

Why the One Cannot Have Parts:

Plotinus on Divine Simplicity, Ontological Independence, and Perfect

Being Theology

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Abstract:

I use Plotinus to present absolute divine simplicity as the consequence of principles about metaphysical and explanatory priority to which most theists are already committed. I employ Phil Corkum's account of ontological independence as independent status to present a new interpretation of Plotinus on the dependence of everything on the One. On this reading, if something else (whether an internal part or something external) makes you what you are, then you are ontologically dependent on it. I show that this account supports Plotinus's claim that any entity with parts cannot be fully independent. In particular, I lay out Plotinus's case for thinking that even a divine self-understanding intellect cannot be fully independent. I then argue that a weaker version of simplicity is not enough for the theist since priority monism meets the conditions of a moderate version of ontological independence just as well as a transcendent but complex ultimate being.

Keywords: aseity, simplicity, ontological dependence, perfect being, monism, Platonism

1. Introduction

This paper draws on the works of Plotinus to present absolute divine simplicity as the natural consequence of principles about metaphysical and explanatory priority to which the theist (and the perfect being theologian in particular) is already committed. I show why Plotinus thinks that strong divine simplicity follows from two principles that perfect-being theologians feel pressure to

endorse: 1) the ultimate being is absolutely ontologically independent and 2) the ultimate being needs no further explanation and. Plotinus argues that the ultimate being cannot have internal parts. If the ultimate being has distinct metaphysical parts, the whole would depend on them in some way, violating 1). Plotinus does concede that in many cases wholes are ontologically prior to their parts, insofar as the whole explains and causes the parts, making them what they are. Nevertheless, the status of any metaphysical whole is still dependent on its parts, since it could not be what it is without these parts, something even advocates of the priority of the whole, such as Aristotle, recognize. This means that an absolutely independent being cannot have any kind of internal structure or parts. Similarly, if the ultimate being's attributes were distinct from each other, then we would need a further explanation of why they are united in one being, violating 2). This explanation would be different from these attributes and would be prior to them, explaining their unity in the ultimate being. Thus the supposed ultimate being would not be fundamental to the structure of reality.

My interpretation also addresses a central issue facing Plotinus's position on the absolute independence of the ultimate being. Scholars have standardly interpreted Plotinus as claiming that the One can exist without anything else, but not vice versa. However, the One does not seem to be counterfactually independent, since Plotinus thinks that all things necessarily proceed from it. Drawing on work by Phil Corkum, I present an alternative interpretation of ontological independence that avoids this problem. On this view, ontological independence requires that your metaphysical status be independent of any other entity. If something else (even an

internal part) makes you what you are, then you are ontologically dependent on it in that respect. I argue that this reading is the best way of articulating Plotinus's views. First, since this account is not a counterfactual one, it allows Plotinus to hold that the One is absolutely independent even though everything necessarily proceeds from the One. Secondly, I show that this account can be used to support Plotinus's claim that any entity with parts cannot be fully independent. I do this by laying out Plotinus's case for thinking that even a divine self-understanding intellect, the ultimate being according to Aristotle and a number of Platonists, cannot be ontologically independent.

I conclude by discussing possible ways of responding to Plotinus's argument. Some may accept Plotinus's position and work to show how the metaphysics Plotinus offers is compatible with their theological views. Others may opt for a weaker version of independence, which only requires that the ultimate being be prior to its parts. In response to this, I show that adopting a weaker principle creates difficulties for the theist, since priority monism meets the conditions of a moderate version of ontological independence just as well as a transcendent but complex ultimate being. Finally, attackers of metaphysical theism may try to employ Plotinus's views as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Plotinus's argument is worth considering both in itself and as a way to clarify general issues about ontological and explanatory priority that face all accounts of reality.

2. Context

In contemporary philosophy of religion, the goals and approach of perfect being theology are often formulated in Anselmian terms (for example, Nagasawa

2008; Rogers 2000; and Morris 1987). This may well be appropriate—Anselm’s formulation is distinctive and influential, particularly for trying to harmonize philosophical theology and divine revelation—but we need to remember that there are earlier sources worth bringing into the conversation. As Brian Leftow points out, Anselm did not originate perfect being theology and is, in fact, drawing on its extensive earlier history (2004: 132). Its roots extend at least as far back as Parmenides and Xenophanes and their insistence on an ultimate transcendent being (Xenophanes, B23; B24; B25; B26; A12; Parmenides, B8; cf. Plato, *Parmenides* 137c-160b). Plotinus is one of the most important ancient exponents of this perfect being tradition. He defends a series of metaphysical constraints on the highest being and develops a notion of divine simplicity that sets the agenda for much of perennial philosophical theology. For example, Plotinus articulates a causal principle of predication (VI.9, 6.54-58) and insists that there are no real relations between the One and derivative beings (VI.8, 8) setting the stage for medieval discussions of transcendence and creator/creation relations. His work influenced a wide array of Islamic, Jewish, and Christian theologians drawing on the Neoplatonic tradition (for discussion, see the introduction of Adamson 2002). Moreover, a pagan perspective on divine simplicity may help to bring to light assumptions involved in Abrahamic versions of perfect being theology.

Plotinus’s arguments for divine simplicity are also worth bringing into conversation with contemporary philosophy of religion on their philosophical merits. Plotinus attacks the assumption that a perfect being would have maximal versions of the sort of personal characteristics that human beings have. Instead of

attributing a variety of apparently great-making properties to the supreme being and then trying to determine the degree to which they are compatible, Plotinus insists that unity is basic to the first being's role as the ultimate metaphysical and explanatory principle. This approach distinguishes him from the predominant contemporary approaches and from some of his ancient interlocutors, such as the Stoics (see Leftow 2011 for further discussion of the ancient and medieval antecedents to Anselm's perfect being theology). This different approach can avoid some of the disputes over possibility that have characterized recent evaluations of omniGod perfect being theology (e.g. Oppy 2011; Nagasawa 2013).

