

A Discussion on Individuality and Personality: J. N. Deck & A. H. Armstrong

[These comments arise from Professor Armstrong's Article, "Form, Individual and Person in Plotinus", which appeared in *Dionysius*, Vol. I, 1977.]

I.

John N. Deck

At the very end of his recent article, "Form, Individual and Person in Plotinus", Professor Armstrong endorses the view that "we cannot say that God is a person."¹ I should like to present what I regard as a Plotinus-inspired position that God is *super-personal in a positive sense*. While I think I can draw support for this from Plotinus (and also from Plato and Aristotle) I wish to make clear that I am proposing it on *philosophic*, rather than Plotinian, grounds — to the extent that the two may be distinct. I do not know, and should be interested to see, how much this position actually differs from that of Professor Armstrong. In his presentation of Plotinus (A. p. 64), he seems to endorse the position that the One exceeds both "personal" and "impersonal." But by the end of his article, speaking as a philosopher, he appears at any rate to stress "not a person."

A person is *au fond* a knower and a lover. To arrive at the One as the super-knower in a positive sense, we do not have to do more than echo Plotinus. He understands, on the one hand, that the knower involves the known and that the known involves the knower. The knower is not a subject standing apart from the known, but is in dialectic union with the known. This is to say that the knower involves *within himself* the duality of knower and known, and that the known involves *within itself* the duality of known and knower. The knowledge level is one of through-and-through duality. The One, who is above duality, is not, then, simply a knower.

On the other hand, knowledge is a high and noble thing. It "ought" to be ascribed to the One if only anything could be "ascribed to the One" and if only it could be purged of its duality.

Now we can, with full understanding of what we are about, allow ourselves to ascribe something to the One — in order to get some insight, however imperfect, into its nature. When we do, we will find ourselves ascribing *knowledge* to it: a knowledge which is no longer dual, and therefore no longer knowledge, but

super-knowledge. The word which Plotinus finds for this (can it be improved upon, when one is striving to express a knowledge which is above the knower-known dichotomy?) is *wakefulness* (ἐγρήγορσις):²

If, now, the One's act does not become but is always, and is a kind of wakefulness which is not other than the one who is awake, being a wakefulness and an eternal super-knowledge, it will be in the way it is awake. The wakefulness is beyond being and Nous and intelligent life; the wakefulness is itself. (Ennead VI, 8, 16, 31-36)

The One is an eternal super-knowledge which is not dual. There is in the One "a quasi-nous which is not nous": the Nous radiates from this, the One's "intellectual nature." (VI, 8, 18, 18-22)

It scarcely exceeds Plotinus to say, in a somewhat looser vocabulary, that for him the ideal of knowledge is the *One* (One) of knower and known (Cf. V, 3, 5 and III, 8, 11) What is achieved at the level of Nous (and what constitutes knowledge here as true and living) is only their *unity*, which still carries along its dialectic partner, diversity. The one, or rather One, of knower and known is super knowledge, super-Nous.³

God is, then, inadequately represented by Aristotle, and by much of the Christian theological tradition, as knower. Even

1. Armstrong, Arthur Hilary. "Form, Individual and Person in Plotinus." *Dionysius I*, December 1977, p. 68. Hereafter "A."

2. Wakefulness: Possibly an echo of Aristotle *Meta.* Λ, 1072b18. Plotinus uses the word in a context in which he is deliberately allowing himself a certain latitude in speaking of the One. It is, however, the least-dualistic phrase he conjures up to describe the One's knowledge, which in other contexts is *self-discernment*, *self-knowledge*, etc. Cf. V, 4, 2, 16-20.

