

# Neither One Nor Many: God and the Gods in Plotinus, Proclus, and Aquinas

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For many centuries, it has been all but impossible for polytheism to gain a serious hearing in the West as an authentic religious and philosophical option.<sup>1</sup> As A.H. Armstrong remarked a generation ago, “Even those who think that the question ‘God or no God?’ has been settled decisively in favour of the latter alternative ... are generally disposed to think that the question ‘God or the gods?’ was settled long ago in favour of the monotheist supposition.”<sup>2</sup> Recently, however, in a pair of fascinating and important articles in *Dionysius*,<sup>3</sup> Edward P. Butler directly challenges this presupposition. “Polytheism,” Butler contends, “is a theological position uniquely suited to stimulate novel solutions to philosophical problems concerning the logic of unity and multiplicity,”<sup>4</sup> and offers a promising way of addressing “the problem of particularity”<sup>5</sup> because it traces being back, not to a single First Principle, or God, but to a multiplicity of unique individual Firsts, or Gods.<sup>6</sup> Butler achieves this revindication of polytheism as a celebration of primordial diversity and individuality by reading Proclus’ doctrine of henads in such as way as to take seriously their identification as Gods, in opposition to the

1. Even Hinduism is sometimes rendered “acceptable” in the West by being treated as “not really polytheistic” through a reduction of the many Gods to Brahman, in a manner parallel to the reduction of Proclus’ henads to the One.

2. A.H. Armstrong, “Some Advantages of Polytheism,” *Dionysius* 5 (1981): 181.

3. Edward P. Butler, “Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold,” *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 83–104; *idem*, “The Gods and Being in Proclus,” *Dionysius* 26 (2008): 93–114. Henceforward referred to as Butler (2005) and Butler (2008) respectively.

4. Butler (2005), 85.

5. Butler (2008), 107.

6. I follow Butler in spelling ‘Gods’ with a capital ‘G.’ The conventional spelling of ‘God’ with a capital ‘G’ and ‘gods’ with a lower-case ‘g’ is tendentially monotheistic, implicitly denying that ‘the gods’ are truly supreme or absolute, or, in short, are truly Gods. A discourse that proposes to treat polytheism and monotheism on equal terms must accord the dignity of capitalization to the polytheist’s Gods no less than to the monotheist’s God.

common tendency to read it in a manner that subordinates the henads to a hypostasized “the One,” which, as alone absolutely supreme, is thus identified as “God” in a monotheistic sense. The latter reading, Butler cogently argues, reflects not only “a reflexive cultural bias privileging monotheism,” but also “a logic of unity and multiplicity for which intelligibility can only come at the cost of reducing multiplicity to unity and the diverse to the same.”<sup>7</sup> Such a logic involves at once a metaphysical “subordination of multiplicity”<sup>8</sup> and a “dissolution of all otherness”<sup>9</sup> in the mystical ascent to the divine, leaving “no room for the polytheist’s experience of wonder at the existence of unique divine individuals.”<sup>10</sup> These problems can be avoided, Butler argues, by appreciating Proclus’ understanding of the Gods as unique individuals who are truly primal, not subordinated to a hypostasized One above and beyond them. The real meaning of the Neoplatonic exaltation of unity, he insists, is not the subordination of multiplicity but the individual integrity of each being as the ground of its existence, an integrity that has its foundation in the many unique henads, or Gods.

In expounding the genuinely philosophical grounds and meaning of Proclus’ polytheism, Butler has rendered a valuable and much needed service both to religion and to philosophy: to religion, by showing, after some seventeen centuries of monotheistic triumphalism in the West, that polytheism should not be regarded as a primitive superstition but can be a profound and intellectually sophisticated religious position; to philosophy, by reminding us that readings of Neoplatonism which interpret the One as a single, simple First Principle fail to do justice to the radicality of the doctrine of the One as “beyond being” and therefore neither a being nor one. The One, indeed, is not a single being from which all other beings derive, but rather represents integrity or wholeness as the condition in virtue of which each being is a being. We are greatly indebted to Butler for not only pointing this out but expounding it with philosophical precision.

We may wonder, however, whether these ends are best served by defending polytheism *as opposed to* monotheism. Is a numerical multiplicity of Gods any better than a numerically single God? Does the former not risk dissolving unity no less than the latter dissolves otherness? In short, I propose to question the presupposed opposition between monotheism and polytheism, within which Butler, no less than his monotheistic adversaries, is operating. If we examine the origins of the Neoplatonic One in Plotinus, its development in the henadology of Proclus, and its inheritance by Thomas Aquinas, we find a

7. Butler (2005), 85

8. Butler (2005), 98.

9. Butler (2005), 84.

10. Butler (2005), 84.

common ground that is more fundamental than the polytheism-monotheism opposition. For all these thinkers, the Christian Aquinas no less than the pagans Plotinus and Proclus, the ultimate source of reality is *neither one nor many*; individuality is not dissolved but established at the highest level; all things as individuals participate immediately in divinity, in a way that transcends the hierarchical levels of being; and the procession of all things from the divine is, in Butler's terms, "polycentric."<sup>11</sup> Butler's reading of Proclus and revindication of the Gods is most welcome, but must be taken up into a wider perspective that transcends the very opposition between monotheism and polytheism in favor of a common philosophical vision.<sup>12</sup>