Examining Plotinus's positive arguments for divine simplicity also helps to add an important dimension to the current scholarly discussion of divine simplicity. Recent work on divine simplicity has largely focused on defending divine simplicity from various attacks (e.g. Stump 2013, Brower 2008, Jacobs forthcoming). Authors have defended the coherence of divine simplicity against objections and articulated the extent to which divine simplicity is compatible with the freely loving God of Abrahamic religion. Not as much work has been done on the positive case for divine simplicity. This paper articulates the case for thinking that absolute simplicity is a consequence of ontological independence.

3. Absolute Ontological Independence

Plotinus, like many ancient thinkers, holds that there must be an ultimate principle that is ontologically prior to all other beings and explains and accounts for all other beings. Within philosophical theology these claims are common, with versions of these principles used from Parmenides to Avicenna and up to the present

day. What distinguishes Plotinus is his insistence that this ultimate principle must be absolutely simple. It must lack any internal structure or dependence relations, anything that could differentiate one part of it from another.

Virtually all classical theists ascribe aseity—having being *a se*, from itself—to the ultimate principle. Anything that does not possess aseity depends, by definition, on something else to make it what it is or to give it being. But such a thing could not be first or perfect, as what it depended on would be prior and more perfect. Thus the ultimate principle must satisfy aseity. Many theists, however, think that the perfect being only needs to be independent of entities that are outside of and fully distinct from it. They hold that differentiation and dependence relations are possible within the ultimate being (I will consider more moderate versions of aseity in sections 5 and 8).

This is the claim that Plotinus challenges. Plotinus's insistence on a stronger kind of unity comes out clearly in the first passage I want us to consider:

When you think of him as Intellect or God, he is more; and when you unify him in your thought, here also the degree of unity by which he transcends your thought is more than you imagined it to be; for he is by himself without any incidental attribute (*sumbebēkos*). But someone could also think of his oneness in terms of self-sufficiency (*autarkēs*). For since he is the most sufficient and independent, he must also be the most without need; but everything which is many is also in need unless it becomes one from many. Therefore its substance (*ousia*) needs to be one. But the One does not need itself: for it is itself. Certainly anything that is many needs all the things which it is. And each of the things in it, since it is with the others and not by itself, exists in need of the others, making a thing of such a kind needy both in each single part and as a whole. Given, then, that there must be something supremely self-sufficient (*autarkestaton*), it must be the One, which is the only thing of such a kind as not to be in need either in relation to itself or to anything else.¹ (*Enneads* VI.9, 6.13-30)

¹ Translations of Plotinus are based on those of A. H. Armstrong (*Plotinus*, vols. I–VII, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [Loeb] 1966-1988) though often with significant alterations.

In this passage Plotinus argues that anything with parts, anything that is both one and many, cannot be fully self-sufficient (*autarkēs*) or independent. To see why he thinks this, let us start with a familiar case.

Why, you might wonder, don't *I* count as the perfect and ultimate being (especially if I am already tempted to think about myself this way)? As great as you are (and Plotinus does, in fact, think, that in a way each of us is divine), you are not truly self-sufficient. Your failure to be perfect may be over-determined (mine certainly is), but the limitation that Plotinus is interested in here involves the multiplicity of our being. You are yourself, but you also are something reading, thinking, moving around etc. You are both one and many. Why is this problematic? Plotinus claims that, 'anything which is many needs all the things which it is.' If being the kind of thing that you are essentially involves having multiple parts, then you cannot be what you are without them. You are dependent on your parts and they are dependent on each other (e.g. your bodily motions depend on your executive direction, your activity of reading depends on your vision, your thoughts depend on your memories, and all your activities depend on your having life). If your parts went away, you would go away. In this way, you are 'needy both in each single part and as a whole.'

So, what kind of thing could avoid being needy? Only an entirely simple being, Plotinus insists, could be self-sufficient in this strong way. As Plotinus put it 'the One does not need itself: for it is itself.' If you just are what you are *and nothing else*, you can be self-sufficient. We can formulate Plotinus's principle in the following way:

1) Absolute Ontological Independence: the ultimate being cannot, in any way, depend for its being on anything distinct from itself.

Plotinus thinks that, upon reflection, we can see that this principle rules out not just dependence on external beings, but also having any internal parts, as these would be distinct from the whole while helping to make it what it is and give it being. This violates full ontological independence, as I will explain further in section 5.

4. No Further Explanation

The defender of a more qualified version of simplicity might claim that parts are not always prior to their wholes. Indeed, some contemporary metaphysicians have argued that dependence relations go up to a whole, not down to the parts, so that, for example, the cosmos, the ultimate concrete whole, is a better candidate for what is ontologically fundamental than its constituent parts (e.g. Schaffer 2010a; 2010b).

Plotinus is well aware of such views on unity, and, indeed, thinks that in many cases (including the perceptible cosmos and embodied living things) the whole gives being to the parts and explains them. We see this in the following passage:

[Unified substances have] together with their substance (*ousia*) also the cause of their subsisting (*hupostasis*), so that the observer afterwards can say why each of its inherent parts is there, for instance why there is an eye and why the feet of these particular beings are as they are and the cause which brings them into existence on account of each other. Why are the legs and feet as long as they are? Because this is as it is, and because the face is as it is the feet and legs are as they are. And in general the harmony of all the parts with each other is their reciprocal cause; and the reason why this part is, is that this is the being for humanity (*to anthrōpōi einai*); so that the being and the cause are one and the same. But these came in this way from a single source that did not reason but gave, together as a whole, the reason why (*to dia ti*) and the being (*to einai*). It is the source therefore of being and the why of being, giving both at once. (VI.8, 14.20-30)

Here Plotinus maintains that in unified substances, like human beings, the whole explains the order of the parts. The form of human being, what it is to be human, explains why Socrates's face is arranged in the way that it is, why his thigh bone is connected to his hip bone, and, generally, the configuration and arrangements of his parts. This contrasts with a mere heap where there are a bunch of things but no reason or explanation, beyond chance, for why they relate as they do. Socrates is more one and more of a being than a pile of flesh and bones because of the way his form or soul makes his parts what they are and organizes them into a unified whole.

