

UNITED WISDOM

Plotinus’ One: How Multiplicity Relates to Unity

World and Consciousness

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Epigraph

> *“The One is all things and no one of them”.*

Plotinus, Enneads V.2, § 1. Exact opening clause before the semicolon in the displayed English translation credited to Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page. Primary text, opening of the tractate on the origin of what follows the First. The Russian companion uses United Wisdom’s own translation from English, rather than directly from Greek.

What this article is about

Unity can mean different things. Several voices form a conversation; parts belong to one object; different events receive a common explanation. Each kind of unity leaves questions about differences and gives no automatic evidence of one physical force behind everything. Plotinus poses a stronger question: how does multiplicity relate to a first principle that is itself no one thing among others? We will read two central tractates of the Fifth Ennead, distinguishing the One, Intellect and Soul, and an order of dependence from a sequence in time. Images of light and a source illuminate the argument; a comparison with Aristotle reveals related questions alongside real disagreement. This examines a philosophical and religious account within its own commitments. It neither turns ancient metaphysics into contemporary cosmology nor promises an exceptional state of consciousness. Readers can ask more precisely what an appeal to unity explains and which differences it needs to preserve.

I. First clarify the question about unity

Unity becomes a substantial concept when we understand what explanation we expect it to provide. Consider an invented musical ensemble. We might ask how many players it has, how the parts are coordinated, why the musicians decided to play together or what makes the performance one work. The questions concern the same case but require different answers. Saying everything is one chooses none of them by itself. It may even hide the distinction that prompted the conversation.

In V.1, Plotinus proposes a movement from Soul towards Intellect and the first principle. His concern is an order in which what follows receives its ground from what precedes. The One should therefore not be imagined beforehand as a collection assembled from everything that exists. A sum already presupposes elements, a way of distinguishing them and an act of

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combination. Plotinus asks what must be first relative to such distinguishable content, rather than how to gather ready-made elements into the largest possible group.

This creates a difficulty in reading. In ordinary speech, one means a single item: one table, one voice, one decision. Applying this sense to a first principle makes it another entry in a list. The question of what connects it to everything else then remains. Plotinus' construction tries to avoid returning to the initial difficulty in that way. It seeks a principle of multiplicity that does not depend on multiplicity in the same respect that multiplicity depends on it.

So far, this states a problem rather than proves that it has been solved. Readers can ask why unity requires a separate first principle at all and why different things cannot be explained through different relations. These objections need space. Otherwise the name One will do the work of an argument. The first step is to see what dependence Plotinus wants to explain before accepting his answer or identifying it with our own experience of wholeness.

II. The One is no hidden object inside other things

The opening of V.2 connects everything with the One while denying its identity with any particular thing. This tension gives the epigraph its meaning. Plotinus does not invite us to find an identical little component in every object. His reasoning points towards a principle without the determinacy of what derives from it. If it were already a distinguishable thing, a further question would arise about the ground of its composition and characteristics.

In this construction, everything therefore does not mean a bag containing all objects. It concerns the dependence of what proceeds from the principle. Denying that the principle belongs to any of those things does not simply mean absence. Plotinus tries to think a source of what is determinate that does not itself become another determinate object. Readers may find the move persuasive or questionable. Either way, it differs from claiming that a huge invisible object exists.

We often proceed differently in ordinary explanation. Looking for why a device has failed, we expect a particular fault that can be found and repaired. Considering an object's form, we examine its material and production. Plotinus' One does not occupy the place of such a fault or component. An appeal to it does not tell us which wire to replace. The different scales matter: a metaphysical ground does not remove the need to examine a particular process.

A difficulty of language also remains. To speak of the principle we give it a name and attribute relations to it, although the argument limits ordinary positive descriptions. This gives no licence to say whatever we please about it. Every expression instead needs checking against the question. If the source becomes a being with changing moods and periodically revised plans, features of the temporal and complex re-enter the account. A different philosophical picture may have appeared, but it now requires its own justification.

III. Intellect is unified while containing multiplicity

Intellect does not coincide with the One for Plotinus because thinking already involves distinctions. In V.1, especially §§ 4–5, he discusses intelligible content, identity and difference. If there is thought of something, a relation arises between thinker and what is thought. Even when closely connected, that relation needs explanation. Intellect can consequently be a whole containing multiplicity without being first in the same sense as the One.

