

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Section I. THE ONE



CHAPTER I

THE ONE. POSITIVE

GENERALIZATIONS about the philosophy of Plotinus are extremely dangerous. It seems, however, to be necessary to preface any attempt to analyse his views of the architecture of reality with some sort of comprehensive statement about their nature, however vague it may be and however much it may have to be qualified later. I have already tried to do this for the system as a whole in the Introduction.

In these first two chapters I proceed to a closer examination of the most baffling part of Plotinus's philosophy, his concept of the One. Plotinus's thought at this point is undoubtedly difficult, and not only, I think, because he is trying to express the inexpressible. This difficulty certainly exists for any philosopher who tries to penetrate the depths of being. In Plotinus, however, there is, I believe, as well, a real confusion of thought caused to a great extent by the complexity of the metaphysical tradition which he inherited. For this reason it is not possible to make any more definite statement about the One of Plotinus than that it is in his system the first and ultimate principle of reality. It would not be correct to call it without qualification the Absolute. This term really belongs to a philosophy of absolute and relative or necessary and contingent being, a philosophy in which Being is the primary concept and its analysis the most important task. Plotinus's system is not of this type. It would be more correct, too, to speak of "systems" than of a system. It is possible to derive from the *Enneads* several divergent and not completely reconcilable constructions of reality. These are not of course clearly separable. They blend into each other and intermix in a most disconcerting way. Any analysis, however careful and elaborate, is bound to lose something of the original. But in the interests of clear thinking it is desirable to make it. I pro-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

THE ONE. POSITIVE

pose, then, to consider some different ways in which Plotinus regards the One as head or first principle of the system of reality.

The first aspect of the One with which I propose to deal is that arrived at as the conclusion of the metaphysical and religious search for a First Cause, a ground of being, a self-sufficing source and director of all things, a primary reality which can act as an explanation of the universe. This line of thought does not seem at first as if it should lead Plotinus higher than his second hypostasis, *Noûs*. *Noûs* in his system can, and sometimes does, discharge all these functions in relation to the lower levels of being.¹ There is, at the same time, a strong tendency to transfer them to the One, a tendency for which, I think, reasons can be found even within the scope of this particular way of regarding it.

Noûs in Plotinus is the totality of being. That is, it is the organic world of Ideas, the objects of knowledge, and at the same time the mind that knows them. It is a perfect unity-in-duality of subject and object, the sphere in the macrocosm corresponding to the stage of perfect intuitive knowledge in the microcosm. It is the region of perfect knowledge in which, according to the Aristotelian psychology which deeply affected Plotinus, the mind becomes what it thinks.

Plotinus, however, insists that *Noûs*, even if it contains in itself the totality of being at one stage of its evolution, is not originative, is not the ultimate ground of reality. The Noetic world is a composite of Matter and Form, resulting from a double movement of withdrawal from and return to the One.² Or, again, it is the result of a multiplex contemplation of the Primal Unity.³ With these aspects of the sphere of *Noûs* I shall deal more fully later. What I wish to stress here is its state of dependence on the One. This dependence persists even when, as in the eighth treatise of the Sixth Ennead, the One is described in terms almost identical with those applied to *Noûs*, or at least in language which suggests something more like *Noûs* than the unpredictable complete unity, the One-above-being,

¹ See Arnou, *Désir de Dieu*, p. 25, for *Noûs* as first principle in the rational intelligible order.

² II. 4. 5.

³ VI. 7. 15.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE ONE. POSITIVE

3

of other passages. In vi. 8 the One is called pure will,¹ absolute ἐνέργεια,² love, and that love of Himself,³ and the cause of Himself, and thus the cause of all that proceeds from Him, not merely the ground of all being in the sense of a primal element, but deliberately willing Himself and all that comes from Him. He is said to include all His effects.⁴ This positive description of the One is very closely connected, especially in Ch. 18, with the light-metaphor of emanation⁵ and the comparison of the One to the sun, a metaphor found throughout the *Enneads*.⁶ It is obvious that this self-directed, self-loving God (I am using the terms of a later theology deliberately at this point), whose Being is Act directed upon His own perfection, from whom all other orders of being proceed as images of Him of varying degrees of adequacy, is not the mathematical Unity to which it is impossible to apply any predicate whatever. Plotinus may protest as much as he likes that he intends to introduce no sort of duality into the One, and that any appearance of duality which his words may suggest is due to the limitations of language. He takes the decisive step when he makes the One ἐνέργεια and gives it will, makes it eternally create itself and return eternally upon itself in love. This makes it inevitably an οὐσία, however much it may transcend the beings which we know, and if an οὐσία, then a one-in-many. It becomes a being to which predicates can be applied and about which logical distinctions can be made. The One-God can be regarded variously as lover, love, and loved, eternal creator, creative process, and eternally created, willer, will, and willed. This is necessary if the One is to be a First Cause in a system of Platonic-Aristotelian type. It must, in such a system, be a substance, however far it may transcend all substances known to us.⁷ It must be the actuality which actualizes all potencies, and not itself a mere potentiality actualizing itself in the development of the universe. The One as bare unity, beyond being, could, strictly speaking, only be a "cause" in this latter sense.