However, Plotinus does not think that unified substances are fully independent and subsistent beings. While the parts depend for their order and arrangement on the whole, the whole would not be what it is without the parts. The whole has priority over the parts causally, in giving the reason why (*to dia ti*) things are as they are. However, the whole and its parts are reciprocally dependent on each other when it comes to their being (*to einai*), as I discuss in the next section. Also, Plotinus insists that they are 'of this kind [sc. unified substances] by what comes from those higher beings.' (VI.8, 14.19-20) Although the human form explains a lot about Socrates, Plotinus thinks it also stands in need of further explanation. Why are there human beings at all? The human form in Socrates does not answer this question on its own. Just considering what is to be human does not explain why there are human beings. We need a further account that depends on a further entity.

This relates to a more general claim that Plotinus makes: as we ascend away from changeable being and towards things that truly subsist, we move away from the range of the arbitrary: 'as one goes towards the simple it is not possible to take

chance up with one, so that it is impossible for chance to ascend to the simplest of all.' (VI.8, 14.15-17) Higher and more unified principles are not affected by chance or in need of further explanation. Indeed, as we saw in the earlier quote, higher levels of being give lower ones, not just their 'being (*to einai*),' but also their 'reason why (*to dia ti*).' The ultimate principle, from this perspective, is seen not just as the source of all being but also as what needs no explanation, the unexplained explainer. Plotinus lays this out emphatically at the end of the chapter I have been quoting from:

If then there is nothing random or by chance and no 'it happened to be like this' with the things which have their cause in themselves, and all things which come from him do have it, for he is the father of account (*logos*) and cause (*aitia*) and causal substance (*aitiōdēs ousia*), which are certainly all far from chance, he would be the principle and in a way the exemplar of all things which have no part in chance, truly and primarily, uncontaminated by chances and coincidence and happening, cause of himself and himself from himself and though himself; for his is primarily self (*prōtos autos*) and self beyond being (*huperontōs autos*). (VI.8, 14.35-42)

This gives us a second principle that Plotinus thinks the ultimate being must satisfy:

2) No Further Explanation: what a perfect being is cannot be in need of any explanation.

The ultimate being explains the being of everything else. If a purported perfect being needs something further to explain why it has the attributes and being that it has, it cannot be the highest being. It cannot depend on something to account for the way it is, since it accounts for the way all other beings are.

5. *What Does Ontological Priority Involve?*

As we just saw, Plotinus, in line with Aristotle, maintains that in many cases the whole explains the parts by making them what they are. Gregory Fowler has recently used this notion of the priority of the whole to formulate what he calls:

The Doctrine of Divine Priority (DDP): For all x , if x is a proper part of God or x is a property of God, then x depends on God for its existence (Fowler 2015)

Fowler presents this as an alternative to divine simplicity. If the whole can be ontologically prior to its parts, then theists can preserve aseity without endorsing absolute simplicity. So, why does Plotinus insist that wholes cannot be truly independent of their parts?

To understand this, we need to consider the notion of ontological priority operative here. Aristotle, whom both Plotinus and Fowler are drawing on, describes the notion of ontological dependence when discussing priority in nature. He says:

As many as are able to be (*einai*) without others, although those others are not able to be (*einai*) without them, (which is the division that Plato used) these things are said to be prior in nature and in substance (*ousia*). (*Metaphysics* Δ 11, 1019a1-4, my translation)

Given Aristotle's reference to his predecessor, Jonathan Beere has called this *Plato's criterion*. It captures the sense of ontological priority to which Aristotle and Plotinus subscribe. We can formulate *Plato's criterion* as follows:

x is prior to y in being if and only if, if x were not, y would not be, but not vice versa. (*Metaphysics* Δ 11, 1019a1-4, as formulated in Beere 2009: ch. 13.3; cf. *Metaphysics* M 2, 1076a36-b4; *Categories* 12, 14a29-35)

We have already seen Plotinus implicitly appeal to this criterion, both in establishing the independence of the One and the dependence of anything with parts.

How does this criterion relate to the Aristotelian idea of the priority of the whole? Immediately after Aristotle introduces this notion, he notes that, since being is said in many ways, things can be prior to others in one respect but not in another.

There can be relations of ontological dependence in both directions, as long as the kinds of dependence involved are distinct. Aristotle uses the example of parts and wholes:

Some things are prior in potentiality (*dunamis*), and others in actuality (*entelecheia*); for example, half a line [is prior] in potentiality to the entire line, and the part [is prior in potentiality] to the whole, and matter [is prior in potentiality] to substance (*ousia*). But in actuality they are posterior: for when the whole has been dissolved they will be in actuality. (*Metaphysics* Δ 11, 1019a7-11, my translation)

For Aristotle, the half-line is prior in potentiality because the whole line would not be what it is without the half-line. In general, the whole's potential to be what it is depends on its parts. However, the whole is fully actual, whereas the half-line does not exist *as a half-line* unless and until the whole is divided into a half-line. In this respect, the part's being is potential and subsequent to the being of the whole.