Imagine someone grasping the structure of a familiar problem at once. They need not first state every relation aloud; later they can unfold an explanation for another person. The scene helps distinguish content grasped as a whole from the sequence of its exposition. Human recognition nevertheless supplies no model of Plotinus' Intellect. He considers a level of reality in which the intelligible has its own coherence, rather than a measured rate of brain activity.

The distinction prevents two simplifications. One makes Intellect a set of separate thoughts collected like documents in a folder. What unifies them, and why their order is not arbitrary, then remain unclear. The other makes it an entirely empty unity without content. That removes Intellect's role as the domain of what is thought. Plotinus seeks a wholeness in which differences are present, neither destroyed nor merely placed side by side.

We can derive a limited question about our own reasoning: what does understanding a subject as a whole mean? Can I explain relations between its parts, or does it only feel familiar? If I name every element, might their order still remain unclear? Those questions can help us examine an explanation, without confirming Intellect's metaphysical existence. They show why distinguishing unity and multiplicity is more substantial than a general demand to stop dividing everything. Some kinds of understanding require precisely distinguished relations.

IV. Soul explains unfolding rather than duplicating Intellect

Soul has a role of its own in the account we are reading. In V.1, Plotinus describes its activity and the difference between its movement and the content of Intellect. Soul relates to what follows, to life and to the ordering of the sensible. The three principles should consequently not be read as interchangeable names for one thing. If their differences changed nothing, the further levels would only repeat the initial answer without explaining the movement towards multiplicity.

It helps to separate the philosophical term Soul from an ordinary description of a private mood. Here it does not mean feeling inspired or anxious today. Plotinus reasons about the structure of reality and the connection between the human soul and its ground. Some of his language has religious and practical significance, but the explanation is not a psychological portrait of an

individual reader. Historical conceptions of cosmic life must also retain their difference from present natural science.

An invented example of a score and its performance can mark a boundary. We can consider the order of a work as a whole, while performance unfolds in time and requires particular actions. A score is nevertheless an artefact, musicians choose a tempo and instruments have physical properties. Plotinus' Intellect and Soul are not respectively a paper document and a group of players. The comparison only shows that the order of content and the order of unfolding can raise different questions.

That distinction also protects an explanation of ordinary action from an excessively broad term. When a plan is not carried out, saying that unity between intention and realisation was lost is insufficient. We need to identify the missing transition: information may have been absent, participants understood the task differently or a material obstacle appeared. Plotinus helps pose a philosophical question about dependence between levels. Checking particular causes remains a separate task that his account does not perform for us.

V. Origin here is not an event on a timeline

Plotinus explicitly restricts a temporal reading of origin in V.1 § 6. Where eternal principles are concerned, the language of generation signifies causal dependence and order, rather than a moment when one principle first appeared after another. This is central to the article. Without it, the principles become a story: the One was initially alone, decided to create Intellect and later added Soul. Such a sequence would introduce change into what the argument presents as remaining itself.

We can distinguish explanatory order from time through a simpler example. A geometrical conclusion depends on definitions and assumptions. A reader learns them in some sequence, but the conclusion's relation to its grounds is not determined by the minutes between reading the lines. This is a limited analogy for different senses of before. It does not show that the world is structured like a geometrical inference or that Plotinus offers a mathematical theorem.

Aristotle's question about a principle in Metaphysics XII.6 also concerns eternal actuality and eternal movement. His premises and task differ, but the explanation does not centre on a moment when previously absent movement suddenly appeared. Comparing the texts shows that first can name an explanatory condition. First in that respect need not mean the earliest recorded event.

This supplies no information about the universe's age and does not rename the One as a scientific account of its initial state. Ancient arguments have their own grounds; questions about physical history require different material and forms of checking. The distinction does not diminish philosophy. It clarifies the question a philosophical answer claims to address. To

challenge Plotinus, we need to question the possibility of such dependence and his concept of a first principle, alongside any curiosity about the calendar year in which Intellect appeared.

