

# Plotinus on the Limitation of Act by Potency

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*The limitation of act by potency, central in the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas, has its origins in Plotinus. He transforms Aristotle's horizontal causality of change into a vertical causality of participation. Potency and infinity are not just unintelligible lack of limit, but productive power. Form determines matter but is limited by reception into matter. The experience of unity begins with sensible things, which always have parts, so what is really one is incorporeal, without division and separation. Unity is like the esse of Thomas, since it is the act that makes a thing what it is and has its fullness in God.*

## 1. Introduction

Over fifty years ago Norris Clarke, S.J., published "The Limitation of Act by Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism," *The New Scholasticism*, 26 (1952) 167–194, which highlighted the role of Plotinus in formulating some of the fundamental distinctions operative in medieval philosophy. He singled out the doctrine of participation and the idea of infinity and showed how they went beyond the limits of classical Greek thought. At the same time, his work challenged some of the basic historical assumptions of Thomists about the relation of scholastic philosophy, especially St. Thomas's, to Plato and Aristotle. I have appreciated more and more the unusual openness and self critical character of Fr. Clarke's historical method, and am pleased to have the chance in this response to Sarah Borden's paper to explore some of the issues raised by Fr. Clarke's seminal article in light of my own work on Plotinus.

I began my graduate studies with a strong interest in Thomistic philosophy, but was influenced by Norris Clarke and others, such as Gerald McCool and Robert O'Connell, to explore the roots of medieval thought in Neo-Platonism in general and Plotinus in particular. I remember after my proposal defense about inter-subjectivity in Plotinus Fr. Clarke's comment, expressed with his mischievous surprise, that I really knew what I was talking about. Working with him as director made writing the dissertation one of the more pleasant aspects of my graduate education. But those were also days whose innocence was shattered when I was hired by Loyola University of Chicago and found my Thomistic background decidedly out of favor. My research and teaching, as a consequence, turned from Plotinus' influence on medieval thought to his roots in the Greek tradition, especially Plato and Aristotle. In 2004 I was invited by Joe Koterski to be visiting professor at Fordham University for the fall semester. It was a marvelous homecoming and I gave a paper for the Society of Ancient Greek Philosophy in their conference hosted at Fordham's Lincoln Center in the fall of each year. I dedicated my paper to Norris Clarke, with the words that opened my comments here. I was also able to share that paper on the omnipresence of soul and another on matter with Fr. Clarke. I remember one Saturday morning receiving a telephone call. Norris was on the other end, expressing his excited appreciation of my paper on the soul's omnipresence. We met for lunch some time later to discuss the two papers. I was especially pleased by his response, since I have come to realize his

influence on my own work and historical method. Both of these papers bear on our topic today in divergent ways, so I shall use them as a way of refining the wonderful insights of that article on the limitation of act by potency and Sarah's careful retrieval of it in her paper.

## 2. Participation

Clarke was particularly intrigued by my account of how Plotinus specifies the soul's presence as a power (δύναμις) dominating and unifying an object without losing its own unity.<sup>1</sup> The images he uses to elucidate this power are decidedly physical: bodily strength in a hand (κράτος ἐν τῇ χειρὶ; VI 4[22] 7,8–23), a small luminous mass (φωτεινὸς μικρὸς ὄγκος; 7,23–39), and finally the light of the sun (φῶς τοῦ ἡλίου; 7,39–47). In each case, the image illustrates the presence everywhere of an undivided power, but then each one is corrected to remove the physical aspect of the image so the immaterial nature of the soul's presence to the body can shine forth. These images are thus designed to add persuasive force to arguments earlier in the treatise that the soul's presence to the body is not as a quality that is divided quantitatively, but rather as an activity that is present as a whole throughout the body.

The first image (7,8–23) is of a hand grasping an entire body, a long plank, and something else (7,10). The text does not specify, so the grasp may be upon all the objects taken together or each one considered separately. By way of filling out his examples, let's assume that the body is a ball. A hand grasping a ball surrounds it more completely than one grasping a plank, which tends toward the midpoint for balance. The strength in the hand has varied effects: the ball can be thrown and the plank carried. Alternatively, someone might be attempting to hold all the objects at once. Plotinus claims that the grasp in the hand is not divided up into parts equal to those of the objects grasped, but the difficulty is determining what he means. In comparing the grasp of ball and plank, there is a contrast between a grasp that surrounds an object more or less completely and one that holds on to no more than a small portion of its total length. In neither case, however, is it necessary or possible to have parts of the hand touching all the parts into which an object can be divided.

What happens is that through this contact of hand and object, the strength in the hand becomes a force or control permeating the object. This control extends in undivided fashion throughout the entire ball or plank: when the ball is thrown, the force propels it completely, and when the plank is carried, the force extends to the untouched parts of its length and not only the small portion firmly in one's grip. In describing this, Plotinus actually enunciates St. Thomas's principle of the limitation of act by potency: the act of the hand is limited by the object.

*As the hand touches [a body] so much is its power, it seems, circumscribed, but still the hand is defined by its own quantity, not by that of the body it raises and*

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on pp. 119–122 of my article, "Plotinus on the Soul's Omnipresence in Body," *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition*, 2 (2008) 113–127. The article as a whole shows how Plotinus uses assumptions about the soul different from common modern assumptions, whether Cartesian or Kantian.