For our purposes, we do not need to fully evaluate or explicate Aristotle's views. The important thing to note is that even Aristotle, who thinks that unified wholes are, in the most important sense, ontologically prior to their parts, also holds that there is another respect in which they are ontologically posterior to and dependent on these parts. Indeed, Aristotle even seems to hold in *Metaphysics* Z 10-11 that there is a sense in which the whole is dependent on its definitional parts (for discussion see Burnyeat 2001; Frede and Patzig 1988).

Thus the priority of the whole is not enough to establish full ontological independence. Fowler appeals to Aristotle's metaphysics as a model for ontological priority (2015: 13-17). But if the parts provide the matter or potentiality for the whole, they seem to be prior to it in this respect, violating **1) Absolute Ontological Independence**. This is one of the reasons Aristotle insists that his own ultimate

principle is not a whole composed of parts or the actuality of some potentiality (*Metaphysics* Θ 8, 1050b7-28; Λ 7 and 9).

Thus even though Plotinus concedes that the functional status of parts as parts depends on the whole, he is still entitled to insist that wholes which depend on their parts fail to meet **1**), since they are ontological dependent on their parts in some way. The priority of the whole is not enough to satisfy **1) Absolute Ontological Independence**. To show that divine priority is compatible with aseity, you would need to show that there is no way in which a whole is dependent on its parts, not just that there is some way in which the parts are dependent on whole.

6. *Can the One be Absolutely Independent?*

But can anything, including the ultimate principle Plotinus posits, actually satisfy *Plato's Criterion* and meet *Absolute Ontological Independence*? Here a problem arises from Plotinus's views on the way that things proceed from the One. To explain this process, Plotinus uses the illustration of a number series, in which we conceive of all the other numbers as coming from and being generated from 1: we put 1 together with itself and get 2, we put 1 together with 2 and get 3, and so on (V.5, 4.20-5). On this picture, 1 can exist on its own and just is what it is, but all the other numbers depend for their existence on 1 (since they are generated from it) and also explanatorily depend on 1 (since what they are is defined with reference to 1). This is an analogy of the way that everything else relates to the One, not by temporal dependence but by explanatory and ontological dependence. When we ask about the being of anything else, it will turn out to be accounted for by the One.

The One, by contrast, does not have any relation to anything else. Nothing else in reality could modify or affect the One: it always is what it is. This is the only way, Plotinus thinks, that *Absolute Ontological Independence* and *No Further Explanation* can be satisfied. As Dominic O'Meara puts it:

Plotinus's conception of Platonic priority by nature...refers to a relation of nonreciprocal dependence in which, in a series of terms, the posterior depends on the prior and cannot exist without the prior, whereas the prior exists independently of the posterior and is not destroyed with the destruction of the posterior. (1996: 72)

So, on O'Meara's reading, the One can exist without the things that come from the One but not vice versa.

But, for Plotinus, everything proceeds from the One, as all numbers proceed from 1. John Bussanich points out this problem, noting that Plotinus's claims 'imply that the One's giving cannot not have occurred and cannot cease.' (1996: 49-50) Necessary emanation is a central feature of Plotinus's metaphysical system. In particular, the other Hypostases or substantial beings, the Intellect and the Soul, come from the One. But this seems to make the three hypotheses reciprocally entailing and thus mutually dependent for existence, contrary to *Plato's Criterion* and 1) *Absolute Ontological Independence*. On the standard interpretation of *Plato's Criterion*, it is only when the existence of B implies A, *but not vice versa*, that A is ontologically prior to B. So it now seems like even the One is counterfactually dependent on something.²

The best way to solve this problem is by reconsidering how to interpret *Plato's Criterion* and 1). Many scholars have understood these conditions in terms of

² I would like to thank Timothy Pawl for forcefully raising this objection.

existence implications and counterfactual dependence. For example, Jonathan Beere describes *Plato's Criterion* as requiring 'non-reciprocal entailment of being.' (2009: 294) Similarly, Dominic O'Meara takes the criterion Plotinus is using to require that 'for *A* to be, there must be *B*, but not vice versa; the destruction of *B* means the destruction of *A*, but not vice versa.' (1996: 69) But counterfactual dependence is not the only way to interpret **1**). Phil Corkum has proposed an alternative interpretation of ontological priority or separability, a grounding reading. On his interpretation, *A* is ontologically independent from *B* if *A* has the ontological status of a being independently of standing in some tie to *B* (Corkum 2008). The idea is that *A* is what it is apart from any contribution *B* makes, while *B* only is what it is because of *A*. We can offer a general formulation of the grounding reading of *Plato's Criterion* as follows:

x is prior to *y* in being if and only if, if *x* were not what it is or did not have the ontological status it does, *y* would not be what it is or have the ontological status it does, but not vice versa. (cf. Corkum 2013)

This view of ontological dependence allows us to see why Plotinus thinks that the One can be both the necessary source of everything else and absolutely independent of all beings.

For Plotinus, the One has its status apart from anything else. As we have seen in our passages, even if other things come from the One, it is what it is on its own, without reference to any other object or any internal feature or property. By contrast, everything else is what it is because of its relation to the One. As I mentioned above, Plotinus holds that the other hypostases, the Intellect and Soul, necessarily emanate from the One (e.g. V.1; V.2; V.5). Thus their status as being what they are is

dependent on the One, but not vice versa. It is part of what Intellect is that it comes from the One. Similarly, Soul is what it is because of the way it comes from the Intellect and the One. Even though the three hypostases are mutually entailing, the One grounds the others.