### I. PLOTINUS

Any satisfactory discussion of the One in Neoplatonism must begin with an account of how, in philosophical terms, we come to the idea of the One as the source of all reality. The argument begins with the Platonic and Aristotelian observation that "'being' and 'one' are convertible:" to be a being is to be one. As Plotinus says, "All beings (ὄντα) are beings by the one, both those which are primarily beings and those which are in any way said to be among beings. For what could anything be if it was not one? For if things are deprived of the one which is predicated of them they are not those things" (VI.9.1.1–4).<sup>13</sup> Since to be, that is, to be a being, is to be one determinate "this," every being is a being in virtue of the unifying determination whereby it is *this* being. "This is why they [the forms, or beings] are realities (οὐσιαι); for they are already defined and each has a kind of shape. That which is (τὸ ... ὄν) must not fluctuate, so to speak, in the indefinite, but must be fixed by limit and stability; and stability among intelligibles is definition and shape, and by these it receives existence" (V.1.7.23–27). Consequently, all beings, as beings, do not account for themselves but depend, in order to be, on determination or identity itself, which is not any one determinate "this," and thus not a being, but is rather that in virtue of which every being is one, is determinate, that is, is a being. And this is what Plotinus means by the

11. Butler (2005), 101–03.

12. The use of singular verbs in speaking of the divine (as in "the divine is neither one nor many") should not be taken to privilege monotheism. Rather, this is simply an inherent weakness of language, which is inescapably ontic and in which any term, therefore, is necessarily either singular or plural. In all statements about the divine the "is" (or "are") must in any case be read *sous rature*.

13. All quotations of Plotinus are from Plotinus, 7 vols., ed. and tr. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1966–1988), with emendations to the translation where needed for clarity or precision. In this passage, Armstrong rightly does not capitalize 'one' because there is an ambiguity as to whether it refers to the unity of each being or to "the One itself" as the principle of all beings. See Pierre Hadot, *Plotin Traité 9* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1994), 69 n. 1.

One, “the measure of all things,” (VI.8.18.3), “measure and not measured” (V.5.4.14), not any thing but, as Plotinus likes to say, the “power of all things” (III.8.10.1; V.1.7.10; V.3.15.33; V.4.1.36; V.4.2.39. VI.7.32.31), the enabling condition by which beings are beings.<sup>14</sup> Plotinus’ doctrine of the One as the cause of all things is thus fundamentally an expression of the existential dependence of every being as one, as determinate, that is, as a being. As he explains, “For even to say ‘cause’ is not to predicate something accidental of it [i.e., the One] but of us, because we have something from that, which is in itself; but one who speaks precisely should not say ‘that’ or ‘is’...” (VI.9.3.49–53).

Since to be is to be one, to be determinate, and thus to be dependent, it follows that the One, as the enabling condition of beings, cannot itself be another being, one of the beings. “That [i.e., the One] is not something (οὐ τι), but prior to each thing, and not a being (οὐδε ὄν) ... For since the nature of the One is generative of all things, it is none of them (οὐδεν... ἄτων)” (VI.9.3.38–41). Consequently, as Plotinus explains, “it is none of all things (οὐδεν τῶν πάντων), but prior to all things. What is it then? The power of all things” (III.8.9.54–10.1). And this, Plotinus explains, is just what it means to say that the One is “beyond being”: “A reality (οὐσίαν) must be some this (τόδε... τι), something defined; but that [i.e., the One] is not to be taken as a ‘this’; for then it would not be the principle, but only that ‘this’ which you said it was. But if all things are in that which is generated, which of the things in it are you going to say it [the One] is? Since it is none of these, it can only be said to be beyond them. But these things are the beings, and being (τὰ ὄντα καὶ τὸ ὄν): beyond, then, being (ἐπέκεινα... ὄντος). This ‘beyond being’ does not mean a ‘this’—for it does not affirm—and it does not say its name, but it conveys only ‘not this’ (οὐ τοῦτο)” (V.5.6.6–14). To say that the One is “beyond being,” then, simply means that the One, as the enabling condition and in that sense the source or principle of all that is, is not itself included in that-which-is as any member of it. And as the One is not any being, so also the One is not one, i.e., not one thing, a thing having the attribute of unity, for if it were it would be merely another being, rather than the condition by which beings are beings. “But if the One—name and reality expressed—were to be taken positively it would be less clear than if we did not give it a name at all: for perhaps this name ... was given it in order that the seeker, beginning from this which is completely indicative of simplicity,

14. On the One as condition, see Reiner Schürmann, “L’hénologie comme dépassement de la métaphysique,” *Les études philosophiques* 3 (1982): 335, and Cristina D’Ancona, “Determinazione e indeterminazione nel sovransensibile secondo Plotino,” *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 3 (1990): 448–51.

may finally negate this as well, because ... not even this is worthy to manifest that nature" (V.5.6.29–35). The One, then, is not, as has too often been claimed, an absolutely simple, undifferentiated monad:<sup>15</sup> "We do not, when we call it 'one' and 'partless', mean as a point or a monad" (VI.9.5.42). The One, therefore, as Plotinus says, is not only "outside all multiplicity," but also "outside any simplicity whatsoever (ἀπλοτητος ἡστινοσοῦν)" (V.3.16.15).<sup>16</sup> To say that the One is one or simple in any positive sense would undermine Plotinus' entire doctrine of the One as beyond being, "not any thing, but the power of all things."

