

**Being, Nothingness and the Problem of Self Predication for the One of Plotinus:
comments in response to ‘Le Principe du Beau chez Plotin’ Phronesis, XLV,1 (p.38 ff.),
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Introduction.

The One of Plotinus¹ has been identified as Beauty by Suzanne Stern Gillet in Phronesis XLV,1 (p.38ff.).² She asserts, unlike the views of certain scholars,³ that Plotinus not only identifies the form of the beautiful in Intellect, but that his use of terms indeed suggests that Beauty and the first principle are synonymous. In this well written article, SSG undertakes primarily a philological exegesis to show that, in VI 7 32 and 33 at least, Plotinus takes an aesthetic view of One as Beauty in particular in his use of the epithet *καλλοῦ*. It is my intention to briefly outline a number of philosophical problems which arise of both an ontological and an epistemological nature in trying to sustain this view, particularly in reference to his use of *ὁ μὲν ὁν ἴσχυται* (VI 9 5, 30) and other negative predicates. I shall achieve this through an analysis of predicates and metaphors in VI 9 and VI 7. I shall also analyse the implications of utilising qualitative, value laden predicates; which raises the difficulties of self predication and the problems of an infinite regress, and then seek to draw distinctions as to Plotinus’ possible intention in using such epithets in the light of his claim that the first principle is *ὁ μὲν ὁν ἴσχυται*. I shall also analyse the possibility of whether, contra SSG, Beauty can be considered not as the first principle but as an intermediary to accommodate the claim.

The attribution of Beauty to One in Enneads VI 9.

In this early treatise, Plotinus notably fails to make any explicit designation of One with Beauty. Further, an aesthetic attribution of Beauty to One is weakened by the statement (VI 9 11, 16) that: ‘He had no thought of beauties but had run up beyond beauty’: *Ὁ ὁ δὲ τῶν*

καλῶν ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ καλὸν ἤδη ὑπερῶν. The use of the plural reinforces the singular τὸ καλὸν along with the use of ὑπερῶν as ‘beyond’. This strengthens his earlier statement (VI 9, 4, 10) Πᾶν γὰρ καλὸν ὑστερον ἢ κείνου καὶ παρ ἢ κείνου. Here, it is not only beautiful objects in the sensible world which must be left behind, it is ‘all’ (πᾶν) beautiful things which are ‘posterior to that One’, as Armstrong translates.

In order to preserve One as Beauty therefore, we might wish to suppose that ἢ κείνου denotes only beautiful objects in the sensible world as limited things, and also forms. As Beauty as One is unlimited and formless however, it is not to be included as a ‘thing’ amongst these.⁴ Yet, in accepting this distinction, we might wish for Plotinus to have made a clearer designation of One as καλλονή as in VI 7 33 22, where the identification with the first principle is more apparent.⁵ But in Enneads VI 9, at least, Plotinus is not prepared to explicitly attribute Beauty to the One, but only to the Good.

Generally concerning Plotinus’ use of aesthetic predicates SSG finds that (p 39):

‘Si le vocabulaire esthetique plotinien est riche et sans champ d’application ample et varié, il manque cependant parfois de précision.’

In this she is less generous than Dean Inge, whom she cites (op cit. p 41), in his precise attribution of aesthetic predicates by Plotinus. It appears, however, that in order to sustain SSG’s view of the One as Beauty the ascription of particular aesthetic predicates necessarily need to be very precise. She is, at any rate, obliged to accept precision in Plotinus’ assignment of key predicates such as καλλονή for Beauty and τὸ καλὸν for beautiful entities in Intellect (op. cit) in support of her identification. If we accept occasional imprecision, however, the claim that this principle is ὑπερ ἢ κείνο τὸ πλεγκαλον (VI 7 33 11) might provide worries based on Enneads VI 9 if we take ‘all beautiful’ to mean that it transcends all beauty and Beauty. But the precise use of the compound utilising καλόν helps identify such beautiful things as limited to Intellect, which helps to soothe any qualms that the One could not be

Beauty. Accordingly, at least in this respect, Plotinus is both prudent and precise in his assignment of the aesthetic predicates *το καλόν* and *καλλονή*. This terminological distinction appeals to the infinity and indetermination of the Plotinian One, which as Inge stresses: ‘being formless, could hardly be *το καλόν* ; cf. WR Inge *The Philosophy of Plotinus* (London 1929) p 124.

