

THEOPHANY

THE NEOPLATONIC PHILOSOPHY
OF DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE

ERIC D. PERL

THEOPHANY

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*The Neoplatonic Philosophy of
Dionysius the Areopagite*

ERIC D. PERL

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NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

There is still no adequate English translation of the Dionysian corpus. The best, that of John Parker,¹ is both highly imperfect and largely unavailable; while the most recent and widely available, that of Colm Luibheid,² is so far from the Greek as to be almost a paraphrase rather than a translation, and disregards Dionysius' use of traditional philosophical terms. Hence I have provided my own translations of passages cited from Dionysius, making them as literal as possible without egregiously violating English usage.

For Plotinus, I have used the translation by A. H. Armstrong in the Loeb Classical Library,³ with my own modifications where I have judged these to be necessary for the sake of clarity or precision; and for Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, I have used the translation by E. R. Dodds,⁴ also with modifications. All other published translations are cited in individual notes.

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ABBREVIATIONS

I. WORKS OF DIONYSIUS

CH	<i>On the Celestial Hierarchy</i>
DN	<i>On Divine Names</i>
EH	<i>On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy</i>
Ep.	<i>Epistles</i>
MT	<i>On Mystical Theology</i>

II. OTHER WORKS

<i>El. Th.</i>	Proclus, <i>The Elements of Theology</i>
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INTRODUCTION

This book is the fruit of more than twelve years' study and teaching of the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite,¹ together with that of Plotinus and Proclus, as *philosophy*: not, primarily, as a late antique cultural phenomenon; nor as an influential episode in the history of Christian theology; nor as "mysticism," if that be taken to mean something other than philosophy; nor as a series of texts with ascertainable relations of influence and citation; but as philosophy, i.e. as a rationally justified, coherent account of the nature of reality. Such a philosophical exposition of any body of thought demands more than an explanation of what the philosopher says and of the sources from which he derives his doctrines. It requires, above all, an account of the argumentation, the sequence of reasoning that supports and leads to his positions. Only by understanding this argumentation can we truly grasp the meaning of the positions themselves.

In the case of Dionysius, such an understanding is particularly difficult to achieve because he notoriously eschews argumentation in favor of proclamatory exposition. (See Ep. VII.1, 1077B–1080A.) But that does not mean that his thought is not open to philosophical interpretation and presentation. It simply means that we must look for its underlying argumentation elsewhere, in the philosophical tradition from which his thought derives. To take a prime example, the central Dionysian doctrine that God is "beyond being" is not merely a phrase or a theme which has a discoverable history in Plato and Neoplatonism, nor is it merely a vague assertion of divine transcendence. Rather, within the Neoplatonic context, it is the conclusion of a definite sequence of philosophical reasoning, and only in terms of that argumentation can its precise meaning be correctly grasped. The same is true of other characteristic Dionysian themes such as procession and reversion, evil as privation, hierarchy, mystical union, and symbolism. The textual "source" of a given idea in Dionysius may be Proclus, or Plotinus, or some other writer, pagan or Christian; but its real philosophical origin is a certain line of reasoning, and this is what I aim to bring to light.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is not to contribute to the extensive *Quellenforschung* that has already been undertaken on Dionysius, but rather to elucidate the meaning and grounds of his vision of reality by looking back through the philosophical tradition to recover the structures and argumentation

that underlie it.² To expound Dionysius in this way, it is necessary to give not merely references to his textual sources, but extensive explanations of the thought of earlier philosophers, especially Plotinus and Proclus.³ Hence this book is an exposition not only of Dionysius himself but also of central aspects of Neoplatonic thought in terms of their philosophical foundations.

The understanding of Dionysius in philosophical terms has been obfuscated by a widespread bias against Neoplatonism among Christian theologians, who have produced most of the scholarly work on Dionysius. To Luther's well-known and still living condemnation of Dionysius as *plus platonizans quam christianizans*,⁴ Christian defenders of Dionysius too often reply, in effect, *non platonizans sed christianizans*.⁵ The study of Dionysius by Christian theologians has thus tended to fall into a pattern of accusation and exculpation: some contend that he is fundamentally Neoplatonic and therefore not truly Christian,⁶ while others attempt to vindicate his Christianity by showing that he is not really Neoplatonic.⁷ The prevailing assumption on both sides is that Neoplatonism is a Bad Thing and is fundamentally incompatible with authentic Christianity.⁸ Both sides tend to share a somewhat simplistic and philosophically unsophisticated conception of Neoplatonism, and, indeed, a somewhat narrow and monolithic view of what counts as authentic Christianity. Such approaches preclude a genuinely philosophical understanding both of non-Christian Neoplatonism and of Dionysius.