Plotinus' doctrine that all beings depend on the One, then, does not mean that all (other) beings depend on a single and simple "first being," but rather that unity-as-integrity, or identity, is the condition in virtue of which anything is intelligible and so is a being.<sup>17</sup> As this condition, the One is beyond both unity and multiplicity and the opposition between them, as the ground of both at once. For a being's identity or selfhood, in virtue of which it is itself and so is a being, is at once its unity or integrity and its otherness from other beings. In discussing the internal differentiation within intellect or being, Plotinus explains, "If then the intellects [i.e., the forms, or beings] are many, there must be difference (διαφορᾶν). Again, then, how did each have difference? It had difference in becoming wholly one (εἰς ὅλωσιν)" (VI.7.17.29–30). Unity-as-integrity and difference are co-implicit and therefore equiprimordial: each being is itself in being different from others and is different from others in being itself. Consequently Plotinus describes the generation of all things from the One thus: "The One ... overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes an other" (V.2.1.8–10). This must be taken to mean, not that the One is a thing which overflows, which would contradict Plotinus' entire philosophy by regarding the One as a being and attributing to it an activity distinct from itself, but rather that the One is Overflow itself, that is, the very differentiation or individuating articulation

15. Contrast John Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1967), 25: "Why does Plotinus generally call it 'the One'? Surely because it is exactly what it is, an entirely indivisible unity."

16. Armstrong's translation, "any ordinary sort of simplicity," does not do justice to the strength of Plotinus' statement here.

17. The phrase "unity-as-integrity" is adapted from Rosemary Desjardins' phrase "unity-as-wholeness," which she aptly uses to express what Plato means by "the Good." See Rosemary Desjardins, *Plato and the Good* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 105–27. The term 'integrity' is adopted here instead of 'wholeness' because it connotes at once unity and goodness. We should not forget, however, its synonymy with 'wholeness,' and the etymological connection of 'whole' with 'holy.' Cf. also Schurmann, "L'hénologie," 337: "L'Un est le facteur par lequel toutes choses se coordonnent et en l'absence duquel elles se désintègreraient. Il est leur pure constellation ...". On "integrity" as the meaning of the Neoplatonic One, see further below, pp. 00–00.

whereby beings are distinct from each other. Since to be is to be determinate and distinct, differentiation or alterity itself, the otherness of beings from one another, is the condition by which beings are themselves, are intelligible, and so are beings. The very notion of “identity,” indeed, implies at once the integrity or selfhood of each being and its otherness from other beings. The One, therefore, as identity, may be regarded as pure Alterity, or better, “alterification” (not an other), no less than as pure Unity, or better, unification (not a one): it is not a principle of sameness at the expense of otherness, but rather of the integrating individuality in virtue of which each being is itself, is other than all others, and so is a being.<sup>18</sup>

Difference, therefore, including the individuality or selfhood of each being, is in no sense a declension from the One, as it would be if the One were merely an absolutely simple monad. On the contrary, the difference of each being from others is precisely the way in which the One is the immediate principle of each being. The One is thus manifest in each different being as its integrity, its selfhood, its unique individuality. Because the One is the principle, not of this or that aspect of being, but of all being simply *qua* being, it is therefore the principle of difference no less than of unity. This must be the case as soon as we arrive, with Plotinus, at the conception of a principle of being as such: no aspect of being whatsoever can come from any other source. This conclusion is implicit in Plotinus’ insistence that the One, unlike Aristotle’s First Principle, is not form, but beyond form (e.g., VI.7.32–33). Form always implies “whatness” or “essence;” it accounts for *what* a thing is, its generic and specific identity.<sup>19</sup> Hence it cannot account for individuality, which in the Peripatetic tradition is usually attributed to matter rather than form. But the One accounts for the *existence* of things, not merely what they are but *that* they are, and hence for each thing as a whole, not only its generic and specific but its unique individual identity. “All beings are beings by the one, both those which are primarily beings, and those which are in any way said to be among beings” (VI.9.1.1–2). The last clause of this sentence can and should be understood in both a Platonic and an Aristotelian sense. Taken Platonically, it means both intelligibles, which are beings in the full and proper sense, and sensibles, which, as images of true beings, are “beings” only in a secondary, analogous sense. Taken in an Aristotelian manner, it means both “substances,” of which ‘being’ is primarily predicated and which are beings in the primary sense, and “accidents,” which can be said to be only as inhering in substances. Unity-as-integrity transcends all such distinctions, because anything that is anything in any sense at all—intelligible

18. On the One as differentiation, see Eric D. Perl, “The Power of All Things: The One as Pure Giving in Plotinus,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1997): 301–13, esp. 307–09.

19. Cf. Butler (2008), 109.

or sensible, substance or accident—has some distinct mode of integrity, of selfhood, of identity, and is at all only by this identity. Every being is a being in virtue of *its* distinct identity. The One is not any “this one,” the distinct unity or identity *of* any thing, but rather just unlimited identity itself as the condition of all being as such. In Plotinus’ words, “That is one without the ‘this’; for if it were this one, it would not be the One itself (ἄνευ τοῦ τὸ ἔν· εἰ γὰρ τὸ ἔν, οὐκ ἂν αὐτοῦν)” (V.3.12.51–53).

