

Plotinus and Aquinas on God

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis attempts to show that Plotinus and St. Thomas Aquinas differ in their conceptions of God. In particular, I focus upon their understandings of God's simplicity and their "ontological" claims, i.e., how God relates to being. I claim that their disagreements about God occur because of a metaphysical disagreement on whether being constitutes a composition. Plotinus thinks it does, and assumes that unity is most fundamental, whereas Aquinas thinks it does not, and assumes that being is most fundamental. These different conceptions of being result in different conceptions of God, with Plotinus concluding that the One is beyond being and Aquinas concluding that God is being itself.

Having explained the different conceptions of God advanced by Plotinus and Aquinas, I argue that Plotinus' position is inferior to Aquinas due to unintelligibility and inconsistency of the One as the source of being and unrelated to being, while also attacking Plotinus' analogies for it. I also argue that the One is implausible, acting as an empty concept for his beliefs.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the history of Western philosophy, there are various beliefs about God. I would like to examine two significant philosophers, Plotinus and Aquinas. Both philosophers rely upon difficult and sometimes obscure metaphysics that support their beliefs about God. It will be necessary to examine their metaphysics to show their relevant differences. From their metaphysics and theological beliefs, we should be able to discern a general conception or overall set of beliefs that concern the nature of God. However, beliefs within one conception may differ within another conception. Thus, I will present each conception in its context in order to prevent confusion or equivocation. In this way, I will show two unique conceptions of God, which I will then examine to determine the superior of the two.

Concerning Plotinus and Aquinas, we will see that both philosophers have similar conceptions of God, holding that God is simple, perfect, omnipotent, and omnipresent. However, their beliefs about simplicity are most important for my purposes. For both, simplicity means that God is without composition. In addition, their beliefs about simplicity have an important role in their ontological claims. By “ontological claims,” I mean what they claim about God in relation to being. For Plotinus, the One is beyond being; for Aquinas, God is being itself.

Now, presumably, if both have the same underlying beliefs, then they would reach the same ontological claims. However, they reach different conclusions. I think this is the result of different metaphysical assumptions, specifically on what I call “the principle of existence.” By “the principle of existence” I mean that which ultimately

constitutes the existence of God and accounts for the existence of all creation. For Plotinus, the principle of existence is unity; for Aquinas it is being. In effect, each assumes a principle of existence, and simplicity is defined in terms of it, which causes a disagreement between Plotinus and Aquinas as to what ultimately constitutes God's nature.

This disagreement can be sharpened by considering how each of them answers the question: "Does being constitute a composition?" For Plotinus, the answer is yes: being is a genus that necessarily involves a composition with unity; since unity is in all things that exist, it is the most simple thing. For Aquinas, the answer is no: being is not a genus and does not constitute a composition; being in itself does not involve a composition. Here, we may observe a metaphysical assumption which has affected the understanding of composition and simplicity. The theological claims are based upon the metaphysics. Thus, the thing without composition, or the thing which allows for God's simplicity, is different for Plotinus and Aquinas. Different understanding of simplicity and what constitutes a composition account for different ontological claims. For these reasons, Plotinus removes being from the One and claims that the One transcends being; whereas, Aquinas claims that God is being itself.

In this work, I will (1) present the positions of Plotinus and Aquinas. In each chapter dedicated to them, I will present their metaphysics, and then their beliefs about God. Afterwards, I will (2) compare and contrast their positions. I will do this by showing some of their superficial similarities and expounding on how the details of some of their beliefs differ or how the justifications for certain beliefs differ. Lastly, in the comparison

I will (3) criticize Plotinus on the grounds of unintelligibility and inconsistency on his claims about the One as the source of being, and then I situate their views within a historical context and then argue that Plotinus' claims about God act as an explanatory concept to complete a philosophy rather than as an actual reality to be rationalized. From these criticisms, I claim that Plotinus' position is inferior to Aquinas' position.

CHAPTER II: PLOTINUS' VIEWS ON GOD

Plotinus' the One provides us with a conception of God that is a synthesis of Plato, Aristotle, and the Middle Platonists, but contains also his own original contributions. One of Plotinus' contributions, or at least a distinguishing factor from previous philosophers, is his emphasis on unity. He incorporates unity into his metaphysics and in effect makes it a kind of cornerstone to his entire philosophy. It pervades not only his metaphysics but also his thoughts about God, whom he usually calls the One, the Good, or the Simplex. Before we can address anything about the One, we need to know what Plotinus means by some of his terms and concepts, especially as they relate to metaphysics. It is not until we understand his metaphysics that we will be able to understand his claims about the One correctly.

II.1. Plotinian Metaphysics

In general, Plotinus follows Plato's distinctions or at least claims some agreement with him, but it also seems probable that he makes use of some of Aristotle's philosophy. In explicating Plotinus' metaphysics, we will survey two sets of considerations. The first set of things to consider is Plotinus' terminology; we need to examine what Plotinus means by matter, form, potentiality, and actuality. These constitute an important set of terms that Plotinus employs. Aquinas also uses them, and it will be useful to note whether they differ in their usage. The second is a set of metaphysical issues; we will need to examine existence, then being, and lastly unity. This set of issues will provide an understanding of Plotinus' metaphysics. His terminology and his positions on metaphysical issues should suffice for an accurate understanding of the One.

In order to understand matter and form, it is probably better to examine potentiality and actuality before-hand, but all four are related in one of Plotinus' examples. On potentiality Plotinus says, "Whatsoever has a potentiality must first have a (definite) character of its own; and its potentiality consists in its having a reach beyond that character to some other" (II.5.1.22-24).¹ It is not a productive force nor, properly speaking, a power (33-34); it cannot occur apart from something which may be or become (15-16). Consider bronze. It has the potentiality of a statue. If bronze could become nothing else, it would have no potentiality. Bronze could be a potential statue, or an actual statue. Plotinus calls actuality a power; it is the power of realizing a potentiality. Realizing, or making something come to be, is the state of actualization. Technically for Plotinus, actuality is a power whereas actualization is a state in relation to a potentiality (33-40). So far, idiosyncrasies set aside, this metaphysics is very similar to both Aristotle's and Aquinas' metaphysics.

Now, let us consider matter and form in detail. An actualized entity is a combination of matter and form (or idea) (II.5.2.10-11). In the case of the statue, the potentiality is the substratum while the actualization is a combination (30-32). Form (or idea) brings "the entity from potentiality to actuality, as the actualization" (33-34). Matter is the potentiality of all things, but not actually any one being amongst beings (II.5.4.6-7). Here, I think it is accurate to understand "matter" and "form" as having similar referents as to Aristotle's or Aquinas's use. Furthermore, matter is a non-being, "formless and therefore not an idea;" it is "utterly removed from being" (II.5.4.15-16; 5.15). Idea can be

¹ Plotinus. *The Enneads*. Trans. Stephen Mackenna. Ed. Bertram S. Page. London: Faber & Faber, 1962. Print, p. 617.

a kind of matter in the intellectual realm (II.5.3.18-19). Matter is the “actualization of non-being, or authentic non-existence” (II.5.5.31-32). Matter is removed from being, and is a non-being.