In relation to this ongoing controversy, therefore, the subtitle of this book is deliberately and doubly provocative. First, by characterizing Dionysius' thought as *philosophy*, I indicate my intention to approach it as a philosophical scholar approaches that of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, or Proclus, asking first and foremost not the theologian's question of whether it conforms to a predetermined notion of what is genuinely Christian, but the philosopher's question of what it means and how it is justified. Second, by characterizing it as *Neoplatonic philosophy*, I intend not to condemn but to celebrate it, regarding Neoplatonism as a profound and well-argued understanding of reality and as the most promising resource to which we may turn in our present intellectual and cultural predicament.⁹ Rather than either convicting or acquitting Dionysius of Neoplatonism, conceived as a capital offense for a Christian theologian, I propose to reclaim him as a Neoplatonic philosopher who not merely appropriates certain terminological or thematic elements from Plotinus and Proclus, but takes up their deep philosophical insights into his own thought.

Because the aim of this study is to articulate Dionysius' understanding of reality in its specifically philosophical dimension, I have for the most part left aside his discussions of trinitarian doctrine, christology, and liturgy.¹⁰ In presenting Dionysius purely as a Neoplatonic philosopher, however, I have no intention of impugning his Christianity. For unlike most of the theologians who have studied Dionysius, I see no fundamental opposition between Neoplatonism and Christianity, and hence no need to decide on which side of this supposed disjunction Dionysius belongs. This position depends in part

on a subtler and to some degree unusual interpretation of Neoplatonism, which brings it closer to what are often regarded as uniquely Christian doctrines. Many of the points which are often said to represent Dionysius' Christian transformation or rejection of Neoplatonism, such as the immediate creation of all things by God, or God as ecstatic love, can in fact already be found in non-Christian Neoplatonism. The need to justify this reading of Neoplatonism further accounts for my extensive discussions of Plotinus and Proclus.

This study is structured not as a sequential commentary on the Dionysian corpus but as a series of closely interconnected essays, aiming to present his thought in its philosophical aspect as a coherent whole. The essays build on one another, in a sequence which, for chapters 1–6, follows the topics addressed in chapters I, IV, V, and VII of *On Divine Names*. *Divine Names I* presents the principles of divine unnameability and nameability, in terms of God's transcendence of all thought and being and his manifestation in all things. *Divine Names II* and *III* are parenthetical: chapter II is Dionysius' explanation of why he is not doing trinitarian theology in this treatise, and chapter III is a preliminary exhortation to prayer. Chapters IV, V, VI, and VII discuss the divine names Good, Being, Life, and Wisdom, respectively, in order of their universality. However, the account of Life in chapter VI adds little philosophical content to the preceding chapters. After chapter VII, the *Divine Names* ceases to have an easily discernible philosophical order,¹¹ although its discussions of various additional divine names contain many points of philosophical interest. In terms of philosophical structure, therefore, the fundamental chapters of the *Divine Names* are I, IV, V, and VII, and my essays are arranged in accordance with this sequence. In each case, however, I draw not only on the associated section of the *Divine Names* but also on the entire Dionysian corpus, treating it as an integrated whole whose parts can and should be read in relation to each other.

Chapters 1 and 2 correspond in subject-matter to *Divine Names I*, discussing, in chapter 1, the radical transcendence and unknowability of God, and, in chapter 2, the immanence and manifestation of God in all things.

Chapter 3 corresponds to *Divine Names IV.1–17*, presenting this doctrine in its dynamic aspect by discussing Dionysius' account of God as Goodness, Beauty, and Love in terms of the cycle of remaining, procession, and reversion.

Chapter 4 corresponds to *Divine Names IV.18–35*, addressing the problem of evil as it arises from such an understanding of reality.

Chapter 5 corresponds to *Divine Names V.1–3*, discussing the hierarchical structuring of being in relation to the doctrine of being as theophany.

Chapter 6 corresponds to *Divine Names VII*, discussing the nature and modes of cognition within such an understanding of being.

Chapter 7, finally, presents Dionysius' philosophy of symbolism as it emerges from this metaphysics and gnoseology, and is linked primarily with *Celestial Hierarchy I–II*.