Predicative distinctions aside, however, we could make the more general criticism that strictly speaking the One should not rightly be termed *καλλονή*, *το αγαθόν* or any qualitative predicate at all, in view of his claim (VI 9 5, 30 ff) that in respect to it we must resist assigning predicates wholesale because it has in truth ‘no fitting name’. This is supplemented by the claim it is ineffable (VI 9 3 40-50). It is with this proviso in mind that Plotinus speaks of the One as the Cause, or the Good, or Beauty, whilst emphasising that this is not predicated of it but of us (VI 9, 3, 50). In this he denounces the use of *ἡκείνου* and *ὄντος* as precise referents, and assigns predicates to our subjective experience of it (VI 9 3, 50).

Plotinus’ descriptions of the One as Beauty in VI 7.

In the later treatise (Enneads VI 7 32 and 33) Plotinus appears to make a number of apparently contradictory claims concerning the first principle which appear to cause difficulties for his assignment of Beauty to the One. I wish to analyse the significance of these predicates and raise a number of issues concerning them in relation to the ontological status of the first principle.

His first claim concerning the first principle is that “it is nothing” (*Οὐδεν γὰρ ὄν τί καλλός*; VI 7 32 30). This supports the earlier treatise that “it is non existent” (*ὁ μὲν ὄν ἴσται* VI 9 5, 30). In this it might be thought that in his use of predicates he is involving himself in a plain contradiction, as he invokes the use of an existent predicate ‘it is’ (*ἴσται*) in his description of its non existence. Here, if we take Plotinus au pied du lettre, the use of the

predicate ‘non existence’ appears as a plain contradiction to any predicate that ‘it is’ something: i.e. ‘it is the flower of beauty’ or ‘it is nothing’.

Plotinus is not, however, in his use of existent predicates assigning an attribute to One’s ontological status as it truly is: for the existent predicate is derived from us, and does not therefore exist in the same sense as the principle itself.⁶ Yet, moreover, if we set aside the limitations of language for a moment and attempt to consider the One solely in respect to its ontological status, the contradiction is apparent that in assigning qualitative attributes to the cause itself it cannot also be taken to be in reality truly non-existent. For it is impossible to ascribe ontologically an existent Beauty (even if it is distinct from other particular or eidetic noumenal existent beauties) to the One whilst also ascribing to it an ontological status as being literally nothing. We are therefore obliged to think of the One in both an predicative and an ontological sense.

A distinction between a predicative and an ontological sense for Beauty appears to be supported in the next passage (VI 7 32 34 ff) as it is ‘the term’ of Beauty *καὶ πέρασ κέλλους*, as well as being the *ἀρχή*⁷. The usual translation of *πέρασ* is, however, ‘limit’. The translation of *πέρασ* by Armstrong is prudent inasmuch as we clearly do not want to associate limit with the One, which is limitless. If *πέρασ* is translated as ‘the limit’ however, the sense could be that Beauty is the terminus as *ἀρχή* of beautiful things. This is the general sense of SSG’s translation (op cit p 54) when she claims it is the ‘principe et fin de la beauté.’ In other words, the many beautiful things are not Beauty, which is the first principle, for these are the limit which the *ἀρχή* cannot be.

SSG cites incorrectly *τό παρ αὐτοῦ καλόν* (VI 7 33 18). She remarks (op cit p 54) that Beauty which is One is ‘that which holds its beauty from itself’ (celui qui tient sa beauté de lui meme VI 7 33 18). The correct rendition is however *οὐδὲ παρ αὐτοῦ καλόν* (VI 7 33 18). The use of *οὐδὲ* is a negative particle (LSJ) which strengthens here that the beautiful things

are not self sufficient in themselves *οὐδὲ αὐτάρκες*, but require something other. This supports the notion of an extant first principle, which is ‘super beautiful’ and yet has neither shape nor form (VI 7 33 20).

Beauty as an intermediary.