Already in Plotinus, then, procession is “polycentric,” in that each being depends on, or is a being by, its own unity, which is the distinct mode in which the One, or unity-as-integrity, is present to it. Better still, we may say that procession is omniscenic, in that each and every being, at every level of reality, is an immediate expression of the One, the center which is nowhere and everywhere. The One is not a monadic center, a unitary producer of many products. Rather, as productivity itself, “the power of all things,” it is present and operative differently throughout every being. As the condition of all being as such, the One transcends the hierarchical levels of reality, from the intelligible down to the sensible. It does not stand isolated at the peak, separated from sensible individuals by the intervening levels of soul and intellect, but immediately pervades the entire sequence. Wherever we look, by any mode of apprehension, we find some mode of integrity or identity, and so we find the One, as the productive power of this or that thing; and, conversely, we never find “the One itself” (αὐτοῦν), as just identity, not the identity *of* anything. Hence, as Plotinus insists, “It is there and not there; it is not there because it is not in the grasp of anything, but because it is free from everything it is inot prevented from being anywhere ... Everything which is not somewhere has nowhere where it is not ... If therefore the ‘not somewhere’ is true and the ‘somewhere’ is false (so that it may not be in something else), it will not be absent from anything. But if it is not absent from anything and is not anywhere, it is everywhere independent” (V.5.9.13–24).

This vision of divinity as integrity, rather than a God who is one being and thus set apart from all other beings, is the basis for Plotinus’ defense of the multitude of traditional Gods against the Gnostic (and Christian?) monotheists who would, in his words, “contract” the divine to a single God, thus separating God from the world and leaving the world devoid of divinity. “It is not contracting the divine into one but showing it in that multiplicity in which God himself has shown it, which is proper to those who know the power of God, inasmuch as, abiding who he is, he makes many Gods, all depending on himself and existing through him and from him. And this universe exists through him and looks to him, the whole of it and each and every one of the Gods in it, and it reveals what is his to men” (II.9.9.36–42). Such a statement defies and surpasses the simplistic opposition between monothe-

ism and polytheism. It is not monotheistic, since it is expressly intended as a defense of the “multitude of Gods” (II.9.9.35) against those who would insist on a single God. But neither is it polytheistic, since it does not allow a positive multiplicity of First Principles: in that they are many and different, each of the many Gods is not “God,” which in this context evidently refers to the One itself. For Plotinus, all things are pervaded by divine identity, which “itself” is neither one nor many, but grounds both unity and multiplicity at once, co-implicitly and equiprimordially, and thereby constitutes every being in its selfhood, at once its integral unity and its distinctness from all others.

## II. PROCLUS

Proclus systematizes this vision in his doctrine of the henads, or Gods. The henads are the many individual unities, and, since unity-as-integrity is identical with goodness (*Elements of Theology*, prop. 13),<sup>20</sup> the many goodnesses, by which different beings are one and good: “Every God is a beneficent henad or a unifying goodness (ένάς ... αγαθουργός ἢ αγαθότης ένοποιός) ... But the primal (πρώτιστος) is the good simply and one simply (άπλώς τάγαθόν καὶ άπλώς έν), while each [i.e., each God] after the first (πρώτου) is a certain goodness and a certain henad (τις αγαθότης ... καὶ τις ένάς). For the divine individuality (ιδιότης) distinguishes the henads and the goodnesses of the Gods, so that each according to some individuation (ιδιωμα) of goodness makes all things good ... Each of these is a certain good (τιάγαθόν) but not all the goods ...” (*El theol.*, prop. 133). Beings are integrated, are good and one, in many different ways, and are beings in virtue of their goodnesses, their unities, their integrities. A henad, on the other hand, is not a thing that has unity or goodness as an attribute, but is only a unity and a goodness. “Every God subsists according to goodness beyond being, and is good neither by possession nor by being, but in a way beyond being ... For each is not something else and then good, but good alone (μονον), as each is not something else and then one, but one alone (μόνον)” (*El. theol.*, prop. 119). We must note Proclus’ precise terminological distinction between *μόνον*, alone, and *άπλώς*, simply. Each God, as distinct from any being, is good and one *μόνον*, alone, i.e., is not a thing which is good and one, but rather a goodness and a unity. But each God, as distinct from “the first,” is not good and one *άπλώς*, simply, i.e., not just goodness and unity, but rather a certain individual goodness and unity. The henads, then, are not beings, but rather, as the unities or goodnesses in which beings participate and in virtue of which they are beings, are determinative and productive of beings. “Every God is beyond being and beyond life and beyond intellect. For if each

20. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. and tr. E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1963). All translations of Proclus are my own.



is a self-complete henad, while each of these [i.e., being, life, and intellect] is not a henad but a unified thing (ουχὶ ἐνάς ἀλλ ἡνωμένον), then it is clear that every God is beyond all these ...” (*El. theol.*, prop. 115), and again, “Every God is a measure of beings. For if every God is unitary (ἐνιᾶος),<sup>21</sup> he determines (ἀφορίζει) and measures all the multiplicities of beings. For all multiplicities, being indeterminate by their nature, are defined (ὀρίζεται) through unity (τὸ ἕν); but the unitary (ἐνιᾶον) tends to measure and limit those things to which it is present, and by its power to bring into definition that which is not such ... Thus every multiplicity of beings is measured by the divine henads” (*El. theol.*, prop. 117).