Now, an objector might still question this claim of independence. For Plotinus, we posit the One as the ultimate cause of unity, being, and goodness in everything we perceive and know. If we merely call this thing Good or absolutely simple without being aware of it as a source and origin, Plotinus says that we will not really connect with it (III.8, 9.15-19). But if we can only think about or have access to the One via its causal agency, its causal agency would seem to be essential to it. The One would not be the One without the effects to which it gives rise, since it is essentially a 'productive power of all things.'³ (III.8, 10.1)

Plotinus has strong grounds for resisting this objection. Even if we only cognize the One insofar as it is a certain kind of cause, our epistemic access to the One does not determine its ontological status. We may only have epistemic access to distant stars through observing the light they emanate, but that does not mean that what those stars are is defined by their emanation. For Plotinus, we can come to see that the One's status must be completely independent of all beings, even if we access the One through effects emanated from it. As he emphatically puts it:

But we must say that [the One] is entirely unrelated to anything; for it is what it is (*esti hoper esti*) before them; for we take away the 'is', and so also any relation to things that are in any way. (VI.8, 8.14-16)

³ I would like to thank one of my anonymous referees for helpfully raising this objection.

All beings relate to the One, but the One just is what it is, with no intrinsic relations to anything outside itself. It perfectly satisfies *1*). Thus Corkum's notion of metaphysical status is a helpful way of explicating Plotinus's use of *Plato's Criterion* and *1*). It explains why the One meets these conditions, but unified wholes do not, since their status is still dependent on their parts, a point we will examine more fully in section 9.

7. How We Can Connect to that which is "Beyond Being."

Even if Plotinus's application of *Plato's Criterion* is consistent and the One satisfies *1*), some of Plotinus's statements concerning the ultimate being might still make you worry that his view is incomprehensible:

For there must be something simple (*haploun*) before (*pro*) all things, and this must be other than all the things which come after it, existing by itself, not mixed with the things which derive from it, and all the same able to be present in a different way to these other things, being really one, and not a different being and then one; it is false even to say of it that it is one, and there is 'no account (*logos*) or scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*)' of it; it is indeed also said to be 'beyond being (*epekeina ousias*).' For if it is not to be simple, outside all coincidence and composition, it could not be a principle (*archē*); and it is the most self-sufficient (*autarkestaton*), because it is simple and the first of all: for that which is not the first needs that which is before it, and what is not simple is in need of its simple components (*tōn haplōn*) so that it can come into being from them. (V.4.1.5-15)

Here Plotinus makes two interrelated claims about the One. First, it is the principle of everything else: its presence is what gives other things being. Secondly, it exists entirely on its own, unrelated to anything else. You might be concerned that Plotinus's view is simply incoherent. It might seem that his principles require impossible things of the supposed ultimate (e.g. that it is 'beyond being') or, at the least, prevent us from being able to connect to this being (given that there is 'no account or scientific knowledge of it'). I want to clarify some of the claims he makes

about the One to avoid misconceptions, address concerns about incoherence or inconsistency, and give us a better sense of what Plotinus is saying.

While Plotinus consistently maintains that we cannot, properly speaking, have an account (*logos*) or scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*) of the One (his reference is to the discussion in Plato's *Parmenides*, 142a3-4), he insists that there are still ways to make reference to it and connect to it. Plotinus distinguishes between being able to say what it is, or knowing its essence, which is impossible for us, and being able to speak about it, which is possible: '[the One] is not its name, but says that it is not 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.' (V.3, 13.4-7) As I read him, Plotinus claims that we cannot know or articulate the essence of the One, but we can still signify it and refer to it:

But we have [the One] in such a way that we speak *about* it, but do not speak *it*. For we say what it is not, but we 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. (V.3, 14.5-8)

In place of intellectual knowledge of the One, Plotinus holds that we can have an immediate experiential connection with the One in which we identify with it:

Our awareness of that One is not by way of scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*) or of understanding (*noēsis*), as with other intelligible things, but by way of a presence superior to scientific knowledge. (VI.9, 4.1-4)

We can connect with the One because the One is with us and in us, in a way that is much more real than if the One were an object of our intellectual knowledge. These aspects of his view raise many further questions, but I hope that this brief explication of his approach will allay some concerns, and position us to further consider his views on the ontological status of the ultimate being.

Now, what does Plotinus mean in saying that the One is 'beyond being (*epekeina ousias*),' a striking phrase taken from Plato's *Republic*, 509b9, where it is applied to the Form of the Good? Scholars debate how to understand Plotinus's repeated denials of being (*einai*) and substance (*ousia*) to the one (e.g. VI.8, 9.29-30, III.8, 10.26-35). Is Plotinus denying all existence to the One or just conditioned existence? I will present my reading and show how it allows Plotinus's view of the One to be coherent. While this interpretation is cogent and has strong scholarly support, the scope of this paper does not allow me to fully defend it against its rivals. Nevertheless, since my aim is bringing Plotinus's thought into dialogue with contemporary perfect being theology, not settling this dispute, providing a plausible and consistent interpretation of the One's simplicity is sufficient for my purposes.

On my reading, Plotinus is not denying that the One exists (after all, if it did not exist nothing else would) or claiming that it is a blank nothingness, instead it is 'Good in another way beyond all goods.' (VI.9 6.58-9) Plotinus is denying that the One has the sort of metaphysical structure that all beings or substances (*ousiai*) have (Kahn 2004: 386 and Gerson 1994: 6 both offer interpretations along similar lines). In my view, Plotinus's claim draws on a way of thinking about being that is characteristic of ancient Greek philosophy. For Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, to be is always to be something or other (cf. Owen 1965; Brown 1994; Kahn 2004). For them, there is no universal quantifier that ranges over every being that exists. Instead, their ontologies are based on multiple ways of being. Claims about being are not seen as expressing an absolute binary (either something is or is not, with no in-between), but as relative to a way of being (e.g. these philosophers are happy to say both "Socrates

is," insofar as he is a human being, and "Socrates is not," insofar as he is not, for example, a color or a god or a form).