¹ Chs. 13, 21.² Cp. v. 6. 6.³ Ch. 15.⁴ Ch. 18.⁵ See Ch. III.⁶ I. 7. 1; v. 1. 2 and 10. 3. 12, 5. 7-8, 6. 4; VI. 9. 9.⁷ Cp. v. 5. 13, especially the words εἶπασε τὸ ἔστιν οὐδὲν καταμαρτυρήσας τῶν οὐ παρόντων.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

THE ONE. POSITIVE

Is it, then, still in any way possible to discover a real difference between *Noûs* and the One, even when all other ways of looking at the One are temporarily excluded? *Noûs* and the One are, from this point of view, unities and not-unities in the same sense,¹ beings possessed of self-intellection (denied elsewhere to the One) and self-concentration. There is really no need for the One here to be regarded as more than the aspect of *Noûs* which it presents when its unity rather than its diversity is stressed;² at least, so it appears at first. A real difference, however, remains.

To explain it, it is necessary to turn for a moment from drawing a metaphysical map of Plotinus's system and to consider it as a record of the spiritual life. It is clear enough from reading the *Enneads* that they are this, though they are also much more. It must be remembered that, for Plotinus, the frontier between microcosm and macrocosm is by no means rigid and precise. The boundaries shutting off the self from the universe are largely illusory, and disappear in the higher stages of perception.

Looked at in this way the distinction between *Noûs* and the One at its most *Noûs*-like becomes clear. *Noûs* is always the universal correlative to our highest mental state; it is the realm of *vônois*, a realm well within our own human sphere. Plotinus draws a sharp distinction between soul and *Noûs*; but this does not affect man's status as inhabitant by nature of the intelligible world. In becoming "man", in discharging his functions in the lower world, man may cease to be the All; but on escaping from the lower world he resumes his higher status.³ Plotinus often says that soul⁴ or "man" is not *Noûs*. He does not often say that "we" are not *Noûs*. When he does say so⁵ he soon qualifies his statement by returning to his

¹ See Nebel, *Plotins Kategorien der Intelligiblen Welt*, pp. 44–5, for the process of approximation by which *Noûs* through being considered primarily as a member of the "Hypostasenreihe" becomes less the Platonic World of Ideas and more a self-concentrated unity approximating closely to the One.

² See Nebel, p. 15, n. 3 (distinction between "morphische Einheit" and "unum transcendentale").

³ v. 8. 7.

⁴ Soul, however, can also be thought of as belonging to the world of *Noûs*, though on its lowest edge, cp. iv. 8. 7.

⁵ v. 3. 3.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE ONE. POSITIVE

5

doctrine that we can become Νοῦς by ceasing to be “man”.¹ The human being, in the totality of its realizable powers, is for Plotinus much more than soul. It is Νοῦς.

The One, on the other hand, whether considered in relation to the human or the universal mind, is normally thought of by Plotinus as something extra, something outside and beyond, which we can only attain by leaving ourselves behind.² It is that which is left over, which remains outside and transcending our systematization and classification of the cosmos. It is “light above light”.³ This is expressed strikingly in the seventh treatise of the Sixth Ennead, where the effluence from the Good is spoken of as a sort of “bloom” upon Νοῦς, a χάρις ἐπιθέουσα τῷ κάλλει.⁴ Even its effects are something extra to the nature of Νοῦς, something, one might almost say, supernatural.

This character of the One is of peculiar interest because it is the first clear appearance in Greek philosophy of any conception of an Absolute, of a ground of being in some way different in kind from that of which it is the ground. Plotinus is by no means consistent in this conception. The One is always getting inside the cosmos, becoming part of the system. In fact the whole theory of necessary emanation is designed to bring it within the cosmos, to make it organically connected with the whole. It was this confusion which led to the later Neo-Platonic development through Iamblichus’s super-One, which is not the Good, above Plotinus’s One-Good⁵ to the ἀπόρητον of Damascius.⁶ It also helps to mark the distinction between Plotinus and the Christian philosophers. There are also the passages to be taken into consideration where Plotinus regards Νοῦς as a stage in our full self-realization rather than its end and asserts the identity of the innermost or highest Self and the One.⁷ This type of thought occurs throughout the *Enneads*, and will have to be discussed in detail later.⁸ It may be said here, however, that at least the realization of identity with the One is for Plotinus a

¹ v. 3. 4. ² III. 8. 1; v. 4. 1. ³ v. 3. 12.

