touched anywhere else.

One of the greatest and most profound mystical philosopher of ancient times: the third century neo-Platonist Plotinus wrote essays in response to student questions. Organized after his death into 54 tractates—the so-called Enneads (means “nines”) continue a tradition of more than 700 years of Pythagorean and Platonic thought, while bringing a unique perspective. They also inform the following 1200 years of Christian and Muslim religious and philosophic thought in the western world.

ESSENCE OF ENNEADS IS ONE-NESS

What do we find at the core of these writings? In essence, the essays of Plotinus present us a philosophy of reality as ONE-ness. In many of the tractates, questions about the nature of happiness, beauty, freedom, knowing all are considered and find a resolution in the ONE reality.

What value could there be for us in this austere view? For Plotinus, without the Unity, there is no value to anything else. We hope to see more as we proceed. The words of a Sage carry an assurance that reality *IS*: evoke an atmosphere of the nature they describe and awaken our desire to experience. Indeed, Plotinus says that even the reasoning that showed there is ultimate reality “was already a kind of initiation.” (1.3.1)

My teacher Anthony Damiani answers like this:

“after all the greatest joy that a human being can have is to try to fathom the unfathomable. When you get to the point where you give up then you get enlightened -- but you better try real hard in the beginning.” [transcript 03/12/82]

An inquiry into reality has the possibility to weaken the ego's self-centered attitude and evoke an atmosphere which inspires us to experience ourselves. If even the teachings about reality have this value, imagine the actuality! Are adventures in reality only for the ancients? Has reality changed so much today that these hypostases are different? Plotinus bids us to not be satisfied with the concepts, but to experience for ourselves

. Let us explore two essential questions which bring our attention to the ONE.

QUESTION 1: WHAT IS UNITY?

No name can capture reality, but as Plotinus says: “since name it we must there is a certain rough fitness in designating it as unity.” (6.9.5) He says further on: we use the terms to communicate: “indicating it to each other by a designation that points to the concept of its partlessness while we are in reality striving to bring our own minds to unity.” 6.9.5 So these terms *the ONE* and *the Good* are pointers. But what do they point to? His phrase “striving to bring our own minds to unity” anticipates his own question and answer dialogue in the next section:

In what sense, then, do we assert this Unity, and how is it (the One) to be adjusted to our mental processes? (6.9.6)

Unity does not fit any of our preconceptions. We listen to the Sage, informed by reality, hoping the words will help us to “adjust” our mind and bring us a touch of reality. It would be a great mistake to take *ONE* in our usual meaning of the word. It is not a homogeneous block, a single point or first in a series. Yet all this does not mean we have nothing: for immediately Plotinus confronts us in 6.9.6 with a view to blow us apart:

Its oneness must not be entitled to that of monad and point: for these the mind abstracts extension and numerical quantity and rests upon the very minutest possible, ...

We must therefore take the Unity as infinite not in measureless extension or numerable quantity but in fathomless depths of power.

. In many tractates such as here, Plotinus uses a combination of affirmation and negation: leads us to the ONE by moving to a grand view, and then pushing us off the edge. Yes, we try to form an image-- Intelligence, God, Mind--the greatest value we can imagine It is not enough-- we have to go one step beyond:

“Think of the One as Mind or God, you think too narrowly. ... For This is utterly a self-existent, with no concomitant whatever. This self-sufficing is the essence of its unity. Something there must be supremely adequate, autonomous, all-transcending, most utterly without need.” 6.9.6

There is no doubt for Plotinus that One, reality, IS, but we should not expect to say “what” the ONE is, since the ONE is not a “what.”

...Note that the phrase transcending Being assigns no character, makes no assertion, allots no name, carries only the denial of particular being;...Its definition, in fact, could be only "the indefinable": ... And this name, The One, contains really no more than the negation of plurality: under the same pressure the Pythagoreans found their indication in the symbol "Apollo" [a= not; pollon= of many] with its repudiation of the multiple. 5.5.6

The only way is to make every denial and no assertion, to feign no quality or content there but to permit only the "It is" in which we pretend to no affirmation of non-existent attribute: 5.5.12

In the original Greek, the word for One, *en*, is close to *on*: the word for Being. Going “beyond being” even has linguistic base: “in our very form of speech we tell, as far as may be, that Being [*on*: the weaker sound] is that which proceeds from [*hen*: the stronger] The One.” 5.5.5 Perhaps in English language we come close to this meaning by shifting *is* to *is-ness*, or being to be-ness or That-ness. And perhaps most directly to the point, in 6.7.38:

It is not that we think it exact to call it either good or The Good: it is that sheer negation does not indicate; we use the term The Good to assert identity without the affirmation of Being. 6.7.38:

PARADOX: ONE AND INFINITY

Thus Plotinus does not hesitate to make use of affirmations to counterbalance the denial of all qualities to the ONE: in order to “adjust our mind to Unity.” Reality is best understood through dialectic, which includes paradox and complementarity, rather than linear logical thinking. Paradox means literally that which is beyond (para) finite logical thought (doxa.) Another word used by the Greek philosophers is Aporia: a dialectical process which brings together two contradictory perspectives in order to bring our mind to a halt. Though we cannot comprehend reality with words, dialectic opens our mind to receive a response. And the ONE is like a magnet that draws us and draws out our own remembrance--in this sense the ONE is also the Good: it is the resolution of all problems and leads us to itself.

Plotinus even dares to describe the paradoxical interiority of the ONE in a fabulous passage in 6.8.16:

The ONE's “being is constituted by this self-originating self-tendance--at once Act and repose”
“ If then this Act never came to be but is eternal--a waking without an awakener, an eternal waking and a beyond-Intelligence—the ONE is as It waked Itself to be. This awakening is before being, before Intellectual-Principle, before rational life, though the ONE is these;
Thus the ONE is not 'as it happened to be' is but as It willed to be.

John Deck (*Nature, Contemplation and the One*) very thoughtfully points out that when the ONE is described as beyond-intelligence it does not mean without intelligence, but rather super-intelligence. Though it is ineffable and beyond being all existence grows from it.

We have to confront this juxtaposition of repose and act right in the ONE :

... Only by a leap can we reach to this One which is to be pure of all else, halting sharp in fear of slipping ever so little aside and impinging on the dual: for if we fail of the centre, we are in a duality which does not even include The authentic One but belongs on both sides, to the later order. 5.5.5

So One is inviolable. It is also infinite. It is self-awake. It radiates. Finite intellect cannot put these descriptions together: we must find these meanings in our hearts. The leap we hope to take is not into a foreign good, but our own Nature as Good.

QUESTION 2: HOW DOES ANYTHING ARISE?

Now that we have heard something of the nature of the ONE we address a second question: (5.1.6)

From such a unity as we have declared The One to be, how does anything at all come into substantial existence...? Why has the Primal not remained self-gathered so that there be none of this profusion of the manifold which we observe in existence and yet are compelled to trace to that absolute unity?

There are two interrelated questions here: given the nature of reality as ONE, HOW and WHY does anything come about? The answers follow directly from the nature of the paradox we have just been discussing. Reality in its intrinsic unific self-perfection nature includes “infinite depths of power” and a “self-tendence, at once act and repose.”

Plotinus answers his own question with the fabulous idea of “essential production.”

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... Again, all that is fully achieved engenders: therefore the eternally achieved engenders eternally an eternal being. 5.1.6

It is natural to spontaneously “produce”. But: careful! For the ONE there is no going anywhere, or doing anything at all. There is no “arisa” because the ONE already is perfect, including everything

It is precisely because that is nothing within the One that all things are from it: ...Seeking nothing, possessing nothing, lacking nothing, the One is perfect and, in our metaphor, has overflowed... 5.2.1

The One is perfect in stillness and in power and awareness. As a metaphor, it is like an infinite sun shining. There is no need of extrinsic agency, or any agency at all, in the emanation of universes and multiplicity. It is the Nature of reality. This is the remarkable insight.

OMNIPRESENCE

It follows from its nature that the ONE is always present, and inviolable in its presence. It is, in the words of Plotinus, “omnipresent.” If we follow these ideas of the ONE, everything else will naturally follow.

God- we read- is outside of none, present unperceived to all...

Thus the Supreme as containing no otherness is ever present with us; we with it when we put otherness away. ... We are always before it: but we do not always look... 6.9.8

The consequence for the human situation is that Reality is omnipresent, and we are always in this presence. From a discussion of Reality, naturally follows a practice of recognizing and living reality. The descriptions of the ONE in Plotinus apply to anything which is a one, serving us as a guide and paradigm for human nature as One and Good. Next time we follow some of his suggestions for Practices.