In a manner that perhaps deliberately parallels his own doctrine of divine names, the author of the Dionysian corpus remains invisible: he lies hidden behind his works and can be known only as he is manifest in them, so that the very name *Dionysius* inevitably refers to the content of the works rather than to the author.¹² The absence of biographical information about the author encourages a reading of the works in purely philosophical terms, simply as a body of thought. At the same time, perhaps in part because of his pseudonymity, Dionysius has tended to be studied not *sine* but *cum ira et studio*, and few expositions of his thought even make a pretense of neutrality.¹³ The present study is no exception: my own love for Dionysius will be patent throughout. But this love is accompanied by, or rather is one with, an equally great love for Plato and Plotinus, and above all for divine philosophy itself.

CHAPTER ONE

BEYOND BEING AND INTELLIGIBILITY

In recent decades there has been a surge of interest in “negative theology,”¹ of which Dionysius is a leading exponent, and hence many studies of this feature of Dionysius’ thought.² Rarely, however, do such studies attempt to present the philosophical argumentation that underlies his teachings. The doctrine that God or the One, the first principle of reality, lies beyond being and beyond thought, for Dionysius and his Neoplatonic forebears, is not an ungrounded starting point or an article of faith but rather the conclusion of a rigorous sequence of philosophical reasoning, and only by following this argumentation can we truly understand the doctrine’s meaning. Neoplatonic and Dionysian “negative theology” and “mysticism” is an aspect of rational metaphysics, and must be interpreted and evaluated as such. The aim of the present chapter, therefore, is to expose the philosophical grounds and meaning of Dionysius’ negative theology by showing how the argument behind it is developed in the Greek philosophical tradition that Dionysius draws on and continues.

The foundational principle of Neoplatonic thought is the doctrine that to be is to be intelligible. The identification of being, τὸ ὄν, that which is, as that which can be apprehended by νόησις, intellection, is the basis not only for the Platonic and Neoplatonic identification of being as form or idea (εἶδος, ἰδέα), and the associated view that the sensible is less than completely real, but also for the Neoplatonic insistence that the One or Good, the source of reality, is itself “beyond being.” To arrive at a philosophical understanding of Dionysius’ doctrines of being and of God, therefore, we must begin by examining the meaning and grounds of this principle, and then see how its implications are unfolded in Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy.

The idea of being as intelligible is implicit in Greek philosophy from the very beginning. The philosophical enterprise, insofar as it is an endeavor to think reality as one whole, always already presupposes that being as such is able to be grasped by thought. This presupposition is first made explicit by

Parmenides: “For you could not know that which is not, for it is impossible, nor express it; for the same thing is for thinking and for being [οὔτε γὰρ ἄν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἔόν (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν)/οὔτε φράσαις. Τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι].”³ Parmenides indicates here, first, that thought is always the apprehension of some being. For whatever is thought is necessarily thought as something, i.e. as some being. Τὸ μὴ ἔόν, that which is not, cannot be thought, for to think absolute non-being would be to have no object or content for thought, to be not thinking anything, and hence not to be thinking. We may recall here the Thomistic principle, derived at long remove from this Parmenidean insight: “Being falls first in the conception of intellect . . . Wherefore being is the proper object of intellect [*Primo autem in conceptione intellectus cadit ens . . . Unde ens est proprium objectum intellectus*].”⁴ Whatever is thought is thought most basically and generically as some being, which may then be specified by various determinations. Second, Parmenides in this passage affirms that being extends no further than that which can be apprehended by thought, that there cannot be anything beyond the reach of thought. It would be incoherent even to postulate an unintelligible being, a being that cannot be thought, for to do so would already be to think such a being. Parmenides’ fragment thus brings to light the obvious but vital point that to think being, that which is, at all, is already to presuppose its intelligibility. To think being is to think it *as thinkable*. Indeed, it follows not merely that being and intelligibility are coextensive, as Parmenides plainly asserts, but that intelligibility is the very meaning of being: by *being* we can only mean “what is there for thought,” for since thought cannot extend to anything else, “anything else” is mere empty noise—in short, nothing (τό μὴ ἔόν). If ‘being,’ “that which is” considered as one whole, has any meaning at all, then it necessarily means “that which is available for thinking,” i.e. that which is intelligible. That which is, then, is (wholly and solely) that which can be apprehended by intellection, and intellection is (wholly and solely) the apprehension of that which is.