SSG questions how Beauty could possibly be considered as anything other than the first principle itself. She passes briefly over the view that the first principle could be an intermediary (op.cit p56). In this she asks of Bréhier’s claim that Beauty is between the Good and the forms: “Qu’entend Bréhier par “intermediare”?” There might, however, be a number of reasons why we might wish to consider the possibility that Plotinus held that Beauty was indeed an intermediary. In this I wish to show that a case might be made for Beauty not as the first principle itself, but the light of the first principle. I wish to outline these considerations before offering further reasons why such a position cannot be consistently sustained in view of Plotinus’ own inconsistent use of epithets.

Plotinus had a very clear conception of the One in distinction from its light (*ὥσπερ πᾶν φῶς μεθρηρινὸν παρ ἡλίου* VI 9 4 11 see also VI 7 16 25). In a certain respect, therefore, he is Platonic in his use of the sun / light metaphor for the object and the vision it causes through its light (VI 9 4, 11). In the Republic (508e-509a) the sun itself is different from the light which denotes the ability to see, just as the Good, as the cause, is different from the vision of knowing. In Plotinus, it is not the One but the light from the One which illuminates Intellect and allows the forms which are beautiful and reside there to be known (VI 7, 22). Above any intellectual experience of forms, however, the One cannot be known, and any knowledge we profess to know cannot be truly spoken of or written about (VI 9, 4 10-15). Yet in this, clearly, the light from the One does not just illuminate the forms, which are the basis of knowledge, but also facilitates ‘another way of seeing’. This is the vision of the One (VI 9 10

5). This vision is ‘greater than reason and before and above reason, as that which is seen’. In this, however, the cognitive experience of the One, which is beyond eidetic knowledge, is still ‘vision’ or ‘cognition’. This is still presumably caused due to the light of the first principle, but it is not necessarily an experience of the first principle itself.⁸

In VI 7 also, Plotinus’ remarks concerning the final experience emphasise contemplation as a ‘vision’ of that which is above that which is all beautiful. The lovers bear witness to Beauty VI 7 332 24. This entails love for that which is more formless (*ἀμορφότερον*: VI 7 33 28). The beginning of which entails a love of the great light (*φωτος μεγελου* : VI 7 33 30). In treatise nine it involves becoming the light itself. (VI 9 9 55).

A distinction between the One and the light which it causes is apparent in revisiting VI 7 33 18 *οὐδὲ παρ’ αὐτοῦ καλόν*. Here the use of *παρ* could denote ‘from’ but it also has implications with verbs as “resting by” in the sense of resting by one’s feet (LSJ). In this, Plotinus has made a previous association of light with rest, as the soul comes to rest when it has the final experience, which is the vision of the light of the One. It then becomes the light itself. This might imply that it is the light which is Beauty and not the first cause, which is asserted to be neither in ‘rest nor in motion’ (VI 9 3 40-45) as this pertains to being. The ‘super beautiful’ (*ὑπερκαλον*), or the beautiful beyond beautiful things, could therefore be the light, which is not shaped and is without form (VI 7 33 20), but this is not the first principle, which causes illumination.

Problems with Beauty as an intermediary

On the face of it, the view that Beauty is an intermediary between a first cause and its light seems plausible, and supports Brehier’s position that beauty is an intermediary (op.cit). However, it appears to lack credibility in view of Plotinus’ claim that Beauty as the primarily beautiful is “the nature of the Good” (VI 7 33 20). Here, however, although it is clear that the first principle is Good, is it necessarily Beauty? The use of the term *φύσις* is

rather ambiguous here. It could equally be used as a synonym for the more technical term *αὐτοτο*, which is used by Plato as an appendage to denote the “inner nature” or “essence” (*οὐσία*) which is an *εἶδος*. Ascribed to the first principle of Plotinus, which is not a form, one would be inclined to accept that Beauty itself is the Good itself and not a secondary cause of it; i.e. its light. Yet alternatively, it might be the converse: if *φύσις* is indeed only to be taken in the more literal sense as “nature”, or rather “that which is in manifestation”, there is then a possible distinction between the first cause and that which it manifests to the perceiver. This would, therefore, be a manifestation of Beauty apprehended as vision due to the light of the cause.

In Plotinus’ *proceedings* (Tj 133 0 TD97 0 TD(e)Tj 97 0 TD((f)Tj 133 0 TD97 0 TD)Tj 1230 TD(e)Tj 97 0 TD

reading of 'non existence' and its associated epithets, which by implication suggests a graded ontology.