Some philosophers are rather unsympathetic to this approach. J.S. Mill accused the Greeks of confusing the 'is' of existence with the 'is' of predication, creating a fog that 'diffused itself at an early period over the whole surface of metaphysics.' (1843: 104) The analytical logical framework that Mill, Gottlob Frege, and others developed entirely divorced existence claims from predication claims. While this approach is still employed by many, most philosophers now recognize that this framework is itself a contested way of thinking about the world with its own metaphysical and semantic commitments, not some irrefutable clarification of earlier mistakes. Given the view of reality that Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus endorse, they have philosophical reasons for presenting being as ways of being and for thinking that there are mutual entailment relations between *being* and *being something*. Given my purposes, I will proceed with elucidating Plotinus's framework, while recognizing that the proper semantics of being is a contested issue that may seriously impact how one thinks about the ultimate being and does philosophical theology.

Lesley Brown has shown that while Greeks marked a syntactic distinction between complete uses of *einai* where no expressed predicate is employed (e.g. Socrates is, *Socratēs esti*) and incomplete uses that involve a completing predicate (e.g. white is a color, *leukon chroma esti*) this did not reflect a semantic distinction between two different meanings or uses. Even syntactically complete uses of *einai* involve some implicitly predicated way of being and can be supplemented: we can

ask 'Socrates is what? (*ti esti Socratēs?*)' In English, by contrast, 'to exist' is used in a complete way and cannot be supplemented with a predicate (e.g. if I say 'John exists,' you cannot follow up by asking 'John exists what?'). Brown helpfully compares the relationship between complete and incomplete uses of *einai* to the relationship between complete and incomplete uses (in English, ancient Greek, and other languages) of verbs such as 'teach' and 'eat:'

One can say 'Jane teaches' or 'John is eating' as well as 'Jane teaches French' or 'John is eating grapes.' The former, complete uses are related to the incomplete in the following ways: 'John is eating grapes' entails "John is eating," which in turn is equivalent to 'John is eating something.' One who hears 'John is eating' can properly ask 'eating what?' (Brown 1994: 225)

When we apply this to being, it is only true that Socrates *is* if Socrates is *something*, if he has some distinctive way of being, some form or characteristics that he displays. This mutual entailment between *being* and *being something* is what leads Plotinus to say that the One is beyond being.

Given Plotinus's metaphysics and semantics, if we claimed that the One is, we would implicitly be committing ourselves to claiming that the One is *something*. Such a claim, however, would imply that the One has parts, that *it* and *what it is* are distinct from each other. This would violate **1)** insofar as the One would now be dependent on its essential parts. It would also violate **2)** insofar as we would now need an account for why these essential parts are united in the One and why the One has being. On my interpretation, such considerations are also what lead Plotinus to describe the One as *amorphon*, formless (see VI.7.17.17, 40, 33.4; VI.9.3.39), and *apeiron*, unlimited or infinite (see V. 5.10.18-22). (cf. Bussanich 1996: 42-45) These negative predications reinforce Plotinus's insistence that the One is just what it is. It

is not limited or defined by a particular form or characteristic (cf. Gerson 1994: 6). My interpretation explains why Plotinus would make the claims he does and how they fit into his overall view of absolute simplicity.

8. *Can the Theist Qualify Plotinus's Principles?*

In response to Plotinus, the moderate perfect being theologian might look for a revised version of ontological dependence. Perhaps internal relations of explanation or of ontological dependence need not violate the principles when properly formulated, as Fowler's *DDP* attempts to do. Instead of *1*), the moderate perfect theologian could employ one of the following:

External Ontological Independence: the ultimate being cannot, in any way, depend for its being on anything outside of itself.

Priority Ontological Independence: the ultimate being cannot, in the most fundamental way, depend for its being on anything distinct from itself.

What prevents the perfect being theologian from employing one of these weaker principles?

Here the metaphysical context is important. The theist typically insists that if the universe is the sort of thing that is contingent, that could be or not be, then it is the sort of thing that needs further ontological grounding (cf. Pruss 2006: part 1; Pearce forthcoming). Similarly, if the existence and being of the universe is the sort of thing that could be explained, then we need to posit some further principle which explains it, without itself being in need of explanation. If theists want to use such reasoning when addressing metaphysical opponents, Plotinus insists that they also apply this reasoning to any supposed differentiation within the divine being. If God's parts are distinct from God we can ask for a further explanation for why God

is and has these parts. If the theist simply posits this as a brute fact, she cannot then object to the naturalist or pantheist who posits the existence of the contingent universe as a brute fact.

For example, Thomas Morris insists that God, as the creator of everything creatable, creates his own haecceity or nature (making the nature causally dependent on God) but also that God's haecceity is logically sufficient for God's existence (making God logically dependent on his nature). Morris recognizes that this suggests that God is creating himself and attempts to avoid this by insisting that while each of these relations is always transitive, transitivity may not hold across both of them together (1987: 176). But in introducing such dependence while claiming that it is not circular and needs no further explanation or grounding, he seems vulnerable to a parity argument on behalf of the pantheist or cosmic naturalist.

The moderate theist cannot differentiate her view by claiming that God only has relations of ontological and explanatory dependence with God's parts, not with anything else. On the pantheist view (and some naturalist views), everything that exists is a part of the cosmos, meaning that the cosmos too, only has relations of ontological and explanatory dependence with its parts and not with anything external (see Schaffer 2010a and 2010b). As we saw in section 5, a unified whole, such as the pantheist or the priority monist cosmos, could have ontological priority over all of its parts in the same way that the moderate philosophical theologian's complex divine being has priority over its parts. Both equally satisfy *External Ontological Independence* and *Priority Ontological Independence*. If the moderate philosophical theologian notes that the cosmos fails to meet *Plato's Criterion* with respect to the

things within it, the pantheist or priority monist can insist that this simply parallels the complex divine being's failure to meet *Plato's Criterion* with respect to its parts. Both wholes can claim to make the parts what they are, while also depending on these parts for their continued persistence.