Plato’s understanding of being as form or idea (εἶδος, ἰδέα) is a direct consequence of this identification of being and intelligibility. Although in many ways critical of his awesome father figure Parmenides, Plato wholly adopts the doctrine of τὸ ὄν, that which is, as τὸ νοητόν, that which can be apprehended by intellect, and makes it the center of his metaphysics (e.g. *Phaedrus* 247c7–8; *Timaeus* 27d6–28a3). Consequently, what is real, for Plato, is the “looks” (εἶδη) that sensible things display to the mind, the universal natures or “whatnesses” that characterize them and can be definitively grasped in thought.⁵ The forms, and only the forms, are “really real,” precisely because they and only they are altogether intelligible. Form is “what is there for thought,” and therefore it is τὸ ὄν. Its complete reality consists in its perfect intelligibility. Conversely, sensible instances, on Plato’s view, are less than really real in that they are constituted as multiple appearances of the unitary forms, apprehended not by intellection but by sensation and opinion

(δόξα), the apprehension of appearance rather than reality (see esp. *Republic* 476a4–7). As appearances or images, sensibles are not mere illusion, or nothing (as Parmenides may have believed), but neither are they being itself, the reality which appears, the universal natures apprehended by intellect. They are rather, as Plato says, “in between” “that which altogether is,” i.e. intelligible reality, the forms, and “that which altogether is not,” i.e. nothing. The “in between” status of sensibles, *qua* appearances, and the perfect reality of the forms, are together correlated to the mode in which each is cognized. “That which altogether is [τὸ . . . παντελῶς ὄν] is altogether knowable, while that which in no way is in no way knowable” (*Republic* 477a2–3), whereas “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,” i.e. opinion (*Republic* 478d5–11). Plato’s levels of being are correlated to levels of cognitive apprehension, and this is just because being is identified with intelligibility.

Contrary to Parmenides, however, Plato regards being, *qua* intelligible, not as simple but as complex, a multiplicity of interrelated forms. He argues, explicitly in opposition to Parmenides, that “relative non-being,” or difference, must be included in the altogether real. Each form is *not* any of the other forms, i.e. is different from them, and thus shares in Difference (*Sophist* 255e4–6, 258d7–e3). Difference, no less than identity, is necessary for and constitutive of being. But this doctrine of being as an internally differentiated multiplicity of forms is itself a consequence of the intelligibility of being. As Plato points out, the forms are intelligible only in relation to each other, by the method of “collection and division,” whereby the less universal forms are identified as differentiated specifications of the more universal, and the more universal forms are understood as unities overarching and pervading a multiplicity of less universal ones (*Phaedrus* 265c8–266c1; cf. *Sophist* 253b8–e2). The forms’ differences from and relations to one another are necessary conditions for their intelligibility. “For through the interweaving of the forms with each other discourse [λόγος] comes to be for us” (*Sophist* 259e5–6). Thus, it is precisely as intelligible that the altogether real must be a multiplicity of distinct, interwoven forms.

Plato’s doctrine of the Good as that which “provides” being is also grounded in the identification of being and intelligibility. In his well-known criticism of Anaxagoras in the *Phaedo*, Socrates says that when he first heard Anaxagoras’ claim that “intellect [νοῦς] is the orderer and cause of all things . . . it seemed to me in a certain way good that intellect be the cause of all things; and I thought, if it was so, that the ordering intellect orders all things and establishes each thing in whatever way would be best” (97c1–6). In other words, an explanation of things as conforming to the demands of intellect necessarily accounts for them in terms of goodness. Socrates goes on to say that in failing to give explanations of this kind, Anaxagoras “made no

use of intellect” (*Phaedo* 98b8–9). Plato here indicates, then, that goodness is the principle of intellectual understanding and of intelligibility itself. The intellect by nature demands to see goodness in its object in order to understand, to make sense of it. Any thing, event, action, or process can be intellectually understood only in terms of the good which is the ultimate “why” for it. And whatever can be so understood, whatever is intelligible, is so only because and insofar as it is ordered on the basis of goodness.⁶ Consequently, those “physicists” who give merely mechanical accounts of nature “think that, truly, the Good and the Right [τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ δέον] do not bind and hold anything together” (*Phaedo* 99c). The position presented here, then, is that it is indeed the Good that “binds and holds all things together,” precisely because only if this is so can “all things” be understood by the mind at all.