3. With regard to the interpretation of Plotinus, cf. Armstrong's *Plotinus* [text and translation] (Cambridge, Mass. 1966 —) "Preface," vol. 1, pp. xvi-xvii: "Again, Plotinus insists that the One does not think, because thought for him always implies a certain duality of thinking and its object, and it is this that he is concerned to exclude in speaking of the One. But he is anxious to make clear that this does not mean that the life of the One is mere unconsciousness, to show that he is more, not less, than Mind at the highest level at which we can conceive it, and so in some passages he attributes to the One a 'super-intellection,' a simple self-intuition, an immediate self-consciousness higher than the thought of the Divine Intellect." Of course, this says "more, not less, than Mind," it does not yet say "more than person." The connection (equation) must be effected between Mind (Knower) and Person. Cf. also my *Nature, Contemplation and the One* (Toronto, 1967), pp. 17-21 where a fuller treatment begins with allusion to those texts in which Plotinus says that the One has no knowledge. I would agree now with most of what was said there, except that I would no longer call the One's super-knowledge "a knowledge with a self-identity", because the phrase "self-identity" is itself dualistic,

“self-knower,” taken without correction, is dual. But he is more penetratingly represented as super-knower than merely as “neither knower nor non-knower.”

Let me sketch rapidly here, also, a line of philosophic reasoning which tends to show that God is to be regarded more properly as super-personal (hyper-Nous) than as hypereidos, hyper-on or hyper-ousia. It develops out of “leads” furnished by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, but makes a fairly free use of its sources.

Knower and known are dialectic partners: no knower without a known: no known without a knower. This was already beginning to be seen by Plato at *Sophist* 249a; it is brilliantly developed by Plotinus especially in V, 1, 4, 26 ff. and V, 3, 5. But even in the case of these dialectic partners it is necessary, for the sake of order, to indicate a “senior partner.” Is the senior partner the knower or the known? Plotinus is aware that there is a question of priority here, but his answers seem now one way, now the other.⁴

Meanwhile, however, in the *Sophist* knowing was presented as acting-upon, being-known as being-acted-upon (248e).

Now if this is illuminated by the Aristotelian insight of the priority of act to potency,⁵ of agent to patient, that is, of the actor to the acted-upon, the *knower* side of the Nous is seen as possessing the metaphysical priority in the knower-known duality.⁶

But — to say it again, with Plotinus — this is not the First. It is the highest duality but it is not the One. Since, however, the Nous

and would no longer say that the *nisus* of knowledge is towards identity because identity (sameness) is only the dialectic mate of difference. The *nisus* of knowledge is towards (the) One.

4. Priority of being (the known): VI, 6, 8, 17-20; V, 9, 8, 8-15, etc. Priority of Nous: VI, 7, 13, 28-29 and especially V, 1, 7, 27-32. Some of these texts are not unambiguous, and the whole question merits further discussion.

5. *Meta.* ©, 8, 1049b4-1051a4.

6. One place where Aristotle comes close to saying “primacy of the actor” is at *Meta.* Λ, 6, 1071b15-20. It is true that his emphasis here is on the requirements of a prime movent. But we must remember that his prime movents turn out to be (and necessarily so) knowers. See also *Meta.* ©, 8, 1050b35-1051a2 where “what is much more scientific than science itself” can plausibly be taken to be the *act of knowing*.

Although the task would be rather formidable, I think it is possible to defend the view that Aristotle, in *Metaphysics* Λ, 7, was presenting, or beginning to present, God or the gods as self-knowing knowers. To mention one point: the translation of *voûs* by “thought” in this passage is unwarrantably abstractive, especially in view of the fact that this *voûs* is called “god” a few lines down, and “god” is compared with “us.” It would be more difficult to argue that Aristotle is consistently maintaining the priority of the *knower* side.

(Actor) side is the "senior partner" in this duality, the duality imitates the One *primarily from this side*. God is above (always in a positive sense) being, above the known, but most properly *above the knower*. He is the super-knower.