VI. Images of a source help question dependence

Plotinus uses images in which a source remains while something proceeds from it. Light, heat and related examples make the thought more accessible: a relation to a source can be imagined without the source passing entirely into its derivative. In V.1 § 6 this concerns how the first remains itself. The image supports a direction of reasoning, but its literal physical operation does not constitute Plotinus' explanation.

Treating the process as the expenditure of material creates another task. We must ask how much the source gave, what remains and how the supply is replenished. Those questions fit a particular natural process. Plotinus seeks to explain dependence in which the first does not lose itself. Expressions about what proceeds therefore require attention to what has been carried from an image into the argument. Vividness does not erase the difference between a metaphor and a proposed structure of reality.

We can compare this with one rule allowing us to examine several cases. The rule does not disappear after its first application, and different answers do not become detached pieces of it. A rule is nevertheless devised or formulated by people, can be mistaken and needs its conditions checked. This is our example of a relation to a ground, rather than a definition of the One. It shows why source need not always mean a stock of matter that diminishes with use.

The reader now has a particular task in examining an explanation. When I name something a common source, what relation do I mean? Does it supply material, determine order, provide a condition of possibility or serve as an end? If these meanings change during an account, the conclusion may rely on an unnoticed substitution. Plotinus' argument about the first remaining itself helps make that difficulty visible. Evaluating its strength requires asking whether the dependence of what follows has been sufficiently shown, alongside appreciating the chosen image of light.

VII. Turning towards a principle concerns determination

At the opening of V.2, Plotinus describes what follows through its turning towards the source. In his reasoning, what proceeds becomes determined and becomes Intellect by turning towards the first. This relation means more than saying everything returns home. It helps explain why a derivative both proceeds from a principle and has an order of its own. Its relation to what it depends upon enters the explanation of what it is.

It is especially easy here to reconstruct a timed story: something first emerged, then looked back and finally learned to think. The nontemporal framework requires another reading. We

distinguish relations within the argument rather than observable stages in a being's biography. Although exposition needs successive verbs, the time of speaking does not become the time of what is described. Origin and turning can consequently be discussed together while the first remains unchanged.

In Aristotle's XII.7, the principle is considered as an object of desire and thought, and movement is explained through an end. Here too we can discuss direction towards a principle alongside an external push. Something loved as a cause of movement is nevertheless different from Plotinus' turning through which Intellect is explained. A related question makes different answers clearer. Instead of unifying both texts under attraction, we need to ask what is directed, towards what, and in which explanatory relation.

Plotinus' invitation to the human soul to turn towards its ground has a religious and philosophical direction of its own. It can be understood within that account without promising readers that an exercise of attention reproduces the order of hypostases. Turning towards an important question can sometimes change what we notice. Such an experience does not yet certify a metaphysics. It may prompt closer reading of an argument: which relation is called return here, and why should it provide determination?

VIII. A related question leaves disagreement with Aristotle intact

Plotinus and Aristotle discuss a first principle without simply giving one doctrine different names. In Metaphysics XII.7 Aristotle connects the highest actuality with thought and its relation to itself. In V.1 § 9 Plotinus discusses the principle he attributes to Aristotle and objects to its being first: thinking already involves distinguishability. For Plotinus, Intellect follows the One. The meaning of first therefore changes with the place occupied by thought.

To understand the disagreement, keep one question in view. If a principle thinks itself, how are thinker and what is thought related? An answer may emphasise their unity in the actuality of thought. Plotinus requires a still simpler first prior to that relation. The difference concerns what is admissible within a first principle and what explanatory order is needed. Calling both authors advocates of the world's unity does not remove it.

Plotinus' criticism nevertheless remains his interpretation of Aristotle. It is important primary evidence of how he constructs his own argument, but does not relieve a reader of examining Aristotle's passage. Distinguishing voices also makes it possible to discuss a potential difference between what one author maintains and how another presents that position. The history of philosophy does not become transparent simply because a later thinker confidently describes a predecessor.

This offers a useful form of attentiveness for conversations today. Two people can agree that a system has a common ground while meaning different things by it: a coordinating rule, a

material cause or an end. Declaring agreement beforehand would erase a substantial disagreement. Clarifying concepts can increase visible disagreement while making it more honest. In reading Plotinus, increased distinguishability can help us understand the One better than a quick list of every tradition containing language about a single principle.