This leaves reality (or existence), and being and unity. For Plotinus, reality is the universal fabric made of separate constituents (II.6.1.6-7). Plotinus claims there to be five existents or things which constitute an existing thing: being, motion, stability, identity, and difference (VI.2.8.34, 51-53). These existents are genera which “are all-pervading, and every subsequent is a particular being”, and a particular instance of the four other existents (34-35). The other four existents can be predicated of being, but “being is not their genus, since they cannot be identified with any particular kind of being” (59-60). Being does not participate in the other four principles as genera, but they are not prior to being nor do they transcend it (64-66). Thus, an existing thing contains some degree of the existents, and the latter four existents contain some degree of being.

Existents are inherently unified in an existing being. Plotinus attempts to provide us with what is greater than these existents. If these things are genera with species, then what is there which has no species? Although being is a genus, it is not a predicate of any given thing (VI.2.2.55). Plotinus thinks that any predication of being is an accidental attribute of the thing (57). Being, thus far, is the highest thing in Plotinus’ metaphysics. However, these existents constitute an existing thing as a unity; “We assert, then, a plurality of existents, but a plurality not fortuitous and therefore a plurality deriving from a unity” (VI.2.3.1-2). No thing exists in the world unless it is unified by these existents as principles of their being (VI.6.13.50; 2.2.36-37, 47-48). Nonetheless, being is not that

unity, because “being is not a unity” on account of its constituent existents (VI.2.2.1). If the other four existents, containing some degree of being, are subordinate to being, “then such a unification becomes feasible” (43-45). Here, Plotinus is eliminating being as the primary principle of existence.

Unity cannot be a genus. Being is a genus, since “the mind accepts differences of being, but differences within unity there cannot be. Every differentia introduces a duality destroying the unity” (VI.2.9.16-17). “Besides, unity, containing no differences, cannot produce species” and thus cannot be a genus (12-13). The unity of being is not unity in a primary sense (33-35), since a being is both one and a thing (VI.2.10.2-3). For Plotinus, it is possible to have a pure unity void of being, but not a being void of unity. Thus, unity can be abstracted from being (VI.2.9.42). In fact, unity “must therefore be prior also to even movement, prior to being, since without unity these could not be each one thing” (VI.6.5.34-34).

Plotinus makes a number of interesting claims about unity. Plotinus says, “nothing is real which is not a unity” (VI.6.13.50), and “whatever is not a unity in some respect must be sustained by a unity and be just what it is because of that unity” (V.3.15.13-14). He says, “Thus for Being, as for the others, unity turns out to be, in some sense Principle and Term...a discrepancy leading us to infer that even in unity there are degrees of priority” (VI.2.11.47-50). “Unity is not identical in all things; it has a different significance according as it is applied to the Sensible and the Intellectual realms” (VI.2.11.8-9). In this, Plotinus tends to relate degrees of determinate being to degrees of

organizational complexity; the greater or lesser capacities for being account for different relations to intelligible beings, requiring a higher principle to give them unity.²

The highest unity is the One. It is pure unity, void of even being (VI.2.9.41). Concerning the One and unity, Plotinus says that the One is external to genera and not included among them; it is the transcendent source, not an existent but beyond existence, standing away from the genera (the existents) (VI.2.3.9-13). Additionally, “a divergence from unity involves a corresponding divergence from Reality” (VI.2.5.7-8). The One is pure unity and thus fully existent. Although the One is not an existent but fully and supremely exists, what is probably meant is that the One is not nothing (or exists) but does so without being (i.e. transcends being) which results in a divergence from created things. I do not think this constitutes a contradiction but a legitimate difficulty in expressing what is meant. The One’s existence is necessary to the existence of the Many (VI.1.26.43-44). In the One, “everything in the Supreme is a reality...there is reality because all things are one” (II.6.1.11, 13).

II.2. Knowing the One

Plotinus confesses some level of difficulty at any attempt to discuss the One. We can speak about it, but these efforts are inadequate, for we are unable to say what it is (V.3.13.7, 14.1-7). Sometimes Plotinus will talk metaphorically and analogically, at other times in an affirmative and negative way. As we have recently seen, some of the things Plotinus says can seem paradoxical or blatantly contradictory.

² Kevin Corrigan, “Essence and Existence in the *Enneads*,” from Gerson, Lloyd P. *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print, p. 109.

One of the problems of discussing the One is its place in the hierarchy of being. The One is the first principle of reason. It transcends particular beings and “every object of thought, even the highest;” fully knowing the One comes neither by knowing nor by Intellection of beings. In part, these claims are based upon Plotinus’ beliefs about discursive reasoning. He thinks discursive reasoning relies upon intellection, but provides a lesser form of knowledge, whereas mere intellection is an immediate intuition of complete comprehension.³ Although intellection provides a better understanding of the One than discursive reasoning, we cannot even become aware of the One unless we have access to it by some kind of mystical vision.

Without a mystical vision of the One, we must use the inferior method of discursive reasoning. Discursive reasoning provides an affirmative and negative way of discussing the One. The affirmative can make use of analogy, metaphor, and symbols to suggest something beyond experience and understanding. However, the negative way is considered superior, since the affirmative way allows no means of actually predicating something of the One, whereas the negative way can specify what the One is not (VI.9.3.49-50, V.3.14.6-7).

The negative way helps to provide some understanding of the nature of the One itself. The following passages contain some use of a negative way. Plotinus says:

This Highest cannot be divided and allotted, must remain intangible but not bound to space; it may be present at many points, wheresoever there is anything capable of accepting one of its manifestations: thus a center is an independent unity;

³ John Bussanich, “Plotinus’ Metaphysics of the One,” from the *Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, edited by Lloyd P. Gerson, p. 39.

everything within the circle has its term in the center; and to the center the radii bring each their own. V. 1, 11, 7-14

Here we can see how Plotinus uses the negative method by denying compositeness and spatial parameters to the One. It may be present at various places but is not bound to a specific location. Additionally, simplicity is an important belief about the One. Plotinus thinks that, technically, “the One” is not an adequate term of description, but signifies this simplicity or non-compositeness.

Plotinus uses the One’s simplicity in order to explain how the One transcends being. Plotinus says:

Standing before all things, there must exist a Simplex, differing from all its sequel, self-gathered not interblended with the forms that rise from it, and yet able in some mode of its own to be present to those others: it must be authentically a unity, not merely something elaborated into unity and so in reality no more than unity’s counterfeit; it will debar all telling and knowing except that it may be described as transcending Being—for if there were nothing outside all alliance and compromise, nothing authentically one, there would be no Source. There can be only one such being... V.4.1.5-12, 16

Although the One is simple, it is also fundamentally different from created beings; it is in a reality that is alone or, one might say, set apart from other beings (V.4.1.16). In fact, the One is not even a distinct object or entity (II.91.1-8, VI.7.38.4-9, VI.9.5.29-34). The One is “something simple before all things, and [is] other than all the things which come after it, existing by itself, not mixed with the things which derive from it” (V.4.1.5-16). For

Plotinus, this set apartness of simplicity even includes the One's form, making it formless (amorphon) (VI.7.17.17, 40, 33.4; VI.9.3.39). It is also beyond actuality (I.7.1.17-20, V.3.13.16-28, VI.7.17.9-11). These beliefs help form some of the more important beliefs about Plotinus' conception of God, and together help form his ontological claim of God as the One that transcends being.