The henads, then, are the unifying and, so to speak, “bonifying” principles of beings. And since beings are one and good in many different ways, these principles are many. It is in precisely this sense that there are many Gods: “The whole divine number”—i.e., the “number” or “set” (ἀριθμὸς) of Gods—“is unitary” (ἐνιᾶός): that is, every God is a unity, not a unified thing. This, Proclus argues, must be the case “if the One is God (τὸ ἕν θεός). But this is so, since the Good and the One are the same (τὰγαθὸν καὶ ἕν ταυτόν). For the Good and God are the same (τὰγαθὸν καὶ θεὸς ταυτόν), for that which nothing is beyond and which all things desire, this is God, and that from which and to which are all things, this is the Good. If then there is a multiplicity of Gods, the multiplicity is unitary. But that this is so is clear, since every originative cause introduces its proper multiplicity ...” (*El. theol.*, prop. 113). So, almost inevitably, we translate. Read in this way, the proposition would seem to mean that the henads are “Gods” because the One is God in an absolute sense, while the henads are individual unities produced by it. Such a reading would support a monotheistic interpretation of Proclus by subordinating the henads to the One, making only the latter “God” in the full and proper sense. But this is a misunderstanding, and supports the monotheistic reading only because it unwittingly presupposes it. Θεός in non-Christian Greek is not a proper name but a predicate term.<sup>22</sup> The meaning of τὸ ἕν θεός is therefore more like “(to be a ) God is (to be a) unity” than “the One is God,” and the meaning of τὰγαθὸν καὶ θεὸς ταυτόν is more like “(to be a) goodness is the same as (to be a) God” than “the Good and God are the same.” It is precisely the elision of the distinction between θεός as a predicate and as a proper name, and the consequent hypostasization of the One as “God” in a monotheistic sense, to which Butler rightly objects. Proclus’ point is not that “the One is God” in this sense, but that

21. Proclus uses this term as an equivalent of μόνον ἕν, to indicate that each God is a unity, not a unified thing. See Butler (2005), 90.

22. See Richard Bodéüs, *Aristotle and the Theology of the Living Immortals*, tr. Jan Edward Garrett (Albany: State U of New York Press, 2000), 4.

what it means to be a God just is to be a unifying goodness and a bonifying unity, because these are the causal principles of beings; and that there are many such. Thus Proclus explains, “Every henad co-establishes with the One the being which participates in it. For as the One is constitutive of all things, so it is cause both of the participated henads and of the beings dependent on the henads; but that which depends on each [henad], the henad which illuminates it produces. The One makes it simply be (ἀπλῶς...εἶναι); the henad to which it is connatural effects its being connatural with that henad” (*El. theol.*, prop. 137). Taken at face value, this would appear to mean that the One causes the henads, which then co-operate with it in producing beings. But within the context of Proclus’ logic of unity and multiplicity, it means rather that whereas unity in general is the principle of being in general, each henad is the productive unity *of* something. Each God is constitutive of being, in that it is a unity; and each is constitutive of *this* series of beings, in that it is *this* unity.

Every God, therefore, is a participated henad, i.e., is the constitutive unity *of* some being or beings. “Every God is participated, except the One. It is clear that that is unparticipated; were it participated and of something (μετεχόμενον καὶ τινός), on that account it would no longer be the cause of *all* things ... That the other henads are participated, we show thus. For if another henad after the First is unparticipated, what will distinguish it from the One?” (*El. theol.*, prop. 116). Proclus goes on to argue that whatever is secondary must include something other than just unity, so that with the secondary what we have is in fact not unity simply (ἀπλῶς), but a participated unity, or henad, together with that which participates in it. He concludes this proposition, “Therefore every henad after the One is participated, and every God is participated.” To distinguish every “this unity,” the participated unity of these or those beings, from unity simply (ἀπλῶς), what Plotinus called “one without the ‘this’,” Proclus in this proposition adopts Plotinus’ term αὐτόεν, “the One itself,” to refer to the latter. Similarly, in the *Platonic Theology* he explains, “Every God is participated by beings, and on this account falls short of the unparticipated henad which transcends all things, but each proceeds according to a different individuality (πρόεσι δὲ ἄλλος κατ’ ἄλλην ἰδιότητα).”<sup>23</sup> Each henad, in that it is not αὐτόεν, would not be itself, would not be *this* unity, in isolation from that which participates in it. Each henad or God, therefore, stands at the head of its proper ontic series, as the productive unity of that series.<sup>24</sup> The beings in that series thus share in

23. Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne*, 6 vols., ed. and tr. H.D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1968–1997), VI.2, 343.