*grasps.* (καθόσον ἐφάπτεται εἰς τοσοῦτον περιγραφομένης, ὡς δοκεῖ, τῆς δυνάμεως, ἀλλ' ὁμως τῆς χειρὸς ὀριζομένης τῷ αὐτῆς ποσῷ, οὐ τῷ τοῦ αἰωρουμένου καὶ κρατουμένου σώματος. VI 4[22] 7,12–15)<sup>2</sup>

This illustrates well how a higher power (strength in the hand) is present in something lower (its control over or force in the object), but also that the bodily character of this relationship needs qualification, since the hand is itself physical, and thus both quantitatively limited and external to the object. The first part of the statement indicates that the power of the hand extends throughout the object, which serves as the boundary of its operation, in the same way that souls were described in VI 4[22] 6 as dwelling one to a body. The force is “received” by the object and is clearly present in the object lifted, but remains centered in and dependent on the strength of the hand, which is external to the object in a way that the soul is not external to the body. The object does not become alive or possess this force on its own, no matter how much strength the hand exerts. The real limit on what the hand can do, moreover, comes from the quantity of the hand itself, how much strength it has. It is at this point that hand and soul part company in their relation to body. The quantitative nature of the hand needs to be corrected when applied to the soul’s presence: take away the bodily mass, but leave the power (δύναμιν) intact as permeating the whole object with all its parts.

The soul is therefore unlike the hand, which is a quantity itself and external to the object, since the soul itself and not just its power are present in a body in the same pervasive way the force is present in an object, with the body acting as the boundary of its operation. The immateriality of the soul allows it to be present much more intimately, manifest in making the body alive with its own power. Nevertheless, the separation between hand and object also plays an important role, indicating not a physical separation, but soul’s radical independence from the body. One can accurately say that the soul is present to body in Plotinus’ scheme in such a way that body hardly seems changed at all, however much the presence of soul enlivens it, and that soul never really belongs to body, however much it functions through it.

The second image continues this reflection (7,23–39) by imagining a small luminous mass within a large, transparent sphere, so that the light from this small center fills the whole sphere, whose shell is opaque in such a way that no light from outside the sphere can shine within it. Thus, the transparent space inside the sphere is wholly filled by the light that comes from this luminous center. His tendency to think of light as quasi-incorporeal emphasizes the distinction made in the previous image between the force or control in the object and the strength in the hand. Here, however, it is the luminous mass that comes off the poorer, since the light that fills the sphere is the point of the image. If that mass is removed, light permeates the sphere perfectly, so that no point of origin can be imagined, but just the presence of light everywhere. This flips the point of view of the previous image around. We are no longer on the outside, looking at a power going out of the hand to some object, but Plotinus, as it were, has moved us

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<sup>2</sup> My translation of this passage is significantly different from my translation in the article; it is both more accurate and brings out more clearly that Plotinus is articulating how an active power is limited by what receives it.

inside the object itself. The soul is present in us much as light is present in the sphere, without a point of origin that can be identified and with the same result of amazement about a power present everywhere in this way. Wherever we look, light and soul are equally present.

The last image applies the previous one to the case of the sun shining and lighting up the air around us (7,39–47). This application presents a crucial point of contact with the major text lurking behind this whole treatise, *Parmenides* 131b3–4, where Parmenides confuses the young Socrates about the nature of the forms by using the image of day and sail to illustrate how a form is present to multiple bodies.<sup>3</sup> Plotinus, in correcting the image, substitutes the sun, as the one source of light, for the day used by Parmenides. The light, as the effect produced by the sun, lights the air everywhere but is not itself divided. Where objects block it or cut it off, they do so only on the side away from the sun, indicating that the light permeates the air thoroughly, as the effect of one cause. He comments further that the image is still in need of refinement to fit the relation of souls or ideas to bodies. Here too the analogy is shown to limp precisely because the sun, as the origin of light, must be located at some definite place. If this introduction of the spatial is eliminated, then the parallel would be exact: a pure power that could not be localized, but is present everywhere as one and the same.

We need now to draw out some of the implications of these images for Plotinus' understanding of participation and infinity. Plotinus is already using and transforming Aristotle's notion of act and potency to explain participation. It is very similar to the change Norris Clarke attributes to St. Thomas, where act and potency are not restricted to horizontal change in the sensible cosmos, but the relation of higher causes to their lower participants. The transcendent cause or power, soul or form in the present context, is fully in act and becomes limited in relation to the body that receives it. It is the power, for example, lifting a particular plank. Plotinus, moreover, assumes that limit or boundary is most strictly the quantitative nature of the corporeal. This allows him to understand that anything non-corporeal must by that very fact be infinite. Prime matter, thus, is infinite as pure potentiality, and is incorporeal precisely because it can have no form. This insight allows him to hold that soul is also infinite because it is incorporeal, but as active power rather than formless potentiality. It is this positive infinity that can be ascribed to soul, intellect, and the One. As Clarke noted, this understanding of perfection as infinite is alien to classical Greek thought, which identified perfection with definite form. Plotinus keeps the forms perfect, but endows them with an infinity that is rooted in their incorporeal nature.