With regard to the person as lover:

The One does not love the world to the extent that this means "love the world as the object of his desire." Does he wish good to the world? He does more than wish good to the world, he is the sole ultimate effective cause of any good that is in the world. Does he wish good to the world as though he could do *otherwise*? The One is above freedom. (VI, 8, 8, 9-14) As though he could not do *otherwise*? The One is above necessity. (VI, 8, 9, 9-23) The same-other dichotomy and dialectic do not apply to the One. As the sole ultimate effective cause of any good that is in the world, he does more, not less, than love the world.

But does the One love the world in the sense that he "cares" for it or is "concerned" about the world and man? It should be possible to purge progressively even this conception of the taints of "refined anthropomorphism." The same type of formulas can be applied: the One is not concerned, but this does not mean that he is unconcerned, indifferent. He is above concern and indifference. Anything positive about concern — anything that does not involve the creature affecting (and so in a way causing) the Creator — can be said of God. God is not less than concerned but more than concerned.

It is basic Plotinism (and, in my opinion, basic philosophy) that what is first beneath the One is the Nous, the knower-known dyad. Conversely, the One is glimpsed as the source of this dyad. To see, then, why the One is not a person and why he can be described as the super-person involves a close meditation on the "internal constitution" of this dyad.

The knower-known dyad is the basic dyad, incorporating, or the source of, all other dyads. Furthermore, all the dialectics take place here, at the level of Nous. The dialectics of particular-universal, finite-infinite, circumscribed-uncircumscribed are subordinate to the dialectic of knower-known.

The philosophic argument I am presenting, however, is that a thorough thinking-through of the *primacy of act* leads to the conception of the primacy of knower not only over known but also over knowledge, knowing, mind, intellect, intelligence, "thought," etc. The proper word for "subsistent thought" is "thinker"; for "subsistent act of knowing," "knower." Knower expresses the ultimate actuality and concreteness towards which all these terms are reaching. Aristotle puts us at least on the track of this doctrine.

These reflections will enable us to modify considerably what Professor Armstrong tells us on pp.67 and 68 about the "non-personality" of the One and will point us again towards his "super-personality."

Thus, although the person *is* both universal ("we are most ourselves when we are most universal") and particular ("the ultimate particularity"), his deepest reality is not brought out in the dialectic of universal and particular,⁷ but rather in the superior dialectic of *Nous* as necessarily self-disintegrating and self-reintegrating. We can follow Plotinus a long way here as he takes up the self-proliferation of the second hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides* as the self-proliferation of *Nous* into *nouses*.⁸ The person is not just an empirical "instance" (in Professor Findlay's "Platonic" sense) of a knower, but rather because he is through-and-through knower he is in dynamic relation with other knowers. Nor — to say really the same thing in a slightly different way — is it an empirical accident that a person finds himself in "encounter" with other persons. It is because he is basically a knower that the person is necessarily in dynamic relation with other knowers. It is essential to being a knower to "encounter" other knowers.

The person is "particular," then, not precisely because his deepest reality is to be an "instance," but because as a knower he is dual and therefore engaged in multiplicity. The super-knower, the super-person surmounts the duality.

One can agree with Professor Armstrong that the encounter of man with God is incorrectly represented as an encounter of two persons. But the more profound characterization of the mistake here is not to say that this formula places God "inside the totality of being as one particular among others," but rather that it places him inside the realm of duality, dualities, and dialectic partner-

7. It should be noted in passing that "universal" and "particular" are not favourite words with Plotinus — his thought is not that abstractive. When he deals with the concrete one-many (*Nous*) and the concrete one-and-many (*Soul*) what he has to say is highly sensitive of the dialectic togetherness of unity and diversity.

8. Cf. V, 1, 8, especially 11. 23-27; V, 9, 8, 1-7 and certain indications in VI, 2, 22 (11. 7-11, 26-28).

The self-proliferation of *Nous* into *nouses* has its positive and negative sides. Positively, it does make the whole a "universe with all its rich variety" (A. p. 67), but negatively it comports a further recession from the One. And thus also "we are most ourselves when we are most universal" must be surpassed by *we are still more ourselves, or more than ourselves, when we are closest to the One*, that is, when we are beyond the multiplicity ("rich universe") appropriate to the *Nous* level.

ships. In short inside Nous. (One could say, at a venture, "like Hegel's God").