24. Cf. D. Gregory MacIsaac, “The Origin of Determination in the Neoplatonism of Proclus,” in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to*

the unique ἰδίωμα, the individual character of that God; that is, the beings in that series are one and good *in the unique way* defined by their God, their henad, their individual mode of unity. This is the purport of *Elements of Theology*, propositions 125, 129, and 137. Prop. 137, of which the opening lines were cited above, therefore continues, “Thus, it is this [henad] which according to itself determines the being which participates in it, and in it [i.e., in that being] displays in an existential way its individual character which is beyond being.” The genuine causes of beings, then, are the henads in which they participate. “The One itself” is simply a generic way of referring to unity or integrity as what the henads confer on their products, each in its own unique way.<sup>25</sup>

As Butler says, therefore, “The One is not one, and its purpose is not the subordination of multiplicity,” and again, “the One neither *is*, nor is *one*,”<sup>26</sup> but rather signifies unity-as-integrity, as the general condition for being. We use the phrase “the One itself” “for our own convenience, to be able to refer to divine activity in a generic fashion.”<sup>27</sup> Unity, integrity, identity, is generically the condition for being; but there are many unique identities, and these are the henads, or Gods. The monotheistic tendency to posit the One as *another* principle, above and beyond the henads, is mistaken. “There is *no such thing* as the One Itself, if we mean something *different* than [sic] the henads; Godhead is nothing but the Gods themselves.”<sup>28</sup> It is the henads, the Gods, who are the actual causes of beings, “the real agents of the causality attributed to the One.”<sup>29</sup> Thus “the One is not a hypostatized One Itself, but *each God*,”<sup>30</sup> and again, “The One *is* as each henad, each God.”<sup>31</sup> Unity-as-integrity, considered as constitutive of this or that ontic series, is each of the henads, and “the One itself” is not something else above and beyond these. Thus, if we are “to think the henads as caused at all ... we must imagine the difference between producer and product as approaching zero, with no difference to separate them from their principle ... They would fall short in their unity were the One to be set over and above them:”<sup>32</sup> that is, they

*the Rev'd Dr. Robert D. Crouse*, ed. Michael Treschow, Willemien Otten, and Walter Hannam (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 148 n. 27: “[T]he ἰδιότης of a particular henad is that it grounds a particular σεῖρά of beings while transcending the oppositions within that σεῖρά.”

25. Cf. Butler (2008), 101: “The One here is not something subordinating the Gods, but that in virtue of which the Gods *have something to give* to Being” (italics in original).

26. Butler (2005), 98.

27. Butler (2005), 98.

28. Butler (2005), 98.

29. Butler (2008), 94.

30. Butler (2005), 97.

31. Butler (2005), 98.

32. Butler (2005), 95.

would not be unities alone (μόνον), but would be unified things, things that participate in unity. This is why, as Butler remarks, the henads are not strictly speaking a πλῆθος, a manifold, which would imply that they are many beings which have something in common and thus all participate in a higher principle, but rather an ἀριθμός, a number or set,<sup>33</sup> which, as unities alone rather than unified things, are participated by beings but do not themselves participate in anything.

The Neoplatonic exaltation of unity over multiplicity, then, as Butler points out, is not a matter of “reducing the number of entities involved,” subordinating and reducing otherness to sameness and multiplicity to unity, but rather of the integrity or “integral individuality” of each entity, as opposed to its dispersal or disintegration, as the ground of its being.<sup>34</sup> The doctrine of the One, or rather of the Ones (henads)—for there is and can be no doctrine of the One<sup>35</sup>—expresses the dependence of every being on unity, that is, on *its* unity, not the dependence of many beings on a single being. Thus, as Butler remarks, each being’s reversion to the One is in fact its tending toward its own unity or integrity.<sup>36</sup> And this unity at once integrates each being and distinguishes it from all other beings. Every being depends on integrity, but each differently, on *its* integrity; and these many unique unities of beings are the henads, or Gods. Thus, for Proclus as for Plotinus, the uniqueness and individuality of beings is not a declension from divinity, but is rather their participation in and manifestation of it, and the divine is the ground not of the unity of beings alone but at once and equally of the individuality of each being.

Thus Butler argues insightfully and accurately against the monotheizing tendency to hypostatize “the One itself” as a single, unitary First Principle at the expense of the many Gods. But there is another side of the issue, to which we must give no less attention. As Proclus carefully explains, each henad, precisely in that it is a certain unity and goodness (τις ἐνάς, τις αγαθότης), therefore is not “the One itself,” αὐτοῦν. Let us return to *El. theol.*, prop. 133, with which we began our reading of Proclus: “Every God is a beneficent henad or a unifying goodness (ἀγαθότης ἐνοποιός) ... But the primal is the good simply and one simply, while each [i.e., each God] after the first is a certain goodness and a certain henad.” Hence Proclus concludes this proposition, “For not all the subsistences of the Gods together are equal to the One, which is allotted so great an excess over the multiplicity of the

33. Butler (2005), 97–98.

34. Butler (2008), 102.

35. Cf. Christian Guérard, “La théorie des hénades et la mystique de Proclus,” *Dionysius* 6 (1982): 76 n. 26, cited by Butler (2005), 102: “stricto sensu’ chez Proclus, il n’y a pas d’hénologie, mais une hénadologie.”

