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Thinking the One

INTRODUCTION

“All of philosophy
is nothing
but the study
of the determinations of unity”
Hegel

Introduction to the historical dimension of the question of the One

In the various attempts to think a primary reality as *One* or *the One* a fundamental question of philosophy expresses itself. It holds true most intensely for that kind of philosophizing which may be comprehended, or comprehends itself, as metaphysics.

The One as primary can never be thought in itself or in isolation and abstraction, but always in relation to something different, i.e. the manifold, the many or plurality. Hence, One and many, the One and the many, unity and plurality constitutes a fundamental relation that is differentiated in itself. To thought, this relation is evident as the structure of being, of reality as a whole, *and* as its own being und form of motion. However, in the reflection upon plurality, unity or the One is constitutive insofar as the manifold cannot be thought sufficiently in itself and from itself, but only on the basis of, and with a view towards, a unity or a One. The One is the principle and origin by which and from which the many exists and in which it is preserved precisely as many. However, the One is also the foundation of the immanent unity *of* the many and *in* plurality, as the many unities and manifold single entities are synthesized into a unity. As single entities, they are directed towards a One that unifies all of them. The One as the implicative foundation and as the origin of the many that explicates itself is at once the ordering and uni[10]fying aim of all the motions which, however divergent they may be, proceed from it.

The relation between the One and Primary to the manifold manifests itself as the general and comprehensive horizon of the relation of identity and difference, of totality and

20 parts. In it, the One may be thought as a unity that is without difference in itself, but also as a unity determined by and “overcoming” difference in itself or as a totality that *is* only by virtue of its parts and constitutive elements. Unity as a relation, therefore, presupposes the identity of the single entities within a relational scheme as well as the identity of the point of reference common to all of these related entities.

25 A special and, at the same time, radical example of a unity that is relational in itself is the Christian notion of the Trinity: relationality between the three ‘persons’ of the One divine being constitutes an atemporal process of being mutually aware in thought and in love. The One substantial being expresses itself into a triad – *mira quaedam tam ineffabilis quam inevitabilis in summa unitate ... pluralitas*¹ – and it is precisely in so doing that it constitutes
30 itself as a unity. It is a tri-unity as absolute, self-present unity *prior* to all plurality or difference in the proper sense, i.e. such a plurality or difference as not only distinguishes, but primarily divides and separates the single entities in it. The relation of unity and the triad, which must not be thought in terms of numbers, is the philosophical foundation of this theological thought.

35 These intimations about the relation of the One as the foundation and origin of the many – whether this is thought as intelligible and ideal being or as the world as the system of reference – apply, above all, to the genuinely Platonist tradition and the philosophies that it helped shape. *Plato* took issue both with Parmenides’ concept of the One being that is without relation and, hence, without difference in itself and with Heraclitus’s notion of a One – the
40 ‘Logos’ – that, while contradictory in itself, constitutes itself dialectically. Not only did this lead to the concept of the concept itself that renders the manifold given intelligible, or definable, on the basis of the One determining it, but also to the theory of the forms that, as the foundation of being and explanation, allow the manifold to be, and to be thought as, identical with itself. For *Plato*, the pre-Socratic question of the One “origin” remaining, and
45 continuously [11] determining itself, in All things becomes radicalized in the context of this same theory. It becomes the concept of an “anhypothetical beginning” (*arché anhypothetos*)² identical with the form of the good that makes possible and determines all the other forms. Hints in the dialogues and the indirect tradition of *Plato*’s philosophy support the idea that *Plato*’s thought as a whole is characterized by a “pair of principles”, namely the One (or unity)

¹ Anselm, *Monologion*, 43 (I 59, 15–16 Schmitt). [“a certain admirable plurality both ineffable and inevitable in its highest unity”]

² *Politeia* 510 b 7. 511 b 6. 533 c 8.

50 and the “Indeterminate Dyad”, dominated by the One as the “determining” or “limiting” power.³ It is precisely this concept which is constitutive for the comprehensive reception of Platonic philosophy in Neoplatonism.

At least as far as its own stated self-conception is concerned, *Neoplatonic* thought seeks to be an interpretation of, above all, the Platonist tradition.⁴ However, despite its many references to Plato which occasionally amount to the legitimisation of its own thought, it must be viewed as a distinct transformation of this tradition. It builds upon genuine Platonic thought and radicalizes it in essential aspects. Thinking the One is the central motif of Neoplatonic philosophizing so that the term ‘henology’ captures its fundamental intention quite well. Tracing phenomena of plurality back to a unitary shape or to the forms that constitute them is an act of understanding the empirical world as well as intelligible structures. Searching these structures for the principle which connects and constitutes each and all of them, thought is led into increasingly more intense kinds of unity and, eventually, into the concept and the being of pure or atemporal and absolute Intellect and into pure absolute unity: the One itself. This One, its “being” and action, is the sole guiding and moving power in every [12] question posed to thought. Hence, thinking the One is “comprehensive” and “universal”. In the One question of the One itself, thought also thinks the latter’s manifold shadows, traces and images: it explicates the One as the universal principle that *in* the procession of being from it nevertheless remains itself and in itself – and, therefore, absolutely transcendent. However, it is also directed towards the *One in the Other*, i.e. towards the One working in that which, having proceeded from it, is different from it, while nevertheless directed towards its origin. This direction of all being towards its origin *is* the One that is transcendent in itself and works *in* the Other. Consequently, the Other, despite the plurality of the elements constituting it, is a *unity* in varying degrees of intensity: ‘soul’ (*Psyché*), e.g., in Plotinus’s sense, must, whether it is the world soul or an individual soul, collect itself through the mode of temporality towards its atemporal ground. It thereby becomes aware of

³ On that, cf. the many compelling publications on Plato’s so-called “Unwritten Doctrine” by K. Gaiser and H.J. Krämer. There are bibliographical references, e.g., in Krämer, *Platone e i fondamenti della metafisica*, Milan 1982, 418–441 [= Hans Joachim Krämer, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics. A Work on the Theory of the Principles and Unwritten Doctrines of Plato with a Collection of the Fundamental Documents*. Edited and Translated by John R. Catan, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990, 287–300].

⁴ Enn. V 1, 8, 12ff. H. Dörrie, “Plotino – Tradizionalista o Innovatore?” In: *Plotino e il Neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente* (Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei Anno CCCLXXI – 1974), Rome 1974, 195–201. German version in: H.D., *Platonica Minora*, Münster 1976, 375ff. Th.A. Szlezák, *Platon und Aristoteles in der Nuslehre Plotins*, Basel/Stuttgart 1979.

its transcendent principle as being immanent in it. *'Intellect' (Nus)*, by contrast, is one in a more intense fashion than soul because of its atemporality. The difference which determines Intellect from the origin and which is itself constituted in Intellect through the plurality of its forms turns it into a relational unity through reflection (identity *in* difference). In this unity, 80 the origin itself manifests itself as a first difference. However, the *One* itself (*Hen*) is the most intense unity, since it is without difference in itself and, hence, without any inner relationality which would exist on account of poles independent in themselves. The ontological explication of unity, i.e. its explication which is, by itself, thought of as a structure of "being", but also its reduction into its point of origin implies a cosmological and an anthropological aspect: *world* 85 as a unity centred towards the One and owing to this alone its ability to exist and the "One in us", i.e. *man's true self* which explicates and consummates itself in the attempt to think the One. Not only, therefore, does the universal scope of this philosophy imply the structure of all being proceeding from the One, but it likewise implies the laws of our *thoughts* (in *Nus* and in *Psyché*) and the maxims of our *actions* founded in it.

90 For Plotinus, the refined Neoplatonic definition of the genuinely Platonic notion of unity, put forward in a draft of a system centring around the complex interaction of three entities that all exist in themselves and represent unity in their own different fashions, i.e. 'the One itself – Intellect – Soul', will become even clearer once we look at his [13] concept of an atemporal, absolute Intellect in which the 'categories' of Plato's *Sophist* become determinate. 95 It is being that thinks itself as the unity of rest and motion, identity and difference. Moreover, in Plotinus *and* Proclus, we find the concept of the "One that is" (in contradistinction to the first One that is above being and not something or "nothing"), which has been derived from the second hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides*. It is identical with Intellect or a sphere of being and the noetic which is differentiated in itself.⁵ For *philosophical theology*, this complex 100 thought of a unity that is and that thinks itself, inextricably linked to the absolute or first One, became an inspiring model of the *unity* or *identity* of the One with being and Intellect as the divine unity or tri-unity: God, as Sapiencia or Logos, is at once being itself (*ipsum esse*)⁶ that thinks itself and the most intense unity.

105 We have thereby also intimated that, even given the change of conditions effected by Christian revelation, "thinking the One" continues to be constitutive for the reflexive structure

⁵ On these questions, see pp. 193ff.

⁶ Cf. W. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus und Idealismus*, 5–82: "Deus est esse – esse est Deus."

of faith. Hence, it is justifiable to include theology – the theological explanations of this thought – in our subsequent discussion of the tenets of Neoplatonic philosophy. We shall treat more or less explicitly the following philosophers as paradigmatic examples of a much more far-reaching story: Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite, Boethius, Eriugena, the Platonism of Chartres, Bonaventure, Nicolas of Cusa, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.⁷ – The philosophical reception history of the predominantly Neoplatonic thinking of the One is represented, above all, by Giordano Bruno’s attempt at an identification with his own self by means of self-reflection and unification with the One ground and by the notion of all-oneness in Leibniz’s *Monadology* and Schelling’s philosophy of identity. Hegel’s dialectical logic builds upon the “One that is”. It reveals itself as a movement that reflects and sublates in itself [14] difference and contradiction, thereby constituting a unity that is consummate and absolute in itself: the One that determines itself from its initial indeterminateness through the many to the One mediated with itself, thus possessing itself as absolute thought.⁸

(*Denken des Einen. Studien zur neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*,

Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985, 9–14)

⁷ My reflections upon the notion of identity in Augustine, Marius Victorinus, Meister Eckhart and Cusa are part of this question: *Identität und Differenz*, 57ff. 75ff. 97ff. 105ff. – I hope that I shall be able to return to Eckhart and Cusa’s concept of unity in particular in a different context.

⁸ On the history of the concept and the problem: M.E. Stokes, *One and Many in Presocratic Philosophy*, Cambridge Mass. 1971. W. Beierwaltes, “Hen”, in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 13 (for the transition from Greek metaphysics to early Christian theology). – P. Hadot/K. Flasch, “Eine (das), Einheit”, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie (Ritter – Gründer)* vol. II (1972) 361–377 (for antiquity and the Middle Ages). – M. Zahn, “Einheit”, in: *Handbuch philosophischer Grundbegriffe (Klings)*, vol. II (1973) 320–337 (especially for the early modern age). – More bibliographical references are provided there. The problem of ‘unity’ must throughout be seen against the backdrop of ‘identity’. Cf. D. Henrich “‘Identität’ – Begriffe, Probleme, Grenzen”, in: *Identität (Poetik und Hermeneutik VIII)*, Munich 1979, 133–186; see also my reflections in *Identität und Differenz*.