⁴ VI. 7. 22; cp. VI. 7. 21 (the “other light”) and 31.

⁵ *Theol. Arith.* I. *De Myst.* 8. 2.

⁶ *Dubitationes et Solutiones de Primis Principiis*, 2–8.

⁷ Cp. v. 1. 11; VI. 7. 36, 9. 11. ⁸ Ch. III

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

THE ONE. POSITIVE

temporary and abnormal state and that Νοῦς, the intelligible realm, is for him the normal home and most fully natural state of the human being in a way in which neither the One nor the visible universe is. If we confine ourselves for the moment to considering the “positive” aspect of the One as God discussed in this chapter we can safely say that it is distinguished from Νοῦς by its “supernatural” or “transcendent” as distinct from a “natural” or “normal” character. Νοῦς is certainly θεός, but the One comes much nearer to the Christian conception of God.

A second reason, of course, for the stressing of the transcendence of the One in vi. 8 and treatises of similar emphasis is that the aspect of the One which we have just been considering is never separated from the mathematical concept of the unity which generates plurality but is not itself multiple.¹ But before discussing this it will be desirable to consider the historical origin of the conception of the One as God, which appears so clearly in vi. 7 and 8. It is not a new conception of Plotinus. The beginnings of it appear in Plato, at least in Plato as understood by the Platonists of the early Roman Empire, with the mention of the “Idea of the Good” in *Republic*, vi. This single, highly metaphorical allusion, however, is not the real basis of the well worked-out description of the Supreme in, for instance, *Enneads*, vi. 8. Behind this stands the systematic theology of Aristotle. It is a striking example of the very great and perhaps not sufficiently realized influence of Aristotle upon Plotinus. There is a phrase in Porphyry’s biography which it is important that the student of Plotinus should remember, καταπεπύκνωται δὲ (ἐν τοῖς συγγράμμασι) καὶ ἡ Μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους πραγματεία.² This is not far from the truth. Not only the teaching of the *Metaphysics* but that of the *De Anima* is to be found firmly embedded in the *Enneads*. The resemblance in particular between vi. 8 and *Metaphysics* Λ is very striking. This transcendent self-sufficing God, pure and self-directed Act, the supreme object of desire, but himself desiring nothing but himself, appears in philosophy before Plotinus only in Aristotle, and in the Platonic literature of the Imperial period. The chief claim to distinction of Plotinus’s

¹ vi. 8, 9, 11, 17.² *Vita Plotini*, 14.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE ONE. POSITIVE

7

master, the mysterious Ammonius Saccas, was to have reconciled Plato and Aristotle, and in this he was following a well-established tradition. The philosophers who took part in this Platonic-Pythagorean revival not only try to reconcile Plato and Aristotle but at times seem to be quite unconscious that Aristotle's teachings are not Platonic. There was, of course, also an anti-Aristotelian tradition of Platonism, of which the chief exponent is Atticus. The violence of his polemic against Aristotle and the Aristotelianizing of Plato is a witness to the strength with which the opposing view was held. It is interesting to note that, in spite of his affectation of Platonic purity, Atticus himself is strongly influenced by Stoicism. Another testimony is furnished by Numenius's statement¹ that he found it necessary to separate Plato from Aristotle, as well as from Zeno and the Academy.

The two most notable representatives of these Aristotelianizing Platonists are Numenius himself and Albinus, the author of the *Didaskalikos*. This latter is an extraordinary work, claiming to be an account of the teachings of Plato, but at least half composed of doctrines taken unchanged and undigested from Aristotle, the Stoics, and other sources.² The author annexes, for example, without explanation or apology, Aristotle's whole system of formal logic.