IX. Unity needs to preserve differences in what derives

In V.2 § 2, Plotinus continues the order of what proceeds from the first while preserving the distinction between what precedes and follows. Reference to a common ground does not turn Intellect, Soul and the sensible into an indistinguishable mass. The order's coherence is compatible with each level having a role of its own. Otherwise multiplicity would remain unexplained: we would have been invited to stop noticing differences instead of understanding them.

This matters in reading the epigraph. If the One is everything as its ground, it does not follow that every thing has every property of every other. A person, a tree and an instrument do not become interchangeable. That substitution would confuse dependence with identity. A philosophical explanation needs to show how the determinate relates to the first. It does not permit properties to be transferred between any objects without further grounds.

In an invented conversation, several people can discuss one task while occupying different positions. A shared task does not erase the fact that one holds relevant information, another bears costs and a third may refuse a proposed action. This example distinguishes a common subject from the sameness of participants. It does not derive norms of living together directly from Plotinus. It shows the mistake that unity can create when used to close questions about particular differences.

An appeal to a whole therefore needs continuation. What relations belong to it? Which differences remain? What would become unintelligible if one level were removed? In Plotinus' construction, transitions and dependencies matter. In our situation, different roles, materials or ways of acting may prove significant. Either way, thought gains content when a general term helps examine connections. If it makes details unnecessary instead, its explanatory work remains questionable.

X. A common source and a particular cause answer different questions

We can conclude our examination by distinguishing scales of explanation. Aristotle's Physics II.3 discusses different senses of cause: what a thing consists of, what makes it that thing, where change begins and what it is for. These questions allow detailed examination of a particular thing. They do not form four counterparts of Plotinus' principles because they classify a different subject and perform different work.

Suppose we ask why a wooden chair came into existence. One answer names its material, another its arrangement, a third its maker and a fourth its purpose. The answers can relate without excluding one another. The same chair might later temporarily support a box. Its new use does not change its earlier manufacture but adds a question about a present action. Even purpose therefore needs clarification: why was the thing made, and what is it now being used for? A common origin does not remove that difference. Saying everything proceeds from the One gives no dimensions of components, production sequence or intended use. Within Plotinus' account it concerns a more general ground. Substituting it for particular questions would give us a less clear explanation even if we accepted his metaphysics.

The reverse substitution is also possible. Explaining the manufacture of a chair does not settle Plotinus' question about the first ground of the distinguishable. A detailed local explanation and a claim to universal explanation require different assessments. We can prefer limited questions, challenge the need for a universal principle or accept it as a philosophical hypothesis. Each choice becomes clearer when it does not pretend to answer every other question at once.

Return to the musical ensemble. One piece, a coordinated performance and a shared desire to play are different kinds of unity. Plotinus' One proposes another, ultimate sense of ground. Reading need not end in accepting it. It can end with a more precise question: which kind of unity have I named, what does it explain, and what cannot be derived from it? Multiplicity then remains a task for thought, while unity ceases to be a word that ends the task prematurely.

What this means in practice

For attentive reading, take a statement in which you or someone else appeals to unity: a team has one aim, a text forms a whole, or everything relates to a common ground. Choose a calm case that can be considered without an urgent decision. Write down the kind of unity involved: a count of objects, coordination of parts, dependence on a source or common purpose. If several answers fit, separate them rather than immediately choose the broadest.

Next, name two differences the statement needs to preserve. A team can contain different responsibilities, a text different grounds for claims, and an object both material and a way of being made. Ask what would change in the explanation if those differences disappeared. It might become unclear who is responsible for what or why one part needs checking. Such difficulty shows the work a particular distinction does; it does not refute every unity.

If you are reading Plotinus himself, write the relations between the One, Intellect and Soul in words separately. Name an arrow in your notes dependence, rather than automatically movement in time. Check whether you have turned levels into physical floors or given the first a changing intention. Then return to V.1 § 6 and the opening of V.2: which expressions support your account, and which require clarification? This examines understanding of an argument, rather than whether you possess a mystical experience.

Finally, ask a separate question about a particular thing or situation. Even if you allow a common ground, what information would explain its form, change or purpose? This leaves room for detail. You might discover that a broad answer and a local check are compatible, or decide that the broad answer presently adds nothing. Both outcomes are possible if their grounds are stated.