The burden of proof is on the moderate perfect being theologian. The advocate of weakened versions of 1) and 2) needs to provide a version of these principles that rules out monism and pantheism, requiring an ultimate being that transcends the universe, while still allowing for this being to have constituent parts. Fowler's *DDP* explicitly holds that God has the same sort of priority over his parts that the priority monist's cosmos possesses with respect to its parts. Whatever degree of ontological independence this provides, it does not give theism any explanatory or ontological advantage. By contrast, Plotinus's view, on which the ultimate principle is entirely simple and self-sufficient, claims to fully meet 1) and 2) making it superior to its naturalist, monist, and moderate theist rivals.

9. A Case Study: Why *Nous* is Too Complex

To further appreciate how forceful Plotinus's principles are, I want to look at why Plotinus thinks they rule out even minimal differentiation between the ultimate being and the ultimate being's activity or the perfect being and the perfect being's nature. To do this, I want to consider the case study of *nous* (intellect) and its activity of *noēsis* (understanding). In several of his treatises, Plotinus argues against properly attributing this intellectual activity to the ultimate principle. These arguments are important within Plotinus's own metaphysics, as they help him to distinguish the One, the first and primal hypostasis, from Intellect or *Nous*, the second hypostasis,

which generates the world of forms by understanding itself. They are also important in the dialectical context. Aristotle thought that the ultimate principle was *Nous*, which he argues is the same as the activity of self-understanding (*Metaphysics* Λ 7 and 9). Later Peripatetics such as Alexander of Aphrodisias follow Aristotle. Moreover, several of the middle Platonists before Plotinus seem to have thought of *nous* as the highest principle (E.g. Numenius, fr. 20.12). A number of early Jewish and Christian thinkers also described God as *nous* or *logos* (e.g. Origen, *De Principiis* 1.6-7). Augustine will use the model of *nous* as self-understanding to think about the relationship between the first person of the Trinity and the Word, the second person of the Trinity, an approach that will become predominant within Western Christianity (e.g. *De Trin.* VII.2, XIV 2-4).

Seeing why Plotinus thinks that *nous* or intellect cannot be the first principle of things will help us to see why he insists that simplicity is incompatible with any sort of ontological multiplicity. I will first consider why he thinks understanding something else is incompatible with being the ultimate principle and then turn to the case of self-understanding.

Let us start with the easy case: where the object I am understanding is something other than myself. Here the object seems to have both ontological and explanatory priority over my understanding of it. First of all, it needs to be, in some way, in order for me to understand it. *Noēsis*, for Plotinus, as for Aristotle, is an intellectual achievement. *Noēsis* is a success term: you cannot be properly said to understand something that is incoherent or utterly non-existent. I cannot understand phlogiston if there is nothing there to understand. Further, these ancient thinkers

hold that any ability we have to think of what-is-not is parasitic on our contact with and thought of what is. I may be able to picture a unicorn and even give a verbal specification of it, but this sort of mental imagery or stipulative definition is not the comprehensive grasp of a form and its real definition that *noēsis* requires. For example, some suspected the initial specimen of a platypus, shipped back from Australia, of being a fake stitched together from multiple animals. "It naturally excites the idea of some deceptive preparation by artificial means," English zoologist George Shaw wrote in 1799 (cited in Ohlheiser 2015). Biologists accepted the platypus as an appropriate object of scientific study and understanding only once they conceded that such creatures actually existed as unified biological entities. In this sense, the being of the object of understanding is an existential precondition to understanding.

It is also an explanatory precondition: my activity of understanding is explained by the object I am understanding. While the platypus can exist and be what it is without reference to biologists, their successful understanding of the platypus can only be accounted for and explained by reference to the platypus. So the understanding of the biologists depends on the platypus in two ways. Its existence depends on the existence of the platypus and its characteristics (that which accounts and explains for what understanding a platypus is) also depend on the form of platypus, on what a platypus is.

The philosophers who think *nous* or intellect is the ultimate principle agree that its activity cannot be directed towards something beyond itself, for reasons similar to Plotinus. Instead, from Aristotle onwards, they typically conceive of *nous*

as self-understanding. Plotinus concedes that this sort of life and activity is more unified but insists it is still multiple in a problematic way. As he puts it,

There is a difference between one thing understanding another and something understanding itself; the latter goes further towards escaping being two.....if it has what it understands as itself, so that it may understand authentically, the two will be one: it must therefore be one and a pair—but if it is, on the other hand, one and not two, it will not have something to understand: so that it will not be understanding. It must, then, be simple and not simple. (V.6, 1.1-2, 11-14)

Here Plotinus concedes that true understanding involves oneness between knower and known, but at the same time maintains that a differentiation and separation between subject and object remains.

Take, for example, Socrates understanding himself. This activity of understanding seems to be one, insofar as Socrates the subject and Socrates the object are the same. However, for Plotinus, it is also two. In achieving understanding, Socrates is not just himself, rather he becomes understanding-Socrates. If Socrates as object were completely identical with Socrates as subject, there would be nothing there for Socrates to understand. Plotinus conceives of understanding as discursive, as unfolding the being of something. In seeking to understand myself, I am seeing myself as other, as object, even if doing this is what allows me to know myself.

As Plotinus puts it,

Knowledge (*gnōsis*) is a kind of longing for the absent, and like the discovery made by a seeker. But that which is absolutely different remains itself by itself, and seeks nothing about itself; but that which explicates itself must be many. (V.3, 10.49-53)

Plotinus insists that the turn towards understanding necessarily involves a distance and otherness between the subject understanding and the object understood. In pursuing an understanding of myself I am seeking for something I do not yet have,

longing for something that is absent. Even if this activity were always successfully being completed, so that I am never actually failing to know myself, there would still be a dependency of the knowing on its distinct object.