The peculiar interest of these two, for the present purpose, is their treatment of Aristotle's conception of the supreme god as self-thinking mind. This they take over from the *Metaphysics* and identify, not with the Plotinian νοῦς, on the same level as the νοητά, but with the source or cause of the Ideas, the Platonic Idea of the Good. Numenius speaks of the Good as αὐτὸ δὲ ἐν εἰρήνῃ, ἐν εὐμενείᾳ, τὸ ἡρεμον, τὸ ἡγεμονικόν, ἴλεων ἐποχοῦμενον ἐπὶ τῇ οὐσίᾳ.³ The resemblance here to Plotinus's One is striking. But he also says⁴ ὁ νοῦς...μόνος εὔρηται ὦν τὸ ἀγαθόν,...ἀρκεῖ τὸ ἀγαθὸν οὐσία

¹ Περὶ τῆς τῶν Ἀκαδημαϊκῶν πρὸς Πλάτωνα διαστάσεως. 1. 8 in Thedinga's arrangement of the fragments.

² See R. E. Witt, *Albinus and the History of Middle Platonism*, for a full and most valuable discussion of this writer.

³ Περὶ τἀγαθοῦ. 1. 10, Thedinga.

⁴ v. 25.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

εἶναι ἀρχή, and εἰ δ' ἐστὶ μὲν νοητὸν ἢ οὐσία καὶ ἡ ἰδέα, ταύτης δ' ὠμολογήθη πρεσβύτερον καὶ ἀπτιον εἶναι ὁ νοῦς. From this it is clear that this Good, source of being and the Ideas, is nothing else than Noῦς. Of this Noῦς or First God of the three gods he recognizes, this Demiourgos of being,¹ he says² ὁ θεὸς ὁ μὲν πρῶτος ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὧν ἐστὶν ἀπλοῦς, διὰ τὸ ἑαυτῷ συγγιγνόμενος διόλου μὴ ποτε εἶναι διαιρετός... (30) ὁ μὲν πρῶτος θεὸς ἔσται ἔστώς, and ἀντὶ γὰρ τῆς προσούσης τῷ δευτέρῳ κινήσεως, τὴν προσοῦσαν τῷ πρώτῳ στάσιον φημι εἶναι κίνησιν σύμφυτον. Here we have clearly a link between Aristotle's God and the One of Plotinus. We have an attempt to put the Aristotelian self-sufficient and therefore eternally stable Noῦς, with no movement directed to anything outside itself, at the head of the Platonic hierarchy of being. It has, however, to be admitted that Numenius does not seem to have been quite consistent in putting his First God above the Ideas. The phrase ὁ μὲν οὖν πρῶτος περὶ τὰ νοητά, ὁ δὲ δεύτερος περὶ τὰ νοητά καὶ αἰσθητά³ may only mean that the First makes the νοητά. It is difficult, however, to accept this interpretation, as the Second God cannot be thought of as employed in making the Ideas; though Numenius says⁴ ὁ γὰρ δεύτερος διπλῶς ὧν αὐτοποιεῖ⁵ τὴν τε ἰδέαν ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὸν κόσμον, in spite of the statement (34) that the Πρῶτος Νοῦς, the αὐτοαγαθόν, is the ἰδέα of the Demiourgos or Second God. This puzzle is perhaps cleared up by the words immediately following in fr. 25 ἐπειτα θεωρητικὸς ὄλω,⁶ taken in connection with the statement of Proclus⁷ that Numenius represents the First taking the Second Noῦς into partnership in its activity of νόησις. According to this interpretation the Idea of himself which the Demiurge or Second God creates would be the reflection of the αὐτοαγαθόν in his own contemplative mind, an immanent form derived from the First God. We thus find in Numenius two orders of Ideal Being corresponding to the First and Second Gods, the two grades of οὐσία referred

¹ v. 25.² v. 26, 30.³ v. 30.⁴ 25.⁵ αὐτὸ ποιεῖ E: αὐτοποιεῖ Thed. αὐτὸς...et. αὐτὸς is perhaps the better reading. Proximity of αὐτὸ ἀγαθόν might account for αὐτὸποιεῖ.⁶ ἐπειτα here however seems to have no acceptable meaning. Professor Dodds suggests ὁ δ' ἐπέκεινα θεωρητικὸς ὄλω, which agrees with the doctrine of the other fragments.⁷ *In Tim.* III. 103.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE ONE. POSITIVE

9

to¹ as μία μὲν ἢ τοῦ πρώτου, ἕτερα δὲ ἢ τοῦ δευτέρου. What, then, is exactly the relation of each of these grades to its appropriate Νοῦς, and what becomes of the exaltation of the First Νοῦς above the Ideas? In another fragment² Numenius, Proclus says, τὸν μὲν πρῶτον κατὰ τὸ ὃ ἔστι ζῶον τάττει (τὸ ὃ ἔστι ζῶον being the Ideal world of the *Timaeus*³). This, taken in conjunction with fr. 30, suggests a relationship between Νοῦς, even the πρῶτος νοῦς, and the Ideas more like that in Plotinus, thought and object of thought co-equal and co-eternal, rather than one of producer and product.