From using the negative way to learn about the One in relation to His simplicity, Plotinus claims other beliefs about the One. It is The Good, but it is Beyond-Good, seeking nothing and needing nothing and therefore, has neither movement nor intellection (VI.9.6). Plotinus says that the One necessarily is what it is (VI.8.10.15-20). This makes the One a kind of necessary being, given that it is self-sufficient, but it also has absolute freedom.⁴ These beliefs can be puzzling; consider goodness. Plotinus claims that the One is the Good since it moves all created things as a final cause, which we will examine later. Perhaps goodness is relative to the context, either as the Good in relation to created beings and Beyond-Good in itself. However, good may be an analogy, similar to beyond being.

From the above, Plotinus conceives of God as beyond being. He says that the One is the First, and nothing is before Him (VI.8.10). The One moves to no other, and is not related to any being, because being itself does not apply to it (VI.8.8). How the One is the source of being without relation to being is the point at which the intelligibility of this position diminishes for me, and strikes me as the central issue on understanding Plotinus' position and its plausibility. We will examine this in more detail later. Furthermore, its priority, unity, and uniqueness make the One a "hyperontic entity distinct from sensible

⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

and intelligible beings.”⁵ “Thus, the One is beyond being and form because form involves complexity, determinateness, and definability.”⁶

II.3. Some Attributes of the One

For Plotinus, simplicity is the basis of the One’s formlessness and infinite or unlimited nature. Plotinus’ understanding of simplicity informs various attributes of the One, but produces different meanings for those attributes in comparison to Aquinas. We will examine a number of these attributes to better understand the One.

An important attribute of the One is its perfection, since it is related to the One’s simplicity. However, this attribute is difficult to understand in relation to simplicity. Bussanich says, “[t]he One must be simple because it is perfect, and being perfect it must be independent from all things, with all things dependent on it.”⁷ However, Bussanich later states, “It is perfect because it is completely itself, fully actual, and a perfect actuality ‘containing everything and lacking nothing’ ...[and] ‘that which has nothing outside itself’ is perfect.”⁸ These passages suggest that Bussanich thinks the One is perfect because of its self-sufficiency and independence of others, or unity, and unified simplicity because of its perfection. Bussanich concludes, “working out the relations among the One’s properties deserves further study.”⁹ Regardless, the One’s reality is attributed perfection due to its actuality (usually stated as “beyond actuality”) and productive act.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

⁹ Ibid.

A second attribute is the One's infinity. The One's infinity concerns its infinite power.¹⁰ For Plotinus, it also seems to mean lack of limitation, or unlimitedness, either internally or externally. This also has important consequences that differentiate Plotinus' conception from Aquinas'. Because the One is infinite, it is not limited by form. Formlessness is unlimited in comparison to how being or essence is limited (V.5.5.6). Formlessness suggests that the One is beyond being, beyond essence, and beyond form. This also supports its self-sufficiency and simplicity.¹¹

A third attribute is the One's omnipotence. Plotinus describes the One's reality as an activity (*energeia*) and what proceeds from this activity as potentiality.¹² This activity is without substance (*ousia*) and is merely the One's existence, and therefore, identifies activity, existence, and being as different aspects of the same thing, in order to maintain the One's simplicity. However, the One is beyond actuality (1.7.1.17-20) and being, but is the source of being through His activity, to the extent that the One overflows in superabundance, making something other than itself (V.2.1.7-9). Bussanich summarizes this nicely: "[T]he One (a) produces eternally, (b) from an inexhaustible reality (VI.9.9.3-4), (c) without undergoing any change or alteration (III.8.8.46-8), and (d) without deliberation or inclination to produce (V.1.6.25-7, V.3.12.28-33)...and without knowledge of its products (VI.7.39.19-33)."¹³ Although the One has a lack of knowledge of its products, which seems to be a lack of what is normally considered a perfection, it is nonetheless perfect without it.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 48.

¹³ Ibid., p.49.

One last attribute we should examine is the One's omnipresence. Omnipresence is related to the One's immanence (VI.8.16.1, V.5.8.24). The One must "fill all things" and be everywhere and nowhere, as the cause of all things and as simple by being "alone by itself."¹⁴ All things are both the One and not the One, from Him but not Him, since the One is entirely alone and simple (V.2.2.24-25). So, there is a dynamic continuity from the One to all beings, as they proceed (*proodos*) from Him and reverse (*epistrophe*) back to Him, in eternal participation of the One (III.8.11.24-5). This is best understood by the production of the Intellect, the first being.

II.4. Emanation and the One

The One produces all through the Intellect. Although paradoxical, the Intellect is not the One, but there is nothing between them, being neither separate nor identical (V.3.12.44). The One is the efficient cause of the existence of all things and of the Intellect, both their coming to be and their continual being (III.8.11.40, V.3.15.12, 17) and their final cause (VI.8.14.32). Thus, the One gives being and the why of being.¹⁵ The Intellect is the primary example of the One's causality.¹⁶ The Intellect is first in potentiality and is actualized or perfected by "looking at" an image of the One (V1.7.16, VI.7.16.16-22). The potential Intellect is the procession of beings, and the perfection or actualization is the reversion.¹⁷ Unfortunately, attempting to describe the role of the Intellect in the One's immanence beyond this point will lead to controversy. It must suffice to say that the Intellect has being and form, and thus substance in some sense,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

whereas the One is beyond being and unlimited by form or substance.¹⁸ More importantly, we now have a clear distinction of the One from the Self-thinking Thought of Aristotle and the divine Intellect of Aquinas.¹⁹

However, we should not interpret the process and reversion of emanation as pantheism. The One and the Many are not identical; they are different, albeit this point is obscurely stated. Here, Plotinus provides us an exact expression of his overall thought in relation to the One's emanation, and is full of antinomy and insight into the *Enneads*:

The One is all things and no one of them; the source of all things is not all things; and yet it is all things in a transcendental sense—all things, so to speak, having run back to it: or, more correctly, not all as yet are within it, they will be. But a universe from an unbroken unity, in which there appears no diversity, not even duality? It is precisely because there is nothing within the One that all things are from it: in order that Being may be brought about, the source must be no Being but Being's generator. V.2.1.1-8 p. 380

The beings that proceed from the One come from it but are not it. Beings are distinct from the One but will eventually return to it. Again, “[T]he One is perfect and...has overflowed, and its exuberance has produced the new: this product has turned again to its begetter and been filled...” (V.2.10-12). Hence the One's omnipresence and efficient causality for everything.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 48

²⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

According to Bussanich, we thus make a full circle starting and ending with the One.²¹ Plotinus says:

Loveable, very love, the Supreme is also self-love in that He is lovely no otherwise than from Himself and in Himself. Self-presence can hold only in the identity of associated with associating; since, in the Supreme, associated and associating are one, seeker and sought one...once more God's being and his seeking are identical... VI, 8, 15, 1-6

This full circle is a mystical union of the One, or Good, as love, lover, and loved in one reality (VI.8.16.12-16, 30-3). More importantly, maintaining a simple unity which neither needs nor has nor lacks all beings, the One is simply beyond being.