This argumentation underlies Plato’s representation of the Good in the *Republic* under the image of the sun. Just as the sun, by providing light, makes it possible for sensible things to be seen and for the eye to see them, so the Good provides that which makes the forms able to be known and the intellect able to know them (*Republic* 508b12–c2). The Good, in other words, is the enabling source of intelligibility and intellection. “When [the soul] is fixed upon that which truth and being [ἀλήθειά τε καὶ τὸ ὄν] illuminates, it thinks [ἐνόησέν] and knows and appears to have intellect [νοῦν]; 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 [νοῦν οὐκ ἔχοντι]” (*Republic* 508d4–9). The fundamental meaning of “truth” (ἀλήθεια), as Heidegger never tires of pointing out, is “unconcealedness.” The truth of the forms is their unconcealedness, their availability or accessibility to the mind—in short, their intelligibility. And this, Plato says, 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 is at a loss, it flounders, it cannot “see” its objects; it “does not have intellect.” Just as there can be neither visibility nor vision without light, so there can be neither intelligibility nor intellection without goodness. Consequently, as Plato goes on to say, “That which provides truth to the things known and gives power [i.e. the ability to know] to the knower is the form [ἰδέον] of the Good” (*Republic* 508e1–3). In other words, any and all beings, i.e. the forms, are intelligible only in virtue of the “look of goodness” that they have and display.⁷

But Plato here says that the Good provides to the forms not only ἀλήθεια, or intelligibility, but also τὸ ὄν, the status of being beings.⁸ Later, he says that “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* 508e1–3). This claim can be justified only on the basis of the identity between being and intelligibility: precisely because the status of being consists in availability to intellectual apprehension, the Good, in pro-

viding the latter, constitutes the forms as beings, as that which is. Since anything can be intellectually grasped only in virtue of its goodness, the Good is the only possible “why” for being *qua* intelligible, which is to say for being *qua* being.

Plato goes on to say, in what is for Neoplatonism perhaps the single most important passage in his works, that “the Good is not reality, but excels beyond reality [ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας] in seniority [πρεσβεία⁹] and power” (*Republic* 508e1–3). Since the Good provides being and intelligibility to the forms, which taken together constitute οὐσία, reality, the whole of what is, it is itself not merely one of them, a member of that complex whole, but lies “beyond” it. As that by which the forms are intelligible and are beings, the Good is ontologically prior to the forms, and in this sense “older” than being, and makes them to be, in this sense transcending them in power. The precise ontological status of the Good in relation to the forms and to intellect remains ambiguous, since Plato also calls it an “ἰδέα” and an object of intellection; but Plato at least recognizes here that being, as the multiplicity of the forms, cannot be ultimate, that it depends for its existence and intelligibility on a principle that transcends it, and identifies this principle as the Good.¹⁰

Plotinus adopts and develops Plato’s understanding of being. Following Plato, he identifies being as the unified multiplicity of purely intelligible, eternal forms, and he regards sensible things as not true beings but images or appearances of the forms. But Plotinus, far more explicitly than Plato, identifies being not only as the object but as the content of thought and therefore as Thought, or Intellect, itself.¹¹ For (to summarize and paraphrase his arguments) if being were external to thought, then the actual content of thought, what thought apprehends, would not be reality itself but some image or impression of it. Thought, therefore, on this view, could never reach reality (see e.g. V.5.1.20–27; V.5.2.1–9). Rather, as Plotinus argues in a Platonic adaptation of Aristotle’s theory of knowledge, intellection, in that what it apprehends is pure idea, contains its object in itself and hence is what it thinks (see e.g. V.9.5–8). Conversely, being, as form or idea, can be nothing but the content of thought, and is therefore not other than the intellect which thinks it. Intellect and the intelligible meet and are one as intellection. “All together are one, Intellect, intellection, the intelligible [νοῦς, νόησις, τὸ νοητόν]” (V.3.5.43–44), and “we have here, then, one nature, Intellect, all beings, truth” (V.5.3.1–2). Here Parmenides’ insight reaches its fulfilment: being and thought are not merely coextensive but identical, because being can be nothing but the content of thought and thought can be nothing but the apprehension of being.