It seems however best to suppose that, as in the *Didaskalikos*, Νοῦς is thought of as prior to and the cause of its thoughts or objects of thought, the νοητά or Ideal World. Plotinus's doctrine of the co-equality and reciprocal action of thinker and thought,⁴ derived from Aristotle's psychology, does not yet appear. This fits in well with the statement that the Second God *makes* his own Idea. The whole system arises from an attempt to interpret the *Timaeus* in a manner consistent with Aristotle.

The explanation of the statement that the Second Νοῦς is περὶ τὰ νοητά καὶ αἰσθητά is to be found in fr. 26, where the sphere of the Second is said to extend into ὕλη; it not only unifies ὕλη but is pluralized by it, in the process of thinking αἰσθητά.

In Numenius's system, then, we have at the head an Aristotelian Νοῦς-θεός, not concerned with actual creation⁵ but only with himself, radiating τὰ θεῖα⁶ as an incident or consequence of his self-contemplation, as in Plotinus, and so the Demiourgos of Being.⁷ The soul is said ὁμιλῆσαι τῷ ἀγαθῷ μόνῳ μόνον.⁸

¹ Fr. 25.

² 39. Thedinga in this fragment inserts a πρῶτον without MS authority, which gives an absurd meaning contradicting everything else which we know of Numenius. If we read τὸν (νοῦντα) νοῦν, as Dodds suggests, there is no inconsistency.

³ Cp. *Enn.* II. 9. 6; v. 9. 9.

⁴ Even in Plotinus Νοῦς sometimes seems to be in effect prior to the νοητά; cp. Nebel, pp. 44–5, and below Ch. v.

⁵ 27. ⁶ 29.

⁷ According to Thedinga's reading at the end of fr. 10 this First νοῦς or αὐτοαγαθόν is called τὸ ἓν. This is possible in view of Numenius's Pythagorean preoccupations and is supported by fr. 14 (*Chalc. in Tim.* 293–7). It is not, however, in the best MSS.

⁸ Cp. φυγὴ μόνου πρὸς μόνον. *Enn.* VI. 9, last words.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65673-4 - The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus: An Analytical and Historical Study

A. H. Armstrong

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO

THE ONE. POSITIVE

Albinus in his *Didaskalikos* is even more interesting. In his tenth chapter he combines elements of the discussion of the One in the *Parmenides*,¹ *Republic* VI, the Second Letter of Plato² and the theology of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The following passage from this chapter is worth quoting at length:

“Since Intellect is superior to Soul, and the Intellect in Act which thinks all things simultaneously and perpetually is superior to the Intellect in potency, and the cause of this and whatever may be still higher than these is fairer than this; this would be the First God, being the cause of perpetual actuality (τοῦ ἄει ἐνεργεῖν) to the Intellect of the whole heaven. It acts towards this, being itself unmoved, as the sun towards seeing, whenever it looks upon it, and as the desired object, remaining unmoved, moves the desire. Thus this Intellect moves the Intellect of the whole heaven. But since the First Intellect is the most fair, it must have the fairest object of thought. But nothing is fairer than itself. It will, therefore, always think itself and its own thoughts, and its Actuality is its Idea (καὶ αὕτη ἡ ἐνέργεια αὐτοῦ ἰδέα ὑπάρχει).”

He continues by calling this First Νοῦς ἀγαθόν, καλόν, σύμμετρον, ἀλήθεια, πατήρ. He then proceeds to the section deriving from the First Hypothesis of the *Parmenides*. In this he says that the First Νοῦς is *not* genus, species (or form), differentia, accident (again Aristotelian terminology), evil, good, with or without quality, part, whole, does not move, is not moved, is not the same or other. About this “negative theology” I shall have more to say later.

Here again, just as in Numenius, we have a system professing to be Platonic but headed by the Aristotelian God. In the passage quoted above it appears even more Aristotelian than that of Numenius, for the Ideas are not mentioned, and next to the supreme Mind there appears the Mind of the whole Heaven. Also the Mind in potency and ὁ πάντα νοῶν καὶ ἅμα καὶ αἰεὶ certainly come from Aristotle's psychology. The position of the Ideas, however, has been defined in the previous chapter, 9. ἔστι δὲ ἡ ἰδέα ὡς μὲν πρὸς θεὸν νόησις αὐτοῦ, ὡς δὲ πρὸς ἡμᾶς νοητὸν πρῶτον, ὡς δὲ πρὸς τὴν

¹ See below Ch. II.

² 312E (the three Powers or Principles).