### 3. Potency

At this point we have done only half the battle. While Plotinus identifies boundary and limit in the strictest sense with the corporeal, forms must also be in some sense finite, relative to one another and to the One. With this issue we come to the other paper that I shared not so many

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<sup>3</sup> See my article, "Plotinus and the Platonic *Parmenides*," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 (1992) 443–57, especially p. 450 n. 12.

years ago with Fr. Clarke when I was visiting Fordham. It was on Plotinus' account of matter, and while he remained encouraging about my scholarship, he was not as enthusiastic about the more positive reception I gave to spiritual matter in Plotinus.<sup>4</sup> Sarah's comments on the difficulty of determining the nature of essence as a principle of potency in Fr. Clarke's retrieval of St. Thomas's thought address this very issue. The problem is precisely the nature of essence as a limit, which has no positive reality and implies that as potencies essences do not exist apart from existing things. I remember Fr. Clarke emphasizing this in class by telling the story of a working vacation he spent with Bernard Lonergan who was putting the finishing touches on one of his many tomes. From Clarke's point of view, Lonergan was claiming that to be meant to be thought, while he insisted that to be is prior and cannot be simply identified with being thought. The difficult side of this, as Sarah reminded us in quoting Fr. Clarke, is that "to try and lay hold of the being of limit as such exceed the limits of language and conceptual thought" ("How Does One Limit Being?", p. 16).

The problem in considering essences to be potencies is, as any good Plotinian can tell you, that it is tantamount to taking them as matter, whether the matter of the sensible world or intelligible matter, for which Fr. Clarke had a neuralgic reaction. Nevertheless, I suspect that Plotinus and St. Thomas share some assumptions that make their understanding of essences very different from our own. Most importantly, Plotinus shows that essences, or perhaps more accurately forms, do not come about or exist singly, like an idea in a Cartesian mind. In the background is Plato's *Sophist*, with the interweaving of the forms made possible by the highest genera, especially sameness and difference. Plotinus introduces an additional understanding of otherness where it serves as a principle that pervades everything that comes after the One. This otherness has degrees, from the one-many of intelligible being and the one and many of sensible becoming to the otherness of absolute matter, which is just many, merely potential, and lacking sameness of any kind.

Plotinus discusses otherness and matter in two early treatises, II 4[12], which uses Aristotelian terms, substrate, privation, and the indefinite, and III 6[26], which attempts to unravel Platonic images for matter, mainly from the *Timaeus*. In both cases, Plotinus argues with unusual vigor what Plato and Aristotle must mean by matter if their accounts of matter are to make sense; a consequence is that their disagreements can only be verbal. It is this Plotinian understanding of prime matter that subsequently dominates medieval philosophy and will be assumed by St. Thomas. I will focus on II 4[12], since Aristotle's terms are more relevant to our discussion.<sup>5</sup> Plotinus begins in typical Thomistic fashion with what is more clearly known to us, the bodies of the sensible world and how they are different from matter itself. He then turns to forms and their relation to intelligible matter, what most concerns us here.

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<sup>4</sup> My article, "Plotinus: Matter and Otherness, 'On Matter' (II 4[12])," *Epoche*, 9 (2005) 197–214, explores the careful analysis Plotinus gives to Aristotle's prime matter in relation to the corporeal. He argues that matter is an indeterminate or infinite substrate, while the corporeal limits various forms, with body and soul as one example.

<sup>5</sup> This section is based on pp. 207–09 of my article, "Plotinus: Matter and Otherness," *Epoche*, 9 (2005) 197–214.

In examining intelligible matter, Plotinus begins with the opposing characteristics of the sensible and intelligible worlds that would seem to argue against it. Matter itself is something undefined and shapeless (ἀόριστόν τι καὶ ἄμορφον, II 4[12] 2,2–3), which seems to preclude its presence in the world of forms, where every being is simple (ἁπλοῦν, 2,5) rather than composite, the opposite of the case with sensible beings. Furthermore, matter is also the principle of change underlying sensible objects.

Matter is needed both for things that become and for things made from other things, from which indeed the matter of sensible things was [first] thought, but for things that do not become it is not [needed]. (καὶ γινομένοις μὲν ὕλης δεῖ καὶ ἐξ ἑτέρων ἕτερα ποιούμενοις, ἀφ' ὧν καὶ ἡ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ὕλη ἐνοήθη, μὴ γινομένοις δὲ οὐ. II 4[12] 2,6–8.)

In this view, the intelligible world does not need matter precisely because things there do not become nor is there change from one thing to another, since all intelligible beings are eternally the same. In addition, this objection continues, if there were composite beings in the intelligible world, this combination of form and matter would yield bodies, as it does in the sensible. Thus we have three objections to the existence of intelligible matter: the intelligible is simple, eternal and not body. Fr. Clarke would agree wholeheartedly.

Plotinus, however, argues against these objections to intelligible matter by using his own understanding of the absolute simplicity of the One and thus the relative complexity of everything else. But his counter argument begins, significantly, with soul's own undefined and shapeless character relative to intellect and reason (II 4[12] 3,1–5), based on the principle that the lower is always shapeless and undefined relative to its higher. He turns next to an examination of simplicity. It is a relative term, and Plotinus reminds us that the intelligible world is in fact composite, but not as are bodies. He specifies the composite nature of the intelligible by examining reasons (λόγοι, II 4[12] 3,7), emphasizing the nature of the intelligible in producing forms. A crucial difference between the matter here and there is that “the matter of things that become is always taking one form after another, while the [matter] of eternal things is always the same and [takes] the same [form]” (ἡ δὲ τῶν γιγνομένων ὕλη ἀεὶ ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο εἶδος ἴσχει, τῶν δὲ αἰδίων ἡ αὐτὴ ταῦτόν ἀεί, 3,9–10).

In II 4[12] 4–5, Plotinus approaches the question from the point of view of form rather than matter. He assumes, for the sake of argument, that there are many forms. Of necessity, this means there is something common (κοινόν, 4,3) to them as well as something individual (ἴδιον, 4,4). The unique element is described as shape (μορφή, 4,5), the form that makes each intelligible being what it is. If there are many forms, different from one another, then there must be something that is shaped, a matter that receives shape, and this is always the substrate (τὸ ὑποκείμενον, 4,7; cf. II 5[25] 3,11–12 on soul as matter). Plotinus is proposing an original understanding of matter and form, where form appears more explicitly as the principle of individuality and matter functions as something common, a principle of unity for all forms taken together. This unifying function, applying to both the intelligible and sensible worlds, is central

in his analysis of matter throughout the remainder of the treatise and is the basis for the next step in his argument, the parallel between the intelligible cosmos (κόσμος νοητός, II 4[12] 4,8) and its image, the sensible cosmos. Whatever is in the image must be, *a fortiori*, in the archetype.

The argument highlights the something common that all forms share, that they are ordered (κόσμον, 4,10), and such ordering keeps them from being just individual, in which case there would be no intelligible world at all, only isolated forms, if such were possible. What is common among them, making them a world, is the substrate on which they are imposed. This position seems to intrude parts into the intelligible world, which is “itself wholly and absolutely partless, but in a kind of way parted” (ἀμερῆς μὲν γὰρ παντελῶς πάντα αὐτό, μεριστὸν δὲ ὁπωσοῦν, 4,11–12). The statement is a typical Plotinian paradox. It describes the intelligible based on, but correcting, the sensible. Sensible partition implies real separation, a cutting and tearing apart, while the intelligible is a many which is nevertheless partless (πολλὰ ὃν ἀμέριστον, 4,14). Oddly, it is matter that gives unity to this many, an undefined unity that is varied by the imposition of forms, but remains prior to them as shapeless and is none of those that are on and in it.

The structure Plotinus depicts here can be seen in St. Thomas’s *De Ente et Essentia* and other works where Thomas describes the scale of being in terms of the relative act and potency that situates a being somewhere along a continuum. Fr. Clarke himself discerns this structure in St. Thomas as the basis for his own proper argument for the existence of God. What the present context highlights, however, is the unity between these forms, a unity of living things rather than abstract ideas. St. Thomas’s Christian identification of these intelligences with angels brings out both the life and personal nature of this aspect nicely. This unity, moreover, emerges from otherness precisely as potency. This potency is identified only in its last instance with prime matter. At the level of intellect, this otherness is intellect itself in its inchoate or potential state. Plotinus in other places describes the generation of the forms as the turning back of this inchoate intellect toward the One. The fullness of intellect, with the whole multiplicity of the forms, is the way in which intellect grasps the One. While this differs from an account based on creation by God from nothing, we can perhaps gain some insight about the potential nature of essences as St. Thomas understands it. These essences are, as it were, the potencies of what actually can exist and they come to be as creation itself unfolds as a whole and unfold precisely as within that whole. A potency or essence then is a limit not as some kind of thing or positive attribute, but rather as the way in which an essence comes to be as different from other essences.

#### **4. God Beyond Being**

Plotinus always begins with our experience, tracing from it the nature of soul and intellect. Only then does he speak of God and usually in the Platonic terms, as Sarah mentioned, as beyond being and knowing. Generally this means that the One is not a being, as both St. Thomas and Fr. Clarke would agree. Plotinus is affirming that the One is not τὸ ὄν or οὐσία, generally identifying the former with the Platonic forms and the latter with Aristotle’s sensible substances. He does not, as far as I have been able to determine, ever deny that the One is εἶναι.

In treatise VI 5[23], which continues the discussion of omnipresence of VI 4[22], he turns to an examination of the One that a Thomist ought to find congenial.<sup>6</sup> He begins with something that appears to recent commentators as an unusual appeal to common human experience, but one that, as Armstrong strangely notes, seems no longer possible in the modern Western world.<sup>7</sup>

A certain common notion says that the one and the same in number is everywhere present as a whole, whenever all are naturally moved to call the God in each of us as one and the same. (τὸ ἐν καὶ ταὐτὸν ἀριθμῷ πανταχοῦ ἅμα ὅλον εἶναι κοινὴ μὲν τις ἔννοιά φησιν εἶναι, ὅταν πάντες κινούμενοι αὐτοφύως λέγωσι τὸν ἐν ἑκάστῳ ἡμῶν θεὸν ὡς ἐν καὶ τὸν αὐτόν. 1,1–4)

This common notion, with its Stoic echo,<sup>8</sup> places the examination of omnipresence in a context different from that in VI 4[22], which is restricted to the relation of soul, as the power from intellect, to the corporeal. On the one hand, there is a similarity between the presence of soul and intellect to the sensible world (or some one of its parts) as a whole, and the presence of God to all human beings. On the other hand, there will be intriguingly different implications to the omnipresence of God, awareness of which is peculiarly human as this passage indicates. Plotinus is not restricting the omnipresence of God to human beings, but is using this general human recognition to understand all lesser modes of omnipresence. What has already been examined in VI 4[22] in the technical language of philosophy, “the one and the same in number that is present everywhere as a whole,” is here identified with the prephilosophical and unreflective notion of all human beings, not merely philosophers, in naming the God in each of us as one and the same.

Plotinus first pinpoints the philosophical nature of this common notion precisely as the foundation of all thought, and then answers the challenge of someone like Sextus Empiricus by returning to philosophical principles articulated by Plato and Aristotle to explain it.