II.5. Summary

In sum, we have seen how Plotinus focuses on the belief that God is fundamentally simple. Plotinus explains that this means that God is completely removed from other beings; “a hyperontic entity distinct from sensible and intelligible beings.” This is sufficient for the One's perfection, or its full actuality, along with a number of other attributes. Specifically and more importantly, Plotinus infers that while the One is the source of being, it is beyond being and without relation to being itself or beings because of the One's internal and external unity. Plotinus infers this ontological claim in part because he believes that being involves a composition whereas unity does not. For Plotinus, all things which exist have unity, and unity has no genus. It is that which is most simple in Plotinus' metaphysics. Thus, unity, as the principle of existence, is the criterion

²¹ Ibid., p. 61.

for the One's simplicity. Since the One cannot be simple with being, it must be beyond being as a pure unity.

CHAPTER III: AQUINAS' VIEWS ON GOD

Aquinas, like Plotinus, also has a comprehensive metaphysics to explain his beliefs about God, especially in relation to the divine attributes that can be known by negative theology. But before we can examine Aquinas' conception of God, we ought first to consider his metaphysics. Aquinas' metaphysics are primarily based upon Aristotle's metaphysics, but also contain Platonic elements, mostly inspired by St. Augustine. Understanding his general metaphysical position and how he uses a number of key terms will provide a better appreciation and understanding of his views on God, but also will allow us to discern the respects in which he disagrees with Plotinus.

III.1. Being²²

One of the defining characteristics of Aquinas' philosophical views is his insistence on beginning with the objects of experience. Rather than starting with theories to explain experience, he begins with experience in order to abstract to the theoretical. The things which we experience are sensible objects. Aquinas calls these sensible objects "substances," but substances are not limited to sensible objects. If the substance can be conceived and defined, then that definition of the substance is its "essence."

Since substances can be expressed by definitions, we can establish determinations to objects given in experience. By appealing to the substance's essence, expressed as a definition, we may group substances which have the same essence into classes, each class of substance corresponding to one essence. In order to group substances by their essences, there must exist something by which we might have the means to group them.

²² This section was informed by Gilson, Etienne. *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Trans. L. K. Shook. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1994. Print.

This means of grouping substances by essence is achieved by what Aquinas calls “form”. By means of an object’s form, we are able to classify substances into certain groups, or, in the language of Aquinas, we are able to classify substance into a determinate species of a genus. For example, we understand the given sensible object woman by her form, which allows this substance to be conceived through its essence, humanity or humanness, as expressed by a definition.

Although we might be able to classify an object by means of form, species themselves are not substances. We experience an individual thing, which belongs to a species. Individual objects are substances which contain form and matter. Such objects will have what Gilson calls “complementary determinations,” such as color, shape, time, and place. He says that “accidents have no existence of their own,” being dependent on their substance’s existence.²³ Thus, a sensible object of experience is a composition of matter and form.

Matter and form differ in other respects. Form is considered to be more noble than matter. Since the form designates what the substance is and makes the substance intelligible, the matter is made determinable by form.²⁴ By this, we mean that matter has the potential to become an existing substance, in composition with a form. A substance exists by the form’s *esse*, sometimes called “act-of-being” or “being.” A substance does not exist by and in itself, but only by its act-of-being. It is possible, however, that something could exist in such a way that its essence is the same as its *esse*, since a given substance exists by virtue of a form, whose *esse* is to be something. For example, a man

²³ Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 30-31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

has the form of man and exists as a man. There could be a form which exists simply in its own right, as existence itself. Such a form would be pure act or pure *esse*. This thing is what Aquinas calls “God.”

For Aquinas, *esse* or being is the principle of existence. Without it, nothing can exist. *Esse*, or being, is that by which all things exist. It is not a genus, which is an important difference from Plotinus’ metaphysics. On this issue, Aquinas cites the authority of Aristotle (ST 1, 3, 5).²⁵ Aquinas says that the reason being cannot be a genus is because “every genus has differences distinct from its generic essence.” Non-being is not a difference, and has no differences. Additionally, being is the most simple thing in Aquinas’ metaphysics. These three features explain why Aquinas calls God pure act, or *esse ipsum*. God is both the principle of existence and God, who is the source of being.

Pure act cannot be fully comprehended since it cannot be fully conceived. A being can only be conceptualized and defined according to our ability to conceive of it as an essence. As with any substance, defining it requires the ability to place the object within the framework of a genus and a species. This differs with God. As Copleston says, “When treating of God’s attributes, of the ways in which we ought to think of the divine reality, Thomas remains convinced of the fact that the divine essence in itself transcends the grasp of the human mind.”²⁶ However, we may still determine what God is not. In

²⁵ Aquinas, Thomas. *A Summa of the Summa*. Trans. 1920 version by The Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Ed. Peter Kreeft. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990. Print. All references to the *Summa Theologica* or citations of it are based upon Kreeft’s edition.

²⁶ Copleston, Frederick C. *A History of Medieval Philosophy*. London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1972. Print, p. 196.

this way, Aquinas and Plotinus are in some accord. The issue that distinguishes them is the degree of transcendence.

III.2. Divine Simplicity

Making judgments on the nature of God by what He is not is called knowledge by way of negation. Since we can neither conceptualize pure-act in terms of genus and species, nor make positive judgments concerning God's essence in the form of a definition, we may only better understand God by affirming what qualities do not pertain to Him. This means of knowledge seeks to eliminate possible options in order to narrow down the object of inquiry. Furthermore, since we do not have direct access to God as substance, we cannot say what He is. However, God can be distinguished from other things, if we eliminate all which He cannot logically be. The answers to what God cannot be will form the basis of Aquinas' understanding of God as pure-act, and will be later used as foundation for his understanding of God's knowledge and will. One of the recurrent means for these answers is the assumption of God's perfection.

Aquinas begins by asking whether God is a body, since the objects of experience are bodies.²⁷ Aquinas denies this possibility on several grounds. In particular, Aquinas thinks that since God is the most perfect of beings, he cannot be a body.

Thirdly, because God is the most noble [perfect] of being. Now it is impossible for a body to be the most noble of being; for a body must be either animate [living] or inanimate; and an animate body is manifestly nobler than any inanimate body. But an animate body is not animate precisely as a body; otherwise all bodies would be animate. Therefore its animation depends upon

²⁷ Cp. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1, 3, 1.

some other thing, as our body depends for its animation on the soul. Hence that by which a body becomes animated must be nobler than the body. Therefore it is impossible that God should be a body. ST, 1, 3, 1

Every body must be animate or inanimate. Therefore, the difference in these bodies must be distinguished by some principle of animation, which Aquinas calls the soul. However, since not all bodies are animate, a thing cannot be animate because it is a body.