But this means that beings that understand need to possess a sort of duality, they need to be able to be both subject (as understanding themselves) and object (as thing understood). Plotinus holds that this is essential to understanding as such:

It is necessary for what understands (*to nooun*), when it understands, to be in two parts, and either one must be external to the other or both must be in the same, and the act of understanding (*hē noēsis*) must, necessarily, always be both in otherness and in sameness; and the proper objects of understanding (*ta kuriōs nooumena*) must be the same and other in relation to the intellect (*ho nous*). (V.3, 10.24-27)

Intellect needs understanding to know itself because it contains multitudes: it can only be what it is by its everlasting, non-discursive activity of understanding the multiple forms that constitute it and constitute being. In this way, it is dependent on its parts, the forms, to make it what it is (even if they are also dependent on it in a sense). Both give each other their status as being what they are, meaning that neither of them can meet *Plato's Criterion*. It is one thing understanding itself, but it is also many insofar as it contains many forms with relations between them. This manyness is what, for Plotinus, rules out ascribing understanding to the first principle. The fact that understanding's proper objects must be other in relation to the subject of understanding, even if they are also the same, means that understanding cannot have its ontological status independent of anything else. On my reading, although Intellect is never actually 'seeking for something [it does] not yet have, longing for something that is absent,' it would be in this condition if it were not everlastingly understanding itself. Because an absolutely simple being lacks the required duality,

we cannot attribute understanding to it. While the One can appear to the Intellect as a pure object of understanding (V.6, 2.8-9), 'in itself [the One] will, in the proper sense, be neither something understanding nor something understood.' (V.6, 2.9-10).

As Plotinus insists,

[The One] does not have understanding [*noēsis*], because there is no otherness; and it does not change: for it is before change and before understanding. For what will it understand? Itself? Then before its understanding it will be ignorant (*agnoōn*), and the very thing that is sufficient for itself will need understanding that it might know itself. (VI.9, 6.42-46)

Here we see Plotinus claiming that even self-understanding involves a kind of lack.

Plotinus's claim here is not about temporal priority (since he thinks that the Intellect, the second hypostasis, is eternally understanding) but about ontological dependence and explanatory priority. If the One understood, it would need this activity of understanding to know itself and to avoid being ignorant and thus would be dependent on a part, on an activity that is not the same as itself. What the understanding thing is depends on the understood thing and this means that it cannot be what it is without its object. Thus even a perfect self-knower would fail to meet *Plato's Criterion* or **1**). It would not have the aseity necessary for the ultimate principle. Again, the explanatory priority of the thing understood would violate **2**).

Aseity demands utter simplicity: 'For knowing is one thing; but that [sc. the One] is one without the thing.' (V.3, 12.51-52)⁴ Plotinus's objections to ultimate self-understanding help to elucidate his version of divine simplicity.⁵ Plotinus's attacks

⁴ Plotinus's argumentation in these passages raises a number of further questions (e.g. is he fairly representing the models of self-understanding put forward by Aristotle?), but the scope of this paper does not allow for a full exploration of these questions, but they are well worth considering.

⁵ Plotinus's argumentation in these passages raises a number of further questions (e.g. is he fairly representing the model of self-understanding put forward

on divine activity also lay out the difficulties which proponents of a simple but active God face.

10. Conclusion

Philosophers and theologians have several alternatives for responding to Plotinus. There are two options for those who concede that the ultimate principle must be absolutely simple. The first is to hold that this strongly constrains our language about and knowledge of the divine, requiring us to avoid positive divine attributes (e.g. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, chapter 50; Ibn-Sīnā [Avicenna] 2000). Co-religionist opponents of this approach have, however, often suggested that this sort of view of the ultimate being is not faithful to the divine being presented in the revealed writings (cf. al-Ghazali 2000).

The second option is to accept the strong version of simplicity, but insist that this simplicity is compatible with the sort of positive predications about the ultimate being that seem to be found in the scriptures of the Abrahamic religions. God is utterly simple but can truly be said to understand and to love and to freely choose to create. The challenge for this second option is to show how (or at least *that*) simplicity and various divine predications are compatible and, in particular, to develop theories of predication, such as Thomas Aquinas's theory of analogy, that allow for meaningful positive attributes without violating strong metaphysical simplicity (*Summa Theologiae* Ia q.13 a.1 ad 2; cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles* I 30; for a contemporary articulation of this approach see Stump 2013). Since the view I have

by Aristotle?). While the scope of this paper does not allow for a full exploration of these questions, they are well worth considering.

articulated is a position about ontology—that the ultimate being is simple and has no metaphysical parts—there may be room for different views here.

An alternative response rejects this strong version of simplicity, while continuing to affirm the ontological and explanatory priority of an ultimate being (e.g. Plantinga 1980). As I discussed in section 8, proponents of this position face the challenge of articulating ontological and explanatory principles that allow for differentiation within the ultimate being but still entail that the cosmos must be dependent on something outside itself.

Finally, critics may simply insist that Plotinus's views constitute a *reductio ad absurdum*.⁶ They show that we should give up trying to find an ultimate being with absolute explanatory and ontological priority. Even these critics, however, will need to say either why they entirely reject the need for explanatory and ontological prior entities or why the search for them should be called off long before the One.

Thus Plotinus's metaphysics of simplicity is well worth considering both in itself and as a way to clarify general issues about ontological and explanatory priority that face all accounts of reality.⁷

⁶ I would like to thank Richard Cross for suggesting this possible way of responding.

⁷ I would like to thank the participants in the 2015 Classical Theism Workshop for their extremely helpful questions and comments on this material and the Templeton Foundation and the University of St. Thomas for making the workshop possible.

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