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<sup>6</sup> This section is based on pp. 138–46 of my article, “Plotinus: Omnipresence and Transcendence of the One in VI 5[23],” *Reading Ancient Texts, Volume II: Aristotle and Neoplatonism*, ed. by Suzanne Stern-Gillet and Kevin Corrigan (Brill, 2007), 137–52.

<sup>7</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead VI. 1–5*, tr. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 326–27, n. 1: “This is one of Plotinus’ rare appeals to the common experience of mankind as a good starting-point for a philosophical investigation (III. 7. 1 may be compared, though ‘we’ there probably means ‘philosophers’ rather than ‘mankind in general’). The way in which he expresses this general consent may remind us of how much the centuries of Christianity and anti-Christianity have changed the common thinking of our own world. What he says here would probably still be true in India.” Armstrong’s comments seem overly hasty and do not do justice to the careful argument Plotinus presents in VI 5[23] 1, and its reprise at the beginning of VI 5[23] 4,1–13. It is hasty to say that Plotinus is appealing to common experience without clarifying the precise thrust of his argument, and the reference to Christianity and India obscures the precise philosophical provenance of the contrast between Modern and non-Modern philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 3,2–12, presents a discussion of God, with the common notion of God occurring in paragraphs 3, 6, 11, in the context of what the dogmatist needs to admit and what Sextus then sees as the contradictions that follow. Plotinus’ argument can be seen as addressing these objections in terms of his own understanding of the nature of immateriality and its consequences for understanding the nature of God as transcendent and omnipresent. *The Outlines of Pyrrhonism* can be found in *Sextus Empiricus*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1933) and in *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, tr. by Brad Inwood and Lloyd Gerson (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co, 1988), pp. 219–22.



And if someone were not to ask them how nor want to examine their opinion rationally, thus they would affirm and, this being active in their reason, thus they would come to rest, firmly set somehow on the one and the same, and would not want to be cut away from this unity. (καὶ εἴ τις αὐτοὺς τὸν τρόπον μὴ ἀπαιτοῖ μηδὲ λόγῳ ἐξετάζειν τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν ἐθέλοι, οὕτως ἂν καὶ θεῖντο καὶ ἐνεργοῦντες τοῦτο τῇ διανοίᾳ οὕτως ἀναπαύοιντο εἰς ἓν τῶς συνερίδοντες καὶ ταῦτόν, καὶ οὐδ' ἂν ἐθέλοιεν ταύτης τῆς ἐνότητος ἀποσχίζεσθαι. 1.4–8)

The questions listed function as if this common notion were like any opinion or idea.<sup>9</sup> Plotinus argues, on the contrary, that this notion is fundamental, since it is already active in reason and is the ground upon which all human knowledge rests, so much so that no one would want to be cut off from it. This *a priori* claim is examined in the rest of the chapter.

Plotinus does not seek to prove this claim as if it were an opinion brought about arbitrarily by some human artifice or reason, but by describing, phenomenologically as it were, how it expresses the nature of the case. The next lines present us with his first distinctions.

And this is the *most certain principle* of all, which our souls shout, as it were, not summed up from particulars, but coming before all particulars and before that [principle] which affirms and states that all things desire the good. (καὶ ἔστι πάντων βεβαιοτάτη ἀρχή, ἣν ὥσπερ αἱ ψυχαὶ ἡμῶν φθέγγονται, μὴ ἐκ τῶν καθέκαστα συγκεφαλαιωθεῖσα, ἀλλὰ πρὸ τῶν καθέκαστα πάντων προελθοῦσα καὶ πρὸ ἐκείνης τῆς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ πάντα ὀρέγεσθαι τιθεμένης τε καὶ λεγούσης. 1.8–12)

That God is one and the same is the most certain principle of all and our souls do not need to be persuaded of this nor learn it, but it is present naturally or spontaneously, as Plotinus phrases it at the beginning of the chapter. These lines state first that it is a principle not known by a process of abstraction or induction, based on moving from particulars to the general. It is thus not at all like an explanation or theory about the nature of things, as would be true with the explanations of the arts or sciences. It is, in a word, not a concept, idea, or hypothesis put forward by the human mind to make sense of the cosmos, but is somehow *a priori*, to use Kant's phrase. Line 8 quotes Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, IV,4 1005b11–12, indicating that Plotinus considers this a first

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<sup>9</sup> In this first move, Plotinus indicates that Sextus, and those like him, are confusing two distinct orders of discourse. Plotinus' critique of Sextus, then, is that he takes explanation and rational analysis as if they were themselves the foundation and beginning of thought. Plotinus counters with the claim that philosophical reflection is designed to elucidate the meaning of a more primordial truth already contained at the pre-reflective level. For a recent expression of the same sort of concern, John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent and Persons in Relation* (New York, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), examines how religion constitutes the primordial mode of human knowledge, with other modes derivative from it and dependent on it. Mircea Eliade, in *Images and Symbols* (New York, A Search Book, Sheed and Ward, 1969) and other works, examines the structure and significance of pre-linguistic thought. Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1957), has a similar project in tracing the origins of language and its unique appearance among human beings.

principle, “which,” as Aristotle says, “it is necessary to have for one who understands anything about beings and is not an assumption; and what is necessary to know for one who knows anything, one must have come already having [it] (1005b15–17).” Plotinus effectively establishes God as the first principle of all knowledge, not only rephrasing but grounding Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction.<sup>10</sup> Plotinus states all this with incredible brevity, but his point is nevertheless clear that the first principle of knowledge, as will be evident later also of being, must be one and the same thing.