Therefore, since animate bodies are more perfect than inanimate bodies, that which makes the body animate is more perfect than the body itself. Therefore, God should not exist as a body.

Furthermore, since God is not a body and matter and form implies a body (ST 1, 3, 2), Aquinas concludes that God cannot be composed of matter and form (ST,1,3,2). Aquinas also says that everything composed of matter and form is perfect and good as regards its form. A substance of matter and form is not essentially form, and thus only participates in goodness and perfection in regard to its form. Since God, however, is the first and best good, He must be form essentially and therefore not matter and form, since the latter implies less perfection (ST 1, 3, 2).

If God is only form, then we must determine whether His form is the same as His essence. In created substances, the substance differs from the form to the extent that the substance contains things which the form does not. The form, however, is that which makes the substance what it is. So we might say that a woman is a human being by her form of humanity, yet the form itself does not contain her flesh or her bones. Thus, the individual matter contributes individuality and accidental qualities which are not within

humanity, but are within an individual substantiation of the form. Therefore, a woman and humanity are not the same. Things not individualized by matter must be individualized by their very form, and these individualized forms are called *supposita*—person-substances—which are identical to their nature. Hence, God’s form is the same as His essence.

Since God’s form is the same as His essence, we must now discern the mode of that essence’s actuality, its *esse*, by answering whether God’s essence and existence are the same. As Aquinas has previously stated, we know that God exists but we are unable to define His essence. Although this might suggest that existence and essence differ in God, to know that something exists is not to know its mode of existence. Like an unknown animal rattling in a box, we may know of its existence but not what exists. In fact, if we assume that existence and essence differ in God, this will lead us to a contradiction. For if they differ, the “existence must be caused either by some exterior agent or by its essential principles” (ST 1, 3, 4). For Aquinas, however, no thing can be self-caused, since if a caused thing did not exist, it could not cause its own existence, because there would not be anything to do the causing. An efficient cause must be exterior, not interior. Thus, it seems that God’s existence must be caused by some exterior agent. Yet, this is absurd, since God must be the first efficient cause. Therefore, it must be the case that existence and essence are the same in God (ST 1, 3, 4).

As a result of essence and existence being the same in God, God cannot be contained in a genus (ST 1, 3, 5). First, the genus and species are related as potency to act. In the case of Socrates, rationality denotes a difference distinct from the genus

animal, since an animal can be either rational or irrational. Thus, we are able to conceptualize Socrates, by his form, into the genus “animal” with the specification of “rationality,” i.e. Socrates is an individual rational animal. Without some specification, an animal could not be actualized. God, however, can have no difference that is not included within his genus. If there were some difference not included within His genus, then His essence would differ from His existence. Therefore, since a substance must differ in genus and species as potency to act, it is impossible for God to be contained in a genus, because there exists no potency in God and His essence and existence are identical.

From these arguments, Aquinas is able to conclude that God is absolutely simple (ST 1, 3, 7). By eliminating a corporeal body and the composite of matter and form from the divine essence, Aquinas is able to remove the typical understanding of a given substance. He appeals to the lack of potency in God, the lack of participated good, and the perfection of God in order to establish that God’s essence must be the same as his nature. Since there is no difference in God, God lacks the differences of genus and species. All of the above reasons eliminate potency and difference in God, His essence and existence must be the same, which is pure-act. Thus, there is no composition in God, which is to say that God is altogether simple.

III.3. The Perfections of God

The simplicity of God leads to His specific perfections. In the first article on God’s simplicity, Aquinas says that we know God is not a body “because God is the most noble [perfect] of beings” (ST 1, 3, 1). By eliminating all that is imperfect in created being from the nature of God, only actuality remains and not potency. Thus, Aquinas

compares perfection to the proportion of actuality (ST 1, 4, 1). Although the argument of divine simplicity is based upon the assumption that God is perfect, we should characterize Aquinas' inference of specific perfections as being based upon the ontological conception of God as being itself. That is, there is a change in Aquinas' position from God as the most perfect being to God as being itself. Together, these beliefs enable Aquinas to infer perfections of God, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. These properties are based upon actual perfections in the world. Since we experience only created being and not God's essence, understanding the perfection of beings will help us to understand God's perfection as being itself in that at least partial knowledge of a cause can be achieved through knowledge of its effect.

Aquinas says that all created perfections must be in God. Since God is most actual and most universally perfect, He must contain all perfections attributed to any genus of a created being. For an "effect pre-exists virtually in the efficient cause" either to the same degree or more, such "as when man reproduces man" or the sun its light (1, 4, 2). In material things, the perfection is less than as it exists in God. Since God is the first efficient cause, all effects and their perfections must pre-exist in God in a more perfect way than they do in the material order. Furthermore, their essence differs from their existence, and is given by something external. Therefore, their perfections must be a lesser actuality than that by which they participate. For created beings owe their perfections to their particular mode of existence, but God is not limited to a particular mode of existence. Hence, since created beings derive their modes of existence from

God, His existence must have all of the particular perfections of those created beings (ST 1, 4, 2).

At this point, Aquinas has intrinsically united being and perfection through actuality. From either perfection or being, Aquinas is able to infer other attributes of God. Gilson says, “Here again, it is impossible for us to conceive of a perfect being, but we must affirm God to be such, denying Him all imperfection.”²⁸ However, he says, “This need not be understood in the sense that being must be reduced to a certain degree of perfection, but rather, inversely, in the sense that all perfection consists in the possession of a certain degree of being.”²⁹ This is “because perfection is only a certain way of being” and the most perfect being exists in the highest degree.³⁰

The first attribute that Aquinas deduces from perfection is God’s goodness. Aquinas says that goodness is that which is in some way desirable. Hence, being and goodness differ in regards to the aspect of desirability (ST, 1, 5, 1). A thing is only desirable according to its perfection, and perfect as to its actuality, and actual as to its existence. Therefore, since God is pure act, He is not only most perfect, but also most desirable and most good. Moreover, the perfection of a thing corresponds to its likeness to the agent, which makes its like. Thus, created beings, which derive their existence and actuality from God by participation, are good insofar as they are actual, because God is pure act. Since God is the first agent, created beings owe the cause of their goodness to Him. “For good is attributed to God...inasmuch as all desired perfections flow from Him as from the first cause” (ST 1, 6, 2). Thus, God is the supreme good.

²⁸ Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 97.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

The second attribute deduced from perfection is God's knowledge. Since God has all created perfections as pure act, He must also have knowledge. According to Gilson, Aquinas deduces this from God's perfection, because intelligence is the greatest perfection of all created things, and God must therefore have it most perfectly.³¹ Both Aquinas and Gilson relate God's knowledge to a correspondence between the mode of knowing and a knower's capacity to acquire more forms through knowledge. This correspondence depends upon the knower's degree of immateriality. Since matter limits form and its capacity to know other forms, a greater intelligence requires a more immaterial means of knowledge. The knower's intellectual capacity corresponds to its own immateriality (ST 1, 14, 1). For example, a human is in a sense more immaterial than an animal, in that a human can know other beings. An angel is more immaterial than a human, and can know more things by a simpler means than a human. Since God has the highest degree of immateriality, He must be intelligent in the highest degree (ST 1, 7, 1).