The "encounter" is rather that of person towards superperson. (Incidentally, it is well to recall here that the One is not other than (nor the same as) Nous, but Nous is other than the One. Man is other than God, man encounters God, God does not encounter man.)

In seeking to avoid a God "inside the totality of being" Professor Armstrong refers with approval to the many Christians and Neoplatonists who hold that "God is infinite and unknowable because absolutely undetermined and uncircumscribed." But these people are making a mistake and are saying something only slightly better than if they were to say that God is finite, etc. These notions, with their dialectic opposite-partners, have their role to play at the level of Nous, and there alone. The uncircumscribed, for example, cannot be or be known except in its dialectic play with the circumscribed. The infinite (which is really the same as the uncircumscribed) cannot be or be known except in its dialectic play with the finite. Etc.

Now if Professor Armstrong's statement at the end of his article that God is beyond all particularity, "even the ultimate particularity, at once the most intimate and most capable of approximating to universality which we call being a person or self" — if this statement has as its background the notion, or anything like the notion, that God is *too universal* ("uncircumscribed"?) to be a person, such a notion (or beginning-of-notion) must be corrected in several ways. God is not, properly, uncircumscribed — as we have just seen. Nor is he universal. The universal is the universal of particulars, the one of the many. The One is not universal, he is One.

Of course, he is not particular either. But even when we remain for a moment with the notions of universal and particular, we should not say "he is not a person because he is not particular — period." He is beyond person *on this showing* because he is above *both* universal and particular.

But it is doubtful if there is any easy path from the relatively abstract and subordinate dyad universal-particular to the positive super-personality of the One. The person is, as we have seen, not "essentially" a particular, but rather "essentially" the knower. The super-person can be seen, but only in a glimpse, from the outside, from the concrete and superordinate dyad knower-known. The One, as the super-knower, is the super-person.

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II

A. H. Armstrong

I am grateful to Professor Deck for his interest in my article, and we probably have a good deal of common ground. I find his remarks on love (p. 96) interesting and attractive. But he seems to have rather too much confidence in his "super" language. It is of course highly traditional. But just prefixing "super" or "hyper" to a term which one wishes to use about God does not really say very much. And I wish he had read the relevant passages of my article a little more carefully. He does not note what is said about Intellect (Nous) on pp. 63-4, which makes it rather unhelpful for his purpose to stress the priority of the knower in the knower-known dyad: for me it would be the priority of the knowing rather than the knower; and in any case I am not prepared to accept such an absolute priority, either in Plotinian exegesis or in my own thinking. I wish at this point he had paid a little more attention to Professor Findlay's (I think genuinely Platonic) way of thinking, as expressed in the passages I referred to and elsewhere. And in the passage on pp. 67-8 with which he is mainly concerned he has not, perhaps, sufficiently noted my extremely guarded language ". . . to say firmly that it is literally and exactly true that God is a person in some understandable sense, and that our encounter with him is to be represented as an encounter of two persons . . . We may still find it absolutely necessary, as Plotinus often does . . . use personal language about our meeting with him . . ." This should surely indicate that I do not think of God as *impersonal* or *less* than a person. And I am not saying that discursively apprehended universality can be more properly attributed to God than discursively apprehended particularity. In this context it would not be appropriate to distinguish the sense of such universality from the peculiar sense in which it may be appropriate to use "infinite" or "uncircumscribed" (which must of course be negated to prevent their being thought of as negative definitions — as "One" must also be negated) to point to God, as Christians much more than pagan Neoplatonists do completely uninhibitedly. What is appropriate in the context is to protest against giving (in the modern Christian manner) too much transcendental significance to the term "person", which seems to me in place only when considering finite beings in relation to the whole, the group, community or universe, of which they are members.

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