Self Predication and the reductio ad absurdum of the infinite regress.

Plotinus' use of the epithet 'non existence' has to be accepted as in effect providing a distinction between the predicative and the ontological sense of what the One is. Ontologically, clearly the first principle must exist in some sense if it is to be the cause; for something cannot be caused by nothing. Yet it does not necessarily suppose difficulties for his argument to presume the first principle is 'non existent' or 'nothing' if we accept that any use of these terms, is not an ontological (a priori) attribute, but only a predicative (a posteriori) linguistic attribute. Likewise it would not suppose difficulties to assign two predicates to One considering his view of the unity of One (VI 9 5, 15 ff). For although these existent predicates are two, they exist in a different sense to the first principle which is One. In this, therefore, we need not suppose that in assigning multiple terms to One we are necessarily prescribing to it a multiple nature as it really is. Likewise, we do not have to suppose that in using the predicates Good or Beauty in speaking of the One, we are necessarily prescribing aesthetic qualities to the first principle as it is in its true nature.

The reason Plotinus ascribes non existence to the One might be construed as a way of emphasising its uniqueness, as well as avoiding the Parmenides criticism, (exploited to good effect by the Third Man argument of Aristotle) that assigning to the object itself the qualities denoted of the predicate leads to the problem of an infinite regress. Here, the prescription of quality to the first principle would necessarily require a further principle, in order to justify any supposed attributes it might itself have as Beauty or indeed Goodness. In the Parmenides this might well be a reductio ad absurdum due to the problem of confusing the instantiation of the qualitative attributes of particulars with forms. The general problem of self predication is

however clearly in Plotinus' mind at VI 9, 5, 30 and in VI 7 18 ff. and may indeed have prompted the claim for non existence in an attempt to distinguish both an ontological and a predicative sense in speaking of the One, and in doing so serve to emphasise the sui generis nature of the One as Beauty or Good, whilst negating the confusions which cause the infinite regress to arise.⁹

Plotinus offers only an apparent paradox concerning the One in attributing non existence to it whilst yet asserting it is Beautiful (and by implication therefore existent, but in a different sense to beautiful things). For the claim that the first principle is non existence could not be a claim that the first principle is sheer Non Existence VI 9 11 37 in the Parmenidean sense; for this would be a contradiction teleologically, epistemologically and indeed predicatively. It would be a contradiction teleologically, because without being an existent something the first principle could not cause anything else to exist.¹⁰ It would be a contradiction epistemologically, because it is not possible to experience and know something as something, even if that is an indescribable experience, when it is a non existent nothing.¹¹ It would be a contradiction predicatively, because a predicate, even a negative one such as 'non existence', exists in some sense as a linguistic term. Clearly, therefore, his use of the term 'non existent' is intended to denote that One exists, but in another sense to the many things which we experience as existence. In this, he is assigning only an apparent paradoxical duality to the status of the One (in keeping with the limitations of language) which is both truly existent and yet non existent, Good and yet not one of the multiple goods, and Beauty whilst yet not being one of the beautiful things.

Conclusion

The first principle causes qualities to exist (VI 9 6 55).¹² In this he attributes existence to the Cause as an existent *something*. His claim for non existence is a dual concern. First it is

a recognition that the One's nature cannot truly be spoken of in any real sense. Second, it is an attempt to distinguish the ontological uniqueness of the One, and its difference from manifold qualities. However, even with the proviso that it lacks qualities such as beauty and goods

and *κἔλλος ἀμῆχανον* to the One (op.cit p 42), before criticising Rist for dissuading the reader from understanding literally his occasional assimilations of the One with Beauty.

6. It is probable that Plotinus has used the view of Plato in the Sophist concerning a distinction between a predicative and an ontological sense for the first principle. Certainly Plato does not want to suggest that the mere ability to offer a predicate must imply the existence of a Form and therefore its opposite. Logically, in any case, this could not be. The ability to predicate the Form of Existence supplements the possibility of this Form's existence. Yet the ability to offer the predicate 'non existence' does not logically infer that there must exist a Form of Non Existence. Plato makes it clear that the Form of Non Existence in itself does not exist (259a). The ability to offer a definition guarantees that the predicate 'non existence' does itself exist, but Non Existence must be something other than this if it is to be said that logically it does not exist (259a). In this sense, then, there are logical limitations to the theory of Forms; for there cannot exist a general class of non existent entities simply because we choose to posit them. The distinction seems applicable in a Plotinian context also in respect to the epithets attributed to the One.