This is a voluntary practice of distinguishing concepts. It is not a spiritual test, treatment or guaranteed way of feeling unity. Its limited aim is to make our explanation easier to discuss by showing in which respect things are connected and why the connection leaves their particularities intact.

Key quotation

> *“we dare not talk of generation in time”.*

Plotinus, Enneads V.1, § 6. Exact internal clause of the displayed English translation credited to MacKenna and Page. Primary text, paragraph concerning the first remaining itself and the causal order of eternal beings. This is a sentence fragment, not a complete aphorism. The Russian companion uses United Wisdom’s own translation from English.

The quotation limits a temporal reading of this metaphysical origin. It supplies no physical age of the world.

Connections between traditions

1. A remaining principle and an unmoved mover. Plotinus discusses what follows proceeding while the first remains in V.1 § 6 and V.2 § 2. Aristotle's Metaphysics XII.7 considers a principle that moves without itself being moved. Both separate dependence from an ordinary transfer of change to the source. The order of hypostases in Plotinus and Aristotle's explanation of eternal movement remain different tasks; no single physical mechanism is established.

2. The One above Intellect and the primacy of thought. Plotinus preserves multiplicity within Intellect in V.1 §§ 4–5 and challenges the Aristotelian principle as he interprets it in § 9. Aristotle connects the highest actuality with thought directed towards itself in XII.7. The specific shared question concerns the admissible relation of thinker and what is thought within a first principle. Their answers differ: Plotinus' One does not become another name for Aristotelian thought, and his account is not neutral historical adjudication.

3. Unity before number and senses of simplicity. Plotinus seeks what is first relative to determinate content and number in V.1 § 5. Aristotle distinguishes one as a measure from simplicity concerning a thing's nature in XII.7. Both require clarification of what unity means. An arithmetical unit, composition and a first principle cannot be substituted for one another; Aristotle's distinction does not itself establish Plotinus' One beyond being.

4. Nontemporal origin and eternal actuality. Plotinus connects what follows with the first through causal order in V.1 § 6 and the opening of V.2, restricting temporal interpretation. Aristotle requires an actual principle to explain eternal movement in XII.6. The shared distinction concerns the order of grounds and chronological sequence. Their assumptions about eternity and movement differ; these passages do not describe the universe's contemporary physical history.

5. Turning to a source and direction towards an end. Plotinus includes the derivative's turning towards the first in his explanation of its determination in V.2 § 1. Aristotle considers the principle as an object of desire and thought in XII.7. The similarity allows discussion of direction towards a ground alongside an external push. Contemplation within the order of hypostases and something loved as a cause of movement remain different relations; no empirical theory of human motivation follows.

6. A universal ground and particular causes. Plotinus preserves distinguishable levels dependent on the first in V.2 § 2. Aristotle's Physics II.3 distinguishes explanations through material, form, the origin of change and an end. The pairing makes a question's scale visible: common origin does not replace examination of a particular thing. Four senses of cause do not become four hypostases, and the comparison claims no historical influence between the constructions.

Primary sources

• Plotinus, Enneads V.1–V.2, English translation credited to Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page. Primary metaphysical and religious-philosophical argument. Both tractates were read in full; the remaining Ennead and Greek apparatus are not claimed as read. The carrier's exact printed revision is unestablished. Passages marked corrupt in V.1 § 7 are not used for quotations or precise inferences.

• Aristotle, Metaphysics, Book XII, English translation by W. D. Ross. Primary philosophy; the fully read Parts 6–7 on eternal actuality, movement and thought are used. The historical celestial model is not presented as contemporary cosmology; the whole book is not claimed as read.

• Aristotle, Physics, Book II, English translation by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye. Primary philosophical inquiry into nature and change. Parts 1–3 were read; Part 3 on senses of cause supports the map and concluding distinction. This is not a modern causal-inference algorithm.

Tags

Plotinus, Enneads, Neoplatonism, One, unity, multiplicity, first principle, Intellect, Soul, hypostases, intelligible, determination, identity, difference, number, simplicity, origin, causal dependence, nontemporal, eternity, turning, contemplation, source, metaphor of light, Aristotle, Metaphysics, Physics, unmoved mover, thought, end, causes, scale of explanation

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