The desire of all things for the good switches from an Aristotelian to a Platonic context, Plotinus stating that God is prior to the good as an object of desire, that is, prior to all other goods or principles of goodness, especially the soul and intellect examined in VI 4[22]. He begins by describing how the good ordinarily functions as an object of desire, particularly in terms of the unity that is the goal of all such desire.

For that [principle] would be true in this way, if all things were tending to unity and were a unity, and the desire were of this [unity]. On the one hand, this unity in going forth to other [unities], as far as it is possible for it to advance, would appear and even in a way be many. (οὕτω γὰρ ἂν αὕτη ἀληθὲς εἴη, εἰ τὰ πάντα εἰς ἓν σπεύδοι καὶ ἓν εἴη, καὶ τούτου ἡ ὄρεξις εἴη. τὸ γὰρ ἓν τοῦτο προῖδὼν μὲν ἐπὶ θάτερα, ἐφ’ ὅσον προελθεῖν αὐτῷ οἶόν τε, πολλὰ ἂν φανείη τε καὶ πῶς καὶ εἴη, ... 1.12–16)

Generally, things desire the good as an external unity toward which they are directed. This kind of good is also characteristic of human production or art, where different things are fitted together or blended to form a new unity that the human agent intends to serve some purpose. Modern philosophy construes all desire for an end as inevitably reducible to this human desire and intention, claiming that all teleology is necessarily anthropomorphic. The context in this passage, however, is not in the least anthropomorphic, and there is in fact no allusion to human production. Instead, the *locus classicus* for understanding this desire for the good is found in the *Republic* and other works where Plato attempts to articulate the various kinds of unities derivative of the forms and especially the form of the good. These unities include that of the sensible cosmos, of the forms themselves, and of various unities that occur within them with varying degrees of stability. Plotinus agrees that this kind of good indeed yields unity, but too many of them, as is already apparent in Plato. Plotinus thus recognizes that there is no single unity toward which all things tend, but there are a multiplicity of unities, no one of which is necessarily the good for all the others. External goods or unities may be subordinated or coordinated, but cannot ultimately be reduced to one unity, even the form of the good, and thus this good as the object of desire cannot be identified with God. Put in terms of unity, not

<sup>10</sup> Plotinus alludes to and is following Aristotle’s argument for the principle of non-contradiction. No proof of it can be given, but objections can be answered, especially in the sense that the objector must be using the very idea that is being attacked in order to formulate the attack. In the present context, the notion of God precedes and is the basis for all subsequent thought. Once Plotinus has formulated these assumptions, he can deduce their consequences, as he does relative to intellect and soul in VI 5[23] 2–3 and 5–12.

everything in the cosmos is or needs to be directed toward the same end or unity, but each unity advances toward others only to the degree possible.

Plotinus contrasts this derivative desire of the good with one more ancient and natural, a desire of the good that is of itself rather than of something else.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the ancient nature and the desire of the good, the very thing which is of itself, really leads to unity, and every nature tends to this [unity], to itself. For this is the good for this one nature, to be of itself and to be itself: but this is to be one. (... ἡ δ' ἀρχαία φύσις καὶ ἡ ὄρεξις τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ὅπερ ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ, εἰς ἓν ὄντως ἄγει, καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦτο σπεύδει πᾶσα φύσις, ἐφ' ἑαυτήν. τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν τῇ μὲν ταύτῃ φύσει τὸ εἶναι αὐτῆς καὶ εἶναι αὐτήν· τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶ τὸ εἶναι μίαν. 1.16–20)

The phrase, the ancient nature, emphasizes the Platonic character of this discussion and how this good is different from the good as an external end. Plato uses it, as the notes in H-S<sup>2</sup> indicate, in *Symposium* 192e9, where Aristophanes refers to the original, unsplit human condition of wholeness, in *Republic* 611d2, where the soul is compared to the sea god, Glaucus, with the contrast between the original and present conditions of each, and in *Timaeus* 90d5, where the intelligent part of the soul is to be brought to likeness to its proper intelligent object according to its ancient nature. The good in the present context is thus something original and already given, and not the product of any kind of activity or achievement. The differences are striking: this kind of good leads to real unity, not the accidental unities that derive from external goods. Further, real unity is effectively rooted in the unity of God, so that the unity of the thing is to be of itself and to be itself. God is thus in no way an external good, different from the good of the thing itself.

Such an account actually makes sense of classical teleology, the way in which all things imitate and desire the divine and perfect, as Aristotle puts it. They do not desire God as something external, but in the very way in which they desire to be themselves. This is not a desire correlated to the sensitive soul, human or animal, but is that kind of desire that constitutes

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<sup>11</sup> Asger Ousager, “Sufficient Reason, Identities and Discernibles in Plotinus,” *Dionysius*, 21 (2003) 219–40, uses various principles formulated by Leibniz to shed light on the very careful distinctions about the nature of the One that Plotinus articulates in the *Enneads*. As in the present context, Plotinus identifies the One with the Good beyond being of *Rep.* 509b, and thus distinct from the form of the good in the intelligible. In VI 5[23] 1 and 4, Plotinus takes three terms, unity, the good and being, and applies them to the One, with transformations in their meaning that correspond to Ousager’s analysis in relation to the transcendent One. They are examined here, however, in relation to the One’s omnipresence, undergoing a similar fundamental change, moving from external to internal causes of things. Ousager hints at this in distinguishing between cause and reason (αἴτιον καὶ αἰτία), but does not consider explicitly the omnipresence of the One in his analysis. Frederic Schroeder, “Prophecy and Remembrance in Plotinus” *Proceeding of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. XII, ed. by John J. Cleary and William Wians (Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1998), pp. 1–22, discusses this passage from VI 5[23] 1, emphasizing also how God is “before the first motion of argument,” “the good most palpable to our pre-ontological awareness,” and “is ourselves in the sense that it is the ground of our identity” (pp. 6–7).