As intelligible and intelligent, Plotinus argues, being or Intellect is necessarily complex, internally differentiated, and indeed is constituted as being and as Intellect by the differentiation of the forms from one another within it. For any being can be intelligible, and hence can be a being, only if it is determinate, a distinct “this:” “A substance [οὐσίαν, reality] must be

some one particular thing [τόδε . . . τι], something, that is, defined and limited" (V.5.6.6–7). But since a being can be determinate or defined only by distinction, by being "marked off" from other beings, intelligibility, and therefore being, depends on the differentiation of the beings, or forms, from one another. "The objects of thought . . . must have otherness in relation to each other" (V.1.4.39–40), and "the thinker must apprehend one thing different from another and the object of thought in being thought must contain variety" (V.3.10.40–42; see also V.3.10.30f). Being as a whole, therefore, is intelligible, and so is, only in virtue of the internal differentiation of the forms from one another, and this differentiation is constitutive of being itself. The differentiation of one being from another is what makes all things to be intelligible and so to be.

Each form, or being, then, is constituted as a being by its proper determination. "This is why they [the contents of Intellect] are substances; for they are already defined and each has a kind of shape. Being must not fluctuate, so to speak, in the indefinite, but must be fixed by limit and stability; and stability among intelligible things is definition and shape, and it is by these that it receives existence" (V.1.7.23–27). In the absence of differentiation, distinction, and determination, and hence in the absence of multiplicity, there is no intelligibility and therefore no being. The doctrine that being is constituted by determination or differentiation, and that it is therefore necessarily multiple, is a direct consequence of the principle that to be is to be intelligible.

Plotinus' doctrine that being or Intellect is not the first principle but derives from the One or Good, which itself lies "beyond being," is a further consequence of the same line of thought. Since every being is intelligible, and hence is, only in virtue of the determination whereby it is what it is, every being depends for its existence on that determination. Again, every being must have unity, must be some one being, in order to be; but being as a whole and each being within it involves multiplicity of content, without which it would not be intelligible. Therefore, each being can be only in virtue of the unity by which it is this one being: "It is by the One that all beings are beings, both those which are primarily beings and those which are in any sense said to be among beings. For what could anything be if it was not one?" (VI.9.1.1–3). In short, for any being, to be is to be finite and unitary, and hence to be dependent on the unifying definition by which it is the one being that it is. Having discovered that being as such must be dependent, Plotinus therefore turns to the One as the ground or source on which being depends, that by which all beings are beings. All beings depend on, and in that sense derive or proceed from, the One or Good, as the "definer" (V.1.5.8–9)¹² or "measure of all things" (VI.8.18.3), which makes all things to be in that it provides the unifying determination whereby each being is itself and so is.¹³

This reasoning offers a very clear and precise explanation of what Plotinus means by describing the One as "beyond being." Whatever Plato

may have intended by this phrase, Plotinus' interpretation of it is unambiguous. Since to be is to be intelligible and therefore finite, any being whatsoever is dependent on its determination and is thus derivative. Hence, to be is to be derivative. No being, therefore, can be the first principle, and the first principle cannot be any being; for if it were any being it would be finite and hence not first but dependent on its determination. Further, it would be one member within the complex totality of all beings, rather than the source of that totality. This would mean that it would have various attributes, such as being, intelligibility, unity, and so on, in common with the other beings; and for Platonic thought, whenever different things share (or "participate in") a common attribute, that attribute itself, as the one nature by which all the participants are such as they are, is ontologically prior to the participants. If, therefore, the first principle were a member of the totality of beings, it would not be first. The One, therefore, "is not equal to the other units 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.5.4.14–17). Again, if the One were a member of the totality of beings, i.e. were a being, it would be differentiated from the other beings within that totality (see V.5.13.20–24), and so would be determinate, finite, and dependent. In short, no common term whatsoever, including 'being,' can embrace both the One and its products, for the One would then be included within the totality and differentiated from others within it. Plotinus thus interprets "beyond being" in a purely negative sense, as meaning, only, that the One is not any being. "This phrase 'beyond being' does not mean that it is a particular thing—for it makes no positive statement about it—and it does not say its name, but all it implies is that it is 'not this'" (V.5.6.11–14). And this presupposes the understanding of being as that which is intelligible and, as intelligible, necessarily determinate:

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 these things are beings, and being: so it is 'beyond being.' (V.5.6.2–11)

Here Plotinus summarizes with exceptional clarity the reasoning behind, and meaning of, his doctrine that the One is "beyond being."¹⁴

Plotinus has sometimes been interpreted to mean by "beyond being" merely "infinite being," a phrase which he himself could not use because in

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