36. Butler (2008), 102.

Gods.” Precisely because, as Butler says, “the One *is* as each henad, each God”<sup>37</sup> in that each henad just is the One, or unity, *qua* participated, for this very reason each henad *is not* the One *qua* unparticipated, or ἄπλως. Since every henad is unity *qua* productive of these or those beings, each of them is not “the One itself,” αὐτοῦν, which is unity in general as the ground of being in general, not the unity *of* anything (*El. theol.*, prop. 116). Thus, on the one hand, as Butler argues, we must not set the One above the henads as “God” in a monotheistic sense, for it would then be another One, over and above them, and they would have to participate in it, leading to an infinite regress of participated terms. But, on the other hand, we must distinguish the henads from the One, since each of them, as a participated unity, is not the One simply, or αὐτοῦν. Thus, while we cannot say that the One is another principle, above and beyond the henads, neither can we say that the One just is the henads, as Butler tends to do.<sup>38</sup>

This is precisely the purport of the seemingly paradoxical *El. theol.*, prop. 130: “In every divine order the first terms transcend those immediately subordinate to them more than the latter do the next terms; and the secondary terms adhere more closely to those immediately above them than subsequent terms do to them.” Since in considering the relation of the henads to the One we are addressing the highest level of all, it follows that, viewed from the side of the henads, their distance from the One itself, as Butler says, approaches zero: each God is the One, considered as the productive integrity of these or those beings. But viewed from the side of “the One itself,” the distance approaches infinity: the One, as not the unity of anything, is not any or all of the Gods. Each God, as a *unity* (not a unified thing), is infinitely close to the One; and each God, as *a* unity (not unity simply), is infinitely far from the One. This must be the case if we are to avoid hypostasizing the One. In order for the One not to be something else above and apart from the henads, we must say, with Butler, that the One “is as each God.” But for the same reason, since each God is not αὐτοῦν, it follows that the One itself, in order to avoid being hypostasized as something else, must altogether vanish into inaccessible, infinite transcendence, as not any of the Gods, not any “this one.” Thus, as Proclus argues, each God, although unknowable in itself, can be known from its participants, while “the first,” as unparticipated, is absolutely

37. Butler (2005), 98.

38. This point is well expressed by Maclsaac, “Origin of Determination,” 148 n. 27: “The monad and the manifold are really the same, but are considered from different perspectives. The One would be the principle as it is in itself, and the henads the One in relation to others. However, this is not to eliminate the One or the henads, because in Proclus’ system things are really different depending on the point of view from which they are considered. In other words, Butler is wrong to reduce the One to the henads, because it is just as proper to reduce the henads to the One, *and at the same time* to say that they are distinct” (italics in original).

unknowable (παντελῶς ἄγνωστον) (*El. theol.*, prop. 123), which implies that it cannot be posited at all. Precisely because “the One neither is, nor is one,” i.e., is not *a* one, we must distinguish each and all of the Gods from the One. Otherwise we make the mistake of merely reducing the One to the henads, a move that Proclus explicitly resists, and for good reason: precisely as a unique individual, each henad cannot be the One simply (ἀπλῶς).

Butler is right, then, to insist that “the First Principle” is not one, i.e., not *a* one, and so to resist the monotheistic reading of Proclus. But we must insist equally that neither are the Firsts many. For precisely in that the Gods are many, each and all of them are not the First absolutely. “The intrinsic value the polytheist accords to the distinct identities and autonomy of the individual Gods,” Butler remarks, “acts ... as a bulwark against illicit hypostatization of the One.”<sup>39</sup> But the same individuality acts equally as a bulwark against regarding the Firsts as positively many, for just in that the Gods are many individuals, they are not First. A positive multiplicity of Firsts would destroy the unity and coherence of the whole of reality no less than a positively single First would “dissolve all otherness.” For this reason, the Gods cannot be many, or individuals, prior to or apart from the beings that participate in them. Rather, as Proclus argues, each is unique, is itself, only *qua* participated. An unparticipated henad would not be a henad, but would be just “the One itself.” (*El. theol.*, props. 116, 133). The meaning of the doctrine of henads is that unity-as-integrity, or identity, uniqueness, the productive power of all beings, is differently productive of different beings. The Gods perform, as it were, this “adverbial” role, representing *how* unity is productive of this or that being. It is by identity, or uniqueness, that each being at once is an integral whole and is distinguished from other beings. But beings are unique in many different ways, for otherwise they would not be unique. As in Plotinus, the source of being is thus unity as differentiation and differentiation as unity, and so is itself neither unified nor differentiated. Here again the divine, as sheer productivity, “the power of all things,” can best be regarded as “selfhood,” at once individuating integrity and integrating individuality. It is therefore neither one nor many, but is differently manifest in each being as constitutive of that being. The many Gods are the various modes of divine selfhood in virtue of which beings are themselves, are one and unique, and so are beings.