the very being of any thing.<sup>12</sup> Primordially, then, God does not and cannot function as an external good productive of unity, but through his omnipresence is that internal good by which each thing is, and desires to be, what it is. The particular distinctions on which this kind of teleology is based were lost in Modern philosophy and necessitate careful recovery or retrieval. Consequently, the criticisms of teleology by Modern philosophers have not been directed at this teleology, which Plotinus has carefully and explicitly distinguished from a desire for some external good. The desire for God is, therefore, in no way a desire for something external, a teleology modelled on human art and consequently appearing and being multiple rather than one. This ancient and natural teleology, based on desire of the good itself, is radically internal. Each thing desires the good by desiring itself and desiring itself is precisely desiring its own unity. The omnipresence of God thus accounts for a teleology that is rooted in the natural desire of everything to be itself and to be one.

In the final lines of VI 5[23]1, Plotinus confirms these findings in terms of being, τὸ ὄν, with the changes needed when this term is used to cover the omnipresence of God in all things. Previously, unity and the good were identified; now being is shown to coincide with that good and unity in a way radically different from Plotinus' usual understanding of being.

In this way the good is correctly said to be one's own: therefore it is not necessary to seek it outside. For where would it be, having fallen outside of being? Or how could one discover it in non being? (οὐτω δὲ καὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ὁρθῶς εἶναι λέγεται οἰκεῖον· διὸ οὐδὲ ἔξω ζητεῖν αὐτὸ δεῖ. ποῦ γὰρ ἂν εἴη ἔξω τοῦ ὄντος περιπεπωκός; ἢ πῶς ἂν τις ἐν τῷ μὴ ὄντι ἐξεύροι αὐτό; 1.20–23)

First, Plotinus draws out the consequence of the previous section, that the good is one's own, as constitutive of one's most original state or condition, and not something which one seeks as an end and therefore as something external. The text implies both one's own good and particular unity, and God as the good and source of this unity. Further, our understanding of this good does not come by an investigation of what is external to oneself, which, in this context, can only be non-being in an absolute sense. This good and being coincide and one cannot find them apart. In

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Shaw, "Teleology and Nutrition in *De Anima B 4*," [given at the Sixth Annual Independent Meeting of the Ancient Philosophy Society, 20–22 April 2006] argues that Aristotle's analysis of the nutritive capacity illuminates what he means by the final end or good. Growth is the end relative to the body and nourishment relative to the soul, but generation indicates the precise way the nutritive power shares in the eternal and divine, by reproducing something like itself. This desire of the nutritive soul is distinguished from the desiring faculty of the sensitive soul and the desires produced by it. Nutritive desire is an essential aspect of the being of a plant, something continuous and beyond the plant's control, unlike the desires of the desiring power, which come and go as they are satisfied or not. The benefit of the particular context Michael Shaw examines is that teleology cannot have the peculiar anthropomorphic characteristics it is alleged to have by its critics, but serves to highlight certain assumptions about the nature of the cosmos that reveal a more striking difference between modern and pre-modern thought. The ancients, and their medieval successors, saw the cosmos as continuous, as alive, with similarities abounding among its most diverse parts. In other words, they saw it in terms of nature and not human artifact. The moderns, and their post-modern successors, see the cosmos as discrete, as dead, functioning like a machine, constructed by human consciousness. The irony is rich indeed. The innate workings of nature, however inscrutable, have been replaced with a thoroughgoing anthropomorphic machine, all the more dangerous for not being admitted or recognized as such.

the earlier context of VI 4[22], good and being can be separate, since they both come from soul or intellect and thus may be present more or less effectively in the corporeal, which is in fact a mixture of being and non-being. Intellect, moreover, is always the duality of being and knowing, so that the being mentioned here has a different meaning even from intelligible being, spelled out subtly in these few lines. The relation of God to all things, thus, is different, so that being in this case is not something more or less present to the thing, but is identified completely with the thing as its own good and unity. Its own act of *esse* as St. Thomas would say.

If being in this latter sense were not present, the thing would not exist. Plotinus does not state this in terms of existence, as Thomists might, but in terms of the nature of this good.

But clearly it is in being since it is not itself non-being. But if that [good] is being and in being, the [good] for each thing would be in itself. We have then not departed from being, but we are in it, nor has it [departed] from us: so all beings are one. (ἀλλὰ δηλονότι ἐν τῷ ὄντι οὐκ ὄν αὐτὸ μὴ ὄν. εἰ δὲ ὄν καὶ ἐν τῷ ὄντι ἐκεῖνο, ἐν ἑαυτῷ ἂν εἴη ἐκάστω. οὐκ ἀπέστημεν ἄρα τοῦ ὄντος, ἀλλ' ἐσμεν ἐν αὐτῷ, οὐδ' αὖ ἐκεῖνο ἡμῶν· ἐν ἄρα πάντα τὰ ὄντα. 1.23–26)