7. Plotinus might well be attempting to distinguish a predicative and an ontological sense for the first principle as Plato does in the Sophist. Here, the 'beauty beyond beauty' or the 'super beautiful' are predicates deriving from the observer's experience of it. Its true ontological status cannot however be truthfully described, as it is unknowable and ineffable. This might prompt Plotinus' description that it is in truth 'nothing' VI 7 32 30 and 'non existent' (VI 9 5, 30). In this, he attempts to distinguish limited things from the limitless first principle. The question is whether this first principle exists in just another sense or not at all, and also whether if indeed he is utilising special qualitative predicates such as *καλλονή*, he is seeking to ascribe qualities to it ontologically as it really is. It cannot be that these are indeed no more than qualitative epithets ascribed to our subjective experience of a non existent first principle; for something which is truly non existent cannot be a cause, or indeed experienced. On the face of it, therefore, Plotinus' special use of the term *καλλονή* appears to be attempting to describe a unique quality of the first principle. Such a term is used with qualification, but there is little doubt that his claim is based on a personal experience of an existent something. We are thus left to suppose that the first principle is itself not non existent but beautiful and good, but that such qualities do not exist in a fashion that we ordinarily know, understand or experience.

8. In attempting to describe the experience of the One it is notable that Plotinus still often emphasises the experience of unity as a contemplative vision. In this sense, therefore, 'another way of seeing' as *ἕκστασις* with the particle *ἐκ* emphasising and supporting the notion of 'being out of oneself', could be no more than an existent state beyond intelligible experience, but lacking complete unity with One (VI 9 11 23). The secondary contemplative stages involving conceptualisation, or understanding, or predicates assigned, are clearly due to its light and the forms in Intellect. But if the One is indeed the cause, and not that which is caused, none of the soul's 'seeing' experiences need necessarily indicate that this is an experience of the cause itself but only of its light.

9. The problem can be seen only as a fatal flaw in Plato's Sophist (254b-255e) in his attempt to offer the *μεγίστα γεινη* of Sameness Difference, Motion, Rest and Existence as the ultimate Forms. The Forms participate in their opposite. Existence does not however partake of Non Existence, which cannot exist absolutely in any case for Plato, conscious as he was of the Pamenidean monism of unmoving Being that this would necessarily provoke. So too, all Forms must partake of Existence even the "greatest kinds" if they are to be existent Forms. The superlative Form must therefore be Existence, by virtue of all the other Forms being

dependent upon it. Yet how Existence can be what it is, which is existence, in this case seems to have hardly been satisfactorily resolved against the problems of an infinite regress. Plato would have us believe Existence differs fundamentally from the existent particulars of the sensible world which partake of it. It is in this sense more truly existent as the essence of existence. The question is, therefore, how Existence is truly existent as Existence? Does this require a further principle of Existence which this Form must itself participate in to truly exist? Hence the problem of the infinite regress.

10. With his description of the first principle as ‘non existent’ Plotinus gives a misleading impression that the One whilst being ‘beyond being’ does not exist. Here, however, the One has more in common with the Platonic sense of *ἡ περὶ τῆς οὐσίας* assigned to the Good as a really real existent something superior in its nature to the other forms. For this cannot be truly nothing, otherwise Plotinus would be in an impossible situation; for he would then have to explain how a teleological principle which is non existent can cause anything. We must suppose therefore that in speaking of One as the causal first principle he is indeed not claiming it is absolute non existence. He is rather making the lesser claim that something which does not exist, as we know it, is to be termed with provisos One. In assigning some kind of existence to One Plotinus is clearly not thinking of One in the same sense as the many things which it causes. It finds support from VI 7 32 15 with the claim ‘it is none of these things and all of them: none of them because the real beings are later, but all of them because they come from it.’