As the most intelligent, God knows all beings. Aquinas, invoking the authority of Aristotle, says, "For if His act of understanding were other than His substance, then something else...would be the act and perfection of the divine substance," and His substance would be in potentiality to his act (ST 1, 14, 4).³² But this is impossible. Therefore, God's substance is the same as His act of intellect. If this is the case, then the intelligible species of His knowledge must be the same as his substance (ST 1, 14, 2). Hence, God knows through His very act-of-being and is the object of His understanding. Therefore, God must know and understand Himself. For God to know Himself, He must

³¹ Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 110.

³² Aquinas refers to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, BK xii.

know His own power and to what it extends. Since God's power extends to all created beings, because He is the first efficient cause of all things, God must necessarily know created beings. Thus, God's knows Himself and all other beings (ST 1, 14, 5).

According to Gilson, because God knows, He must have a will.³³ Aquinas, on the other hand, prefers to say, "Will follows upon intellect" (ST 1, 19, 1). To both, intelligence and will are a bundled package. Nonetheless, Aquinas builds his account of will upon the assumption that everything has an aptitude towards its natural form so as to move toward it or rest within it. Intellectual natures have an aptitude to the good through intelligible forms. The good, however, is the object of the will. Thus, when the good is known, it is sought after or rested within. These motions toward a known good are called the will. Hence, every intellectual being has will. Since God has intellect, it follows that He has will.

Since every will has an object, the object of God's will is Himself. If God were to primarily know through some other object than Himself, He would necessarily turn to something inferior to Himself, because God is the most perfect and most good. But this would deny Him the perfection of knowing what is best, which is impossible. Since God knows all created things and Himself, and since the first and principle object of God's knowledge is Himself, He must necessarily will Himself. Since God wills Himself as an object, He must necessarily will the divine goodness of His own substance.

If there is will, then we must attribute love to God. Aquinas says, "We must needs assert that in God there is love: because love is the first movement of the will and of every appetitive faculty" (ST 1, 20, 1). Given that there is a known good, as said above,

³³ *Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 114.

the will moves or rests because of it. Since God knows Himself and He is the supreme good, He must will Himself. According to Aquinas' definitions of love and willing, we can conclude that in this first movement of the will, there is love, which all movements toward a good presuppose. Therefore, love is a necessary attribute for Aquinas' conception of God.

III.4. Summary

For Aquinas, perfection is used to establish divine simplicity. Together, perfection is related to the actuality of being. That is, being constitutes perfection, or a thing is perfect on account of its actuality. Hence, Aquinas makes the transition from perfection to divine simplicity. These beliefs help form Aquinas' ontological claim that God is being itself. From God as being itself, Aquinas uses perfection, or actuality, to infer God's attributes: God being ignorant would suggest imperfection, thus He must be omniscient, etc.

Divine simplicity is related to being (*esse*). For Aquinas, being is the principle of existence, without which a thing cannot exist and has no genus. As a result it is the most simple thing in Aquinas' metaphysics; being does not involve composition. Therefore, God is being itself, (*esse ipsum*). Furthermore, he is the source of being; all beings have being (*esse*) from Him. By denying all non-actual being as seen in the created world, we can come to a kind of knowledge of God.

CHAPTER IV: COMPARISONS

As we have seen, Aquinas and Plotinus have a number of similarities and differences in both metaphysics and theology. Although the similarities can suggest much agreement about God, they are superficial. Due to a difference concerning simplicity, the meanings of their supposed similarities change, and become defined relative to their metaphysics. To show this, we will first start with a general list of similarities, and then we will examine how Plotinus and Aquinas differ. I will also provide an explanation as to why they differ and show how some of their beliefs change in meaning because of their differences. Afterwards, I will identify respects in which Plotinus' position is inferior to Aquinas'.

IV.1. Some Similarities

Aquinas' God and Plotinus' the One share some similarities. First, they both believe that God exists in a way that is both different and better than that of determinate or created beings. This entails God's transcendence from created beings. For both, this means that God is not some kind of mixture of created beings, but is distinct from them. This means that God has a kind of clean break from the material, corruptible, limited world of finite beings. This explains in part why both philosophers use the negative method of philosophizing about God. Affirmations based upon created beings should not be attributed to God, because they lack an appropriate relation to Him. However, both allow certain kinds of affirmative statements to be predicated of God.

For both, God is one and his oneness implies unity. For both, God is also simple in nature, as well as perfect. Simplicity and perfection are related to one another, and for

both, simplicity or perfection are used to establish an ontological claim for God.

Furthermore, for both, God is good, infinite, omnipotent, and omnipresent.

For Plotinus and Aquinas, God is simple. God's simplicity has some relation to His transcendence from created beings. A consequence of God's transcendence and dissimilarity to created beings is our inability to fully comprehend God. Having full existence, there is no created being that adequately compares to God's existence. God's existence includes Him as the source of being. That is, all beings receive being because of God, who acts as the efficient cause of a thing's being. God is also the final cause of all things. For both, God is the beginning and the end of all things, as all ends are related to God's goodness.

IV.2. Some Differences

Although they ascribe similar properties to God, Plotinus and Aquinas differ as to how these properties should be understood or why they should be attributed to God. We will briefly examine some differences, in order to prepare our discussion for an examination of their principles of existence and how it affects their beliefs on simplicity and their ontological claims.

IV.2.a. Discussing God

Plotinus and Aquinas differ on how to discuss God. Plotinus prefers what he calls intellection, a pure intuition, for knowing God. Aquinas suggests this to be impossible. Regardless of experiencing God, both agree that a person can reason about God; yet, disagree about the kinds of claims that can be made based upon reasoning. For Plotinus, the affirmative method is a possibility and can be used in different ways. For Aquinas,

the affirmative method can only be used as a form of analogy, as opposed to purely positive affirmations about God.

IV.2.b. Will, Intellect, Love, Goodness, and the Source of Being.

In general, both Plotinus and Aquinas think that God has three important aspects, and both think that love is related to the created world from God's will and that God is the greatest good or beyond good. These things contribute to God being the source of being. For Plotinus, there is the One, the Intellect, and the World Spirit. The Intellect (or Intellectual-Principle) is being itself and the intellect of the One. The World Spirit in conjunction with the Intellect creates the world according to the goodness that emanates from the One. The Intellect, as being itself, emanates but is not internally or externally related to the One. This seems to be heavily influenced by the Christian tradition and Plato's *Timaeus*. For Aquinas, who follows the Christian tradition rather than Plato's account of the creation of the world, the intellect or Word of God and both God's will and love are all the same reality in God, through the Holy Trinity, rather than making some of them distinct beings as Plotinus did. Goodness is tied to being, rather than the One's actuality and existence. For both will is a free choice of God and eternal, but is the result of God's intellect rather than due to the One's motion or energy. For Aquinas, God's love arises from His will, whereas for Plotinus love is related to the One as the Good and final end. God is directly the source of being, whereas the One is only indirectly the source of being and the Intellect is directly the source of being as being itself.

IV.2.c. Simplicity and Actuality through God's Existence

Both Plotinus and Aquinas adopt Aristotle's distinction between potentiality and actuality. For both, created beings have being, and created beings are unified. God also must be most actual, without composition. This means that God transcends determined beings, and that God fully exists. However, God's simplicity is manifested in a kind of existence, yet they differ as to what it means to fully exist or to exist most fully. For Plotinus, God must exist beyond being. For Aquinas, God must exist as being itself. Hence, for both, God's actuality is defined in terms of the principle of existence.

For Plotinus, the One's existence must include unity externally and internally. In order for the One to be fully unified, it must be removed from the Many (meaning created beings) but it must also have no internal relations (meaning formless or unlimited). The One cannot have form, since this would mean that it is a part of intelligible being (VI.7.32.5-6).³⁴ For Plotinus, this existence is entirely simple. Only unity itself could be completely simple, but it is a unity without being. This most simple existence grounds the One's ontological status as beyond being. Actuality is not defined in terms of being. Since the One is beyond being, it is most actual or beyond actuality.

For Aquinas, God's existence must include full actuality and lack potentiality. The only kind of existence which lacks potentiality is one which lacks any kind of composition. Composition necessarily adds potentiality. Composition can occur in a few ways. In particular, matter necessarily adds composition, whereas form may have potentiality through imperfection. Created substances lack actuality either in form, such as angels, or from composition with matter, such as humans, animals, and plants. God is

³⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

without matter, and His form or essence is the same as His existence. Thus, actuality is defined in terms of being for Aquinas, whereas it is not defined in terms of being for Plotinus; and simplicity is in terms of being for Aquinas, whereas it is defined in terms of unity for Plotinus.

IV.2.d. Perfection through Being and Unity

Concerning perfection, both Plotinus and Aquinas think it to be related and defined in terms of actuality and simplicity, where both of these are defined in relation to being and unity. More specifically, Plotinus thinks that the One is beyond actuality without being, as a pure unity. This constitutes simplicity, but also the One's perfection. Perfection is the One's full and actual existence. Aquinas thinks that God has being and all that is good about a determinate being's being. Any good thing that exists belongs naturally to God. This actuality constitutes God's perfection. While for Aquinas this includes omniscience or the perfection of knowledge, this is not the case for Plotinus.

Concerning being, both Plotinus and Aquinas think being is necessary for something to exist. For Plotinus, it is one of the five existents, which the other four existents must also have. However, being has a genus with differences (or species) and is necessarily composed with unity. As a result, the One is removed from beings, and does not have the perfections of beings that Aquinas' God has. For his part Aquinas appeals to the basic claim that God is perfect, or the most perfect being, that has all the perfections of created being. He is pure existence, pure actuality, pure perfection. Such a being lacks imperfection, and as such God is not completely removed from being. While not a

determinate being, God transcends determinate beings and is the immediate source of being, but is not removed from being itself.

Where Aquinas emphasizes being, Plotinus emphasizes unity. Plotinus applies unity to the One and determined beings. First, consider one of his examples as it relates to determinate beings. He says, “Less unity need not mean less being. For an army or a chorus has no less being than a house, though less unity” (VI.2.11.15-16.) Since unity is identical to goodness, this would suggest that the army is less good because it is less unified than a house, but does not necessarily have less being. This is due to Plotinus’ identity of unity and goodness, while any correspondence between the proportion of being and unity is accidental (VI.2.11.20-21). Second, this understanding of unity would also apply to the One. The One, as pure unity, is the Good, since goodness is based upon unity. If the One is not absolute unity, then it would not be the Good. But this is absurd, for Plotinus. He thinks the One is the Good since it the efficient and final cause of the Many. On account of the One’s emanation and reversion, all things begin and end with the One. Therefore, the One must be the most unified.

For Aquinas, unity is necessary to existence. However, unity does not add anything special to existence. If a given thing exists, then it must be one in some way. God is also one, but this unity and oneness adds nothing to God’s being. Furthermore, unity is not identical to goodness. Although God is supremely one, goodness is defined in terms of being and actuality, rather than unity. That is, a non-actual unity would not necessarily be good.

IV.2.e. The General Picture through Metaphysical Hierarchy.

Plotinus' hierarchy of the beings is based upon unity. First, he says that no being ever came into existence without an irresistible tendency towards unity. Second, he suggests that unity is logically prior to being, saying "oneness must be something prior to man and to all the rest: only so can the unity come to apply to each and to all: it must therefore be prior also to even movement, prior to being, since without unity these could not be each one thing" (VI.6.5.30-34; 12.4-12). Third, he claims that unity is identical to goodness; the good of every thing is to be itself as unity (VI.2.11.35-37; 5.1.18-19).

Aquinas creates a hierarchy of the greatest things based upon the composition of substance's being. God is the most actual or most existent being, because He is pure being, pure act. Humans, as composites of form and matter, have being to a lesser degree. However, degrees of unity do not seem to be the primary criterion used to form these judgments. Nonetheless, Aquinas says that God is supremely one (ST 1, 11, 4). Furthermore, Aquinas also does not think unity and goodness are identical in all things.

IV.2.f. Principles of Existence

Most of the beliefs, mentioned above, are either defined or related in terms of the principle of existence. Each philosopher's principle of existence is as follows. For Plotinus, unity is the thing which is common to all beings, in different degrees, but is not a genus. It constitutes that which unifies all the genera or existents into an actual reality. In other words, unity is the principle of existence, the thing without which no existence could occur and is without composition. For Aquinas, being is the thing which is common to all beings, in different degrees, but is not a genus. It constitutes that which

gives existence to all things. In other words, being is the principle of existence, the thing without which no existence occurs. Now for both, actuality, perfection, and goodness are defined in terms of the principle of existence. Different principles of existence will cause different understandings of God's simplicity, actuality, existence, being, unity, perfection, goodness, various perfections such as omniscience, and his role as the source of being will be different.

The above are the results of different principles of existence. This difference is fundamentally traceable to differences in their metaphysics. From different metaphysical positions, they disagree as to what constitutes a composition. For Plotinus, being constitutes a composition, whereas it does not for Aquinas. These claims are the basis for God's simplicity and, hence, Plotinus and Aquinas disagree on the nature of God's simplicity. God's simplicity is used to form an ontological claim. Therefore, since simplicity and many other beliefs defined in terms of their principles of existence differ, they infer different ontological claims. All of this is mostly the result of a different metaphysical assumption about the principle of existence, and clearly distinguishes the two conceptions of God.

IV.3. An Analysis to Determine the Superior Philosophy

Having presented several significant differences and the root cause of these differences, it is now possible to evaluate the respective strengths of their accounts of God's nature. I will argue that Plotinus' position is inferior to Aquinas' position in two respects. First, Plotinus' contention that the one transcends being and is the source of

being is incoherent. Second, Plotinus' position is weaker in that it focuses on a logical conception of God rather than an ontological conception.