That this good is in being is obvious. But his phrasing is ambiguous, since he says literally that the good is in ‘the being,’ and is not ‘non-being.’ This is not the being of intellect or the sensible world that is many, τὰ ὄντα, and mixes with non-being, but rather it is always only τὸ ὄν, the being at the center of each thing that is, and at the same time the being of God. In the second sentence, the good is defined as being and in being, arguing in reverse, as it were, by using this peculiar meaning of being to show that the good for each thing is in itself. Plotinus has already stated this when he said that the good is “the very thing which is of itself” (1,17) and that it is one’s own and cannot be sought outside (1,21), but he confirms it now in terms of being. His language continues to say two things at once, that we have not departed from being nor being from us. There is at the same time coincidence and distinction, omnipresence and transcendence, and the same difficulties that make Plotinus’ discussion of the One paradoxical are replicated in his discussion of the relation of the One to all things (cf. *Parm.* 160b2). The conclusion adds something new: all beings are one. Earlier, the good that is in and is each nature makes it one nature (μία). Now, this being makes all beings one thing (ἓν), a unity. This is not a unity that needs to be achieved, a good toward which we are directed, but a unity already always given, that allows the God in each of us to be called the one and same.

Plotinus uses the paradoxes and contradictory arguments of the *Parmenides* about the meaning of everywhere, unity and the whole to indicate and clarify the difference between the immaterial and the corporeal. In brief, the immaterial does not admit of division, but division is the very essence of the corporeal. Thus, Plotinus constantly maintains that division and being everywhere one and whole are mutually exclusive. The underlying problem is that our language is developed in relation to the sensible world, with corporeal division as its most general, ingrained prejudice. When we speak of unity, for example, we speak firstly of some one thing that can be sensed, or some way of grouping sensed objects together, but in examining the nature

of unity itself division is left behind and unity becomes more clearly identified with what is absolutely partless, the immaterial. Thus if something is really everywhere, it cannot be body, since body is divisible, with one part here and another there, parts outside of parts as Fr. Clarke was wont to say. A body simply cannot be everywhere. Thus being everywhere, or one, or whole excludes being a magnitude or body.

This is at the root of understanding transcendence, whether the relative transcendence of a form, examined in VI 4[22], or the absolute transcendence of God, investigated in VI 5[23]. It is this absolute transcendence that is the condition of possibility for any other. Finally, he reaffirms the conclusion reached in VI 5[23] 1 that God is one and the same.<sup>13</sup>

But if these things are impossible, what is not believed has again reappeared in acknowledging at once that God is within every nature of man and is at the same time everywhere the self-same whole. (εἰ δὴ ταῦτα ἀδύνατα, πάλιν αὖ ἀνεφάνη τὸ ἀπιστούμενον ἐν πάσῃ φύσει ἀνθρώπου ὁμοῦ τῷ θεὸν νομίζειν καὶ πανταχοῦ τὸ αὐτὸ ἅμα ὅλον εἶναι. 4.10–13<sup>14</sup>)

Disbelief arises from the introduction of reason with its questions and desire for explanation, as was first mentioned in VI5[23] 1,4–8. Plotinus has shown, however, that such questions, rather than conflicting with unreflective belief, lead inevitably to the same conclusion. One side of his argument concerns human nature, the possibility of human knowledge and the role and limits of asking questions and reasoning in any way, especially as involving language with its inherent limitations. We have seen Plotinus draw on both Plato and Aristotle to support this position. The other side is the equation of God with the one and same. Plotinus has relied more completely on Plato in articulating both the problem and its solution, involving both an analysis of desire for the good and the three terms crucial in this last section, being everywhere, one and whole.

## 5. Conclusion

Let me summarize briefly the territory we have covered. In the first part, we saw that Plotinus already understands act and potency in a new way that explains the relation of higher to lower. This is not accidental to this treatise, but is pervasive throughout Plotinus' works as the means by which participation can be explained. In the next section, we saw how Plotinus' transformation of the otherness of the *Sophist* allows him to give the ontological structure of all of reality, with the things generated at the intelligible or sensible levels as differentiated in terms of the relation of act and potency within them. Limitation in the strict sense derives from the corporeal, so that Plotinus can develop a notion of infinity that is characteristic of intellect and

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<sup>13</sup> This is based on pp. 148–49 of the same article, "Plotinus: Omnipresence and Transcendence," *Reading Ancient Texts*, (Brill, 2007) 137–52.

<sup>14</sup> I want to thank Jean Marc Narbonne and Ronald K. Tacelli, S.J., for pointing out some inadequacies in an earlier translation of this passage. The result corresponds to neither of their versions, so any continuing infelicity is solely my own. I construe τῷ with νομίζειν, and εἶναι as governing the two beliefs at the center of the arguments of VI 5[23] 1 and 4, that God is within every human nature and is everywhere the self-same whole.

soul and thus counter to the classical Greek identification of limit with perfection. The key source of these transformations can be seen in the third section discussing the unique transcendence of God as one, good, and being. It is actually Plotinus' profound meditation on the nature of unity that underlies all these transformations. Our notion of unity begins with the unity of the sensible things of our experience, but these things can only point to a more complete kind of unity, that is not corporeal at all but rather wholly without division and separation. This leads Plotinus to a thorough articulation of the immaterial nature of soul and intellect that also recognizes the multiplicity present even in intellect. Unity has its most perfect expression in the One, which is beyond the duality of intellect itself. Such unity is an alternative to the *esse* of St. Thomas, but is in no way in opposition to it but rather, I suspect, the means by which this sensitivity to the act of existence could be articulated and understood.