11. One cannot be taken literally as sheer non existence (VI 9 5, 30) otherwise it would be impossible to experience it as a union of subject and object without the end result being an annihilation of the soul, and a melting into non existence. In this, however, Plotinus offers further mystical confusions, by offering a misleading impression at any rate at VI 9 8 40-45 that this is indeed the case:

οὕτω καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀεὶ μὲν περὶ αὐτόν καὶ ὅταν μὴ λήσῃς ἡμῖν παντελῆς ἔσται καὶ σὺκετι ἴσόμεθα- οὐκ ἀεὶ δὲ εἰς αὐτόν· ἀλλ’ ὅταν εἰς αὐτὸν ἴδωμεν τότε ἡμῖν τέλος καὶ ἀνεπαύλα καὶ τὸ μὴ ἑπάδειν χορεύουσιν ὄντως περὶ αὐτὸν χορείαν ἔνθεον

The literally interpretation would be a paradox, as although the experience of the One is one where the soul does not continue to see but becomes nothing, he also asserts that ‘when we do look’ then we are ‘at the goal’. In this it is not that Plotinus shifts his specifications of the final experience in describing union in terms of a melting into nothingness whilst emphasising that the final joining is a vision (VI 9 9 40-55) entailing another kind of ‘seeing’ for the soul (VI 9 8 44). The apparent paradox of the end result (VI 9 8 40-45) emphasises only that the soul experiences and becomes *something other* than what it was as an affirmation of unity as ‘the final goal’ (VI 9 8 40). In this the soul becomes more truly existent in turning to this goal it does not exist less (VI 9 9 10-15). The soul sees God as intelligible light (VI 9 9 57). The soul becomes pure light itself (VI 9 9 55). In this the inconsistency arises only when Plotinus ascribes the term rest (*λοιπὸν*) and standing still (*στασις*) to denote the soul’s experience of unity as well as the epithet of vision *θεας* (VI 9 11 15, see also 35). But notably, although he speaks of union with the One, he distinguishes the first principle as being neither at rest nor in motion (VI 9 3 40-45), because this pertains to being. The assimilation of soul to that which it experiences is one which does not therefore appear to entail an assimilation or a making like the object of its contemplation and union in any consistent sense.

12. Plotinus draws a distinction between substance and that which causes substance (denoting the Aristotelian term for *ουσία* VI 9 5 35) which sufficiently distinguishes any designation of

limited qualities ascribed to the cause itself. Usually Plotinus ascribes Intellect to substance. Here however Intellect is not substance it leads to substance. One can however be known better by its product which is substance (VI 9 5 35). In respect to this Plotinus does make comments concerning the ontology of One as *ἄπαρα τῆς οὐσίας* 'beyond substance' (VI 9 11 43), which might denote a unique existential and qualitative attribute to One. In this context it is not as SSG claims (op.cit p 50): 'que le générateur de la beauté est également celui de l'être ou substance'. Plotinus criticises Aristotle in VI 3 3-5 concerning his notion of substance. The only thing that matter, form and the composite have in common is being. This however differs in respect to each of these (VI 3 6-7). Sensible substance is therefore nothing more than a conglomeration of qualities (VI 3, 8). In this respect VI 9 5 35 it is evident that the cause is not equivalent to any such a notion of substance, nor with any literal reading of non existence (VI 9 5, 30) can its ontological status be readily equated with being.

13. If One is the cause and the principle of the forms, it cannot share designations with them, and so must be 'something beyond beauty' in order to explain the beauty of the Intellect. In this, there can be little doubt that whilst Plotinus associates Beauty with the One denoted by his special use of *καλλοσύνη* there is no reason to suppose his use of the term was advancing anything other than the *sui generis* nature of Beauty as the One. His use of aesthetic predicates in this sense are applied with this proviso clearly understood in the case of the Good, and cannot be thought of as assigning to One qualities in the same sense as the many. His application of the epithet 'non existence' provides a useful ontological distinction without invoking a qualitative value to the first principle, which could provide sufficient ammunition for the infinite regress problem. His claim for an eternal principle with no beginning in the real sense is sufficient justification in any case to free himself of any difficulties arising from the problem of what caused Beauty to originally be the first principle (III 7 6 5). That the cause must itself exist in some sense negates any literal reading of the first principle's ontological status as non existent (VI 9 5, 30).