IV.3.a. Criticisms about the One as the Source of Being.

Plotinus' position loses coherence or intelligibility on the issue of God as the source of being. The problem is: "How can the One be the source of being without being related to being either internally or externally?" Pure unity cannot have being or be associated with it. This would include the Many. So, presumably the Many and being itself emanate from the One without relation to the One. I would like to examine this claim in more detail.

The way this is explained is usually by metaphor in relation to the One's goodness and activity. The One's eternal activity gives rise to an entity, the Intellect, which is potentially the One, but never can be and it is less than the One.³⁵ In this, the One gives what it does not have. Some of the metaphors are: water flowing from a spring, the life-force from the root of a plant, and the sun's light. In these three metaphors, Plotinus thinks that the source gives rise to something different. However, the objects themselves are different in idea but of what they are made is the same. A spring gives rise to a river, which both are made of water. Supposedly the root gives rise to the plant that spreads its life-force, but this seems to be inaccurate biology that could be explained away through the genetics of the plant's seeds. The third metaphor is the most interesting, in that the sun is not a ball of light, but produces light. Nonetheless the light is directly originated from the sun. All three metaphors produce weak analogies of things giving what they actually have. Furthermore, for the One to give something it does not have suggests that

³⁵ John Bussanich, *Plotinus' Metaphysics of the One*, p. 50.

there is something else that exists other than the One, a middle-man between the One and the Intellect, which is absurd. The idea of giving something which one does not possess, when nothing else exists, is unintelligible to me.

The same criticism might be turned against Aquinas on material substances. However, this criticism does not hold against Aquinas. God, for instance, does not give matter to created beings, a thing which God does not have. For Aquinas, matter is an imperfection of being in a corporeal substance, a potential being. This means that rather than God giving matter, the created thing is given being in a less perfect respect to God. When God creates *ex nihilo*, the perfection of the material substance exists more perfectly in God, which is explained as eminent causality—when an effect has the same property as its cause, but to a lesser degree. So, matter is not an actual giving but a lessening; an effect that is less than the cause.

By the same move, Plotinus might defend himself from the same accusation. It is not clear to me that Plotinus has this doctrine of eminent causality. Furthermore, we should not assume that Plotinus and Aquinas share the belief of creation *ex nihilo*, since they do not. They differ on this issue in a couple of ways. First, for Aquinas, in creation *ex nihilo* God is giving what he actually has, whereas for Plotinus the One does not have being or any relation to it. Without this relation to being, the One cannot eminently cause created beings. Second, for Plotinus, the One does not deliberate on eternally producing, or its motion, whereas for Aquinas, there is an aspect of intentionality in God's creation. Third, Bussanich says that Plotinus holds that the "effect resembles the cause and is in its cause...or participates, Platonically in its cause" and that the "cause is greater than the

effect.”³⁶ This sounds very similar to eminent causality. However, the One produces the Intellect, and “the Intellectual-Principle has produced [created beings] by its vision of the Good” (VI.7.15.16-17). This suggests that the Intellect, not the One, is the cause of created beings. Thus, eminent causality of being would properly belong to the Intellect in relation to created beings.

On this issue, we might lastly say that the One’s goodness eminently causes the Intellect. The One produces the Intellect in “its self-quest” in which “it has vision: this very seeing is the Intellectual-Principle” (V.1.7.8-9). We might also claim that created beings are a variation of goodness. It seems that although the One does not have being and could not have the perfection of beings within it, the One could be the eminent cause of different forms of goods, containing all created goodness within itself. However, the One is beyond Good. As mentioned much earlier, this is puzzling. Does the One have goodness that is simply in a greater degree than created being or is something different, like its actuality? Regardless, it does not seem to be the case that we can say that the One eminently causes being in lesser degrees.

Overall for Plotinus, it is necessary that the One be the source of being, or it would imply that something other than the One is the source of being and possibly that there could be a source of the One. To achieve pure unity, it is necessary that the One (1) not have being and (2) have no relation to being. That is, the One is completely removed from being internally and externally; “We cannot think of the First as moving towards any other; He holds his own manner of being before any other was; even Being we withhold and therefore all relation to beings” (VI.8.8.13-14). But this seems impossible.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

To give being, even without having it, i.e. to be the source of being, is to have some relation to being. These claims appear to be inconsistent.

Lastly, consider an epistemic concern about the One as the source of being. If the One is unrelated to beings, how can we ever have a mystical encounter with the One? If the mystical encounter consists of seeing the image of the One via the Intellect, how would we know there is something greater than the image of the One? Presumably we can follow the trail of being across an unfinished bridge to the isolated island of the beyond. And the only way to make it across is by an ecstatic jump into the unknown. However, we can never make it there without getting swept back into the current of the many waters surrounding it. The jump only leaves us with a vision of something beyond but never with the experience of the real thing. We are only left to assume that something is beyond the image. The relevant question is: “How can we determine the Good is the One rather than the Intellect?” How Plotinus would answer this is not clear to me.

IV.3.b. Ontological vs. Logical Conceptions

My second kind of criticism on Plotinus position is based upon historians, such as Gilson, who claim that philosophy before Aquinas tended to treat being as an essence. The most notable aspect of Aquinas’ philosophy was his focus on being through a great part of his metaphysics in the *Summa*. There, Aquinas treats being as an act, and not so much as a property and not as an essence. For Plotinus, given that he thinks being is a genus and has species, he seems to treat being as an essence. In differing how to think about being, I think they diverge on the kind of conceptions of God which they present.

For Aquinas, treating being as an act of existence, presents us with an ontological conception, one that primarily asserts the existence of God and how to think through it. He attempts to explain his beliefs about God in relation to God and existing things. God is no mere concept in Aquinas' philosophy. God plays an active role in reality and in explanation. In contrast, Plotinus' position is a logical conception, primarily using the One as an idea to explain his metaphysics. Plotinus' position, however, seems forever held in conjecture rather than reality. According to him, we can abstract unity from being, but according to his metaphysics, something cannot exist without the five existents. Thus, Plotinus says that the One is beyond being, to maintain its existence. But because of this, the One is plausible only as a placeholder or an empty concept, like Kant's thing-in-itself. It is never anything which we could experience, but is something we maintain to keep the story straight. Its main function is as an explanatory concept. However, Plotinus also wants to make the ontological claim and give the One a true basis in reality, but in the process produces paradoxes and about the One and its role as the source of being.

IV.4. Conclusion

This analysis has sought to provide us with a way of understanding Plotinus and Aquinas on their beliefs about God. I have attempted to show that both philosophers use different conceptions of God. The key difference is what they assume for their principle of existence. From different assumptions, various beliefs are defined in relation to them. All of these differences help explain why their ontological claims differ.

After examining their beliefs about God, I attacked Plotinus' position on its intelligibility, consistency, and plausibility, primarily on the issue of the One as unrelated

to being and as the source of being. This included showing that his analogies were weak as unintelligible, that both claims about the One and being could not be maintained, and that the One served as mostly as an explanatory concept which could not actually exist. For these reasons, I claim that Aquinas' position is superior to Plotinus' position.

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