Consequently, Proclus’ doctrine of henads can best be understood by returning to the interpretation of the henads as “pure participations,” “modes,” or “manifestations” of the One.<sup>40</sup> Butler is troubled by such formulations

39. Butler (2005), 99.

40. See Jean Trouillard, *L’Un et l’âme selon Proclus* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1972), 95; Guérard, “La théorie des hénades,” 78, 81.

because in his view they tend toward “effacing the individuality and autonomy of the henads.”<sup>41</sup> But as we have seen, Proclus is very clear that the *only* difference of the henads from the One is that they are participated (*El. theol.*, prop. 116). The henads just are the One, or integrity, considered as participated by these or those beings, and for this very reason are not αὐτόέν, “the One itself” or “simply.” Hence they are distinguished from each other, each as *this* unity and goodness, and just therefore from “the One itself,” only by what participates in them. Were it not for their participants, they would just be “the One itself,” and so would not be the many individual Gods. Consequently, the statement of Trouillard, to which Butler objects, is exactly right: “The henad can be defined only by that which it produces,”<sup>42</sup> and thus they are indeed “the event of their participants.”<sup>43</sup> Each henad is defined as itself, as this unity and goodness, only by that which participates in it, as the unity or integrity *of* these or those beings. If this were not so, if the henads were defined as individuals prior to their being participated, they would include in themselves whatever makes each henad this unity and goodness, and so would not be unities and goodnesses alone (μόνον), but good, unified things. Only the interpretation of the henads as participations or modes of unity can reconcile *El. theol.*, prop. 133, which explains that each God is a *certain* unity and goodness, with *El. theol.*, prop. 119, which argues that each God is *nothing but* a unity and goodness. Thus, as Proclus says, “the One” is the “cause both of the terms prior to being (τῶν... προόντων) [i.e., the henads] and of the beings” (*El. theol.*, prop. 116; cf. prop. 137), together, in that the participated terms *qua* participated, and so *qua* many unique Gods, would not be themselves without their participants. The Gods, then, are “manifestations of the One,” in that each God is unity, or integrity, as contemplated here, as the integrity of certain beings. Likewise, they are “modes of the One,” in that each God is a unique way of being whole, one, and good. Such formulations are unexceptionable as long as we do not fall into the error of hypostasizing “the One itself” as another principle above or behind these manifestations, modes, or participations.<sup>44</sup> The Gods just are the many individuating identities, the many integrities, the many modes of unity, that are exhibited by different kinds of beings, and as such are manifestations of integrity or unity in general as the generic condition for being. But this does not mean that they are manifestations of something else that

41. Butler (2005), 103.

42. Jean Trouillard, *La mystagogie de Proclus* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1982), 201. Butler (2008), 93, takes exception to this interpretation as “virtually effacing the henads.”

43. Butler (2005), 103, uses this phrase to express the position he rejects.

44. Butler (2005), 103 acknowledges that such formulations “would be harmless enough were the understanding of the system on firmer ground.” By resisting the monotheistic interpretation and insisting that the One neither is nor is one he has gone far to set it on such ground.

exists and can be known apart from them.<sup>45</sup> Rather, they are manifestations just in that, *qua* participated, they can be known, while unity in general or αὐτόεν is not any one and so cannot be known at all.

Consequently, while accepting Butler's critique of the monotheistic reading of Proclus, we must question the "facticity" that he celebrates in arguing for the absolute primacy of the many Gods.<sup>46</sup> "Proclus," he rightly maintains, "does not offer an account of the coming-to-be of many Gods from one God." If the many Gods came to be from one God, they would not truly be Gods. But he continues, "Rather, [Proclus] takes the existence of the Gods as primordial givenness."<sup>47</sup> For this reason, Butler argues, the Gods *as individuals* cannot be known philosophically, but only through divinely inspired myth: "For Proclus the mythology and iconography associated with the Gods originates directly from the Gods themselves;"<sup>48</sup> Proclus "quotes 'theologians' (e.g., Homer, Hesiod, 'Orpheus') for data about particular Gods ...,"<sup>49</sup> and "theology for Proclus is not a set of universal propositions about the nature of divinity but an empirical and pluralistic welter of myths, rituals, names and iconography."<sup>50</sup> Most revealing of all, "The henadic manifold ... consists of just those Gods who *happen* to exist, and who have revealed themselves culturally ...".<sup>51</sup> Ironically, Butler's celebration of polytheistic facticity echoes the insistence by many Christian theologians in recent years on the facticity of the content of their faith as precluding philosophical appropriation.<sup>52</sup> The phrase "happen to exist,"<sup>53</sup> ruling out any philosophical understanding or justification, implies that the Gods as individuals are not

45. This is what Butler (2005), 84 objects to, insisting that the Gods are "not the masks, aspects or potencies of anything."

46. Butler (2008), 109 (twice), 111.

47. Butler (2008), 110.

48. Butler (2008), 96.

49. Butler (2008), 97.

50. Butler (2008), 104.

51. Butler (2008), 108; italics in original.

52. This is a characteristic of virtually all "postmodern" theologies, but is perhaps most notable in so-called "Radical Orthodoxy," the most self-consciously "postmodern" movement in recent theology.

53. Butler's reference to Gods who "happen to exist" should be contrasted with Plotinus' intense effort in VI.8.7–10 to distance his doctrine of the One from any such "happened to be" (ἐτύχεν). Since the One is the principle of intelligibility, to attribute the One to chance (τύχη) would undermine the intelligibility of the whole of reality: "For if [someone] attributes to chance (τύχη) the nature which takes away the 'happened to be' (οὕτω συνέβη) from the others, wherever will existence which is not by chance come to be? But this principle takes away the 'as it chanced' (ὡς ἐτύχεν) from the others by giving them form and limit and shape ... But as for the principle of all reason and order and limit, how could one attribute the existence of this to chance?... [W]hen chance even seems to be in direct opposition to reