

Class Fifteen - Plotinus's Monism

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Some Platonic Themes

- **The Everyday World as Illusion:** The world of everyday experience, full of the perceptible things that we see, is not what is fundamentally real. Plato describes it as a *dream* world, a world of *shadows*.
 - **A Dream World:** “Someone who believes in beautiful things, but doesn’t believe in the beautiful itself and isn’t able to follow anyone who could lead him to knowledge of it [...] is living in a dream rather than a wakened state,” (*Republic*, 476c).
 - **A World of Shadows:** Most people are living in the cave, and do not “see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them,” (*Republic*, 515a).
 - * **An Interesting Feature of the Metaphor:** Plato goes out of his way to point out here that one does not see one’s actual self.
- **The Philosopher as Aiming to Transcend the Everyday World:** The aim of philosophy is to transcend the body in order for the soul to be united with the forms—most fundamentally, the form of the good.
 - “[I]f we are to ever have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself,” (*Phaedo*, 66e).
- **This is a Kind of Return:** The soul’s coming to be united with the forms, through philosophy, is its coming to be reunited with the forms. So, the sort of transcendence the philosopher seeks to achieve through philosophy is a *return* of the soul to the connection with the forms whence it came.
 - **Philosophy as a Kind of Death:** “[T]rue philosophers are nearly dead,” (*Phaedo*, 64b).
- **Steps Towards Fundamentally Monistic Conception of Reality:** Though there appear to be many different things, reality is, at the fundamental level, not *manifold*, but *unified*. That is, fundamentally, what really exists is not *many*, but *one*.
 - **A First Thought:** There are many particular triangles, but the reality that underlies all of them—triangularity—is a one rather than a many.
 - **A Final Thought:** The most fundamental thing whose reality underlies everything else is the most fundamental *unity*, identified by Plato as *the good*
 - * “Not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being to the good, but their being is also due to it,” (*Republic* 509b).
 - * The good is “the unhypothetical first principle of everything,” from which everything else follows (*Republic*, 511b).
- **Remaining Questions:** It seems that after reading Plato, we’re still fundamentally left with two basic metaphysical and epistemological questions: what, exactly, is the good itself, and how do we have knowledge of it?
 - Plato gives us metaphors that are supposed to illuminate the answer to these questions, but all that we really get, at the end of the day, are metaphors.
 - Plato suggests that it’s impossible to give us more than that:

- * “You won’t be able to follow me any longer [. . .] for you would no longer be seeing an image of what we’re describing, but the truth itself,” (*The Republic*, 533a).

2 Some Aristotelian Themes

- **Everything Striving to Take Part in the Divine:** Every substance, be it plant, animal, human, or celestial body, qua substance strives, as part of its being, to take part in the divine.
 - What this is, for each type of substance, is distinct.
- **The Divine in Each of Us:**

“Whether this best element is intellect or something else we think naturally rules and guides us and has insight into matters noble and divine, and whether it is divine or just the most divine element within us, its activity, in accordance with its own proper virtue, will be complete happiness,” (NE 10, 7).

 - Striving for the divine is really nothing other than striving for one to be what one truly is. The divine is just that which is always perfectly just what it is.

3 Plotinus and the *Enneads*

- **Plotinus:** The most important ancient philosopher in the Western tradition, after Plato and Aristotle.
 - Born in Egypt (which was part of the Roman empire at the time) around 204CE.
 - Learned philosophy in Alexandria from the Platonist Ammonius Saccas.
 - Came to Rome at around the age of forty.
- **The *Enneads*:** The collection of all of Plotinus’s treatises, compiled and organized by his student Porphyry.
- **Neo-Platonism:** Plotinus is regarded as the founder of “Neo-Platonism.”
 - This term is not one that Plotinus himself (or his immediate follows) used. Plotinus took it that he was articulating the true Platonic doctrine.
 - Nevertheless, Plotinus is an importantly distinct and original philosopher, and his work synthesizes several distinct views, so the label “Neo-Platonism” is not inapt.
 - * **Incorporates Aristotelian Thought:** Plotinus’s writing “contains the concentrated essence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*,” (Porphyry, 14, 5).

4 Plotinus’s Hierarchy of Being

- **The Centrality of the One:** Really puts at the center (literally) the notion of the Good, also referred to by Plotinus as “the One.”
 - That’s already the case, in some sense, in Plato, but Plotinus really takes this thought and structures his whole system around it.
 - Moreover, as mentioned Plotinus incorporates core metaphysical ideas from Aristotle.
- **Unity and Being:** Like Plato, Plotinus thinks that things have different degrees of being. For Plotinus, the principle of degree of *being* is the degree of *unity*.

“All beings are beings due to unity, both those beings that are primarily Beings and those that are said to be among beings in any way. For what could be, if it were not a unity? For if you take away the unity which they are said to be, then they are not those things. For an army does not exist unless it is a unity, nor a choir, or a herd, if it is not a unity. Nor a house or a ship, if it does not have unity, since a house or a ship is a unity, and if it loses its unity, then it is no longer a house or a ship,” (6.9.1).

- **Plotinus's Hierarchy:** Like Aristotle, Plotinus conceives of the constituents of reality as organized as a hierarchy. However, Plotinus's hierarchy is structured differently, corresponding to a more Platonic conception of reality.
 - **Material World:** Consists in changing bodily particulars. Plotinus identifies matter with *privation*, insofar as "privation is in opposition to what is contained in an expressed principle," (2.4.16).
 - **Soul:** The principle at work in living things in virtue of which living things live the lives that they do, aspiring towards ends and acting to achieve those ends.
 - **Intellect:** That which comprehends the principles of things and contains these principles, qua intelligible forms.
 - * For Aristotle, pure intellect is the highest substance.
 - * Still, for Plotinus, "Intellect is not simple but multiple, revealing itself as a composite, although an intelligible one, and consequently seeing many things," (5.4.2).
 - * Yet, like for Plato, where all the forms point to the form of the Good, for Plotinus, they are, though many, ultimately one:

"If, then, we liken the intelligibles to the many centers, leading back to the one center where they are unified, they appear many through the lines though the lines, not because the lines have produced them, but because they reveal them," (6.5.5, 17-20).
 - **The One:** The ultimate unity that underlies all things, that cannot even be spoken of as *being*.
 - * **Unity and Ineffability:** To speak of the one as being is to mischaracterize it, since conceptual articulation essentially involves division and the One is the ultimate unity.

5 The Being of Intelligibles and Intelligibility of Being

- **Knowing Being:**
 - One is not to look for being outside of oneself. Since it belongs to all beings, it is to be found within oneself, (6.5.1).
 - We think the One by *being* it, (6.5.7, 5).
 - * Aristotle clearly thinks something similar about divine substance. We *think* divine substance, which is nothing but the activity of thinking its own being (which is that very thinking), by *doing* the very activity that divine substance *is*.
 - **The Unity of Beings qua Being:** "Insofar as the Good is being and within being, in being in itself, it would be in each being. We have not, therefore, stood part from being, we are in it; nor did the Good stand apart from us. All beings, therefore, are one," (6.5.1, 25).
 - **The Good as Having the Essence of Unity and Being:** "For this is the Good, for this one nature, belonging to itself and being itself, and that is what it is to be one nature," (6.5.1, 20).
 - * **Pure Being, No Becoming:** "It is in the same state and does not step outside of itself, and if there is said to be no becoming for it, not even in place, then it is necessary for it, being in this state, to always be with itself, and to not depart from itself; nor for another part of it to be thus, with another thus, nor may anything proceed from it," (6.5.2)
 - **Compare to Aristotle:** For Aristotle, this is to be said just as well about the divine. Insofar as divine is nothing but the activity of thinking itself, it is not going anywhere.
 - **An (Imperfect) Illustration:** One can depict the account using "the example of many lines drawn from one center in order to illustrate the concept of a generated plurality," (6.5.5, 3).

6 The One as Ineffable, Beyond Being

- **Not a Something:** "So, the One is not the Intellect, but prior to it. For the Intellect is something, whereas the One is not something, because it is prior to every Being, since it is not Being. Indeed, Being has in a way the shape of Being, whereas the One is shapeless, without even an intellectual shape," (886).
- **Some Remarks on Union:** "This is indeed what the injunction about the mysteries makes clear, not to communicate them to the uninitiated; since that is not communicable, it forbids explaining the divine to anyone who has not had the good fortune to see for himself. So, since they were not two, but the seer was one with what is seen, as though it was not being seen by him, but was unified with him, if he remembers who he became when he mingled with the One, then he will have in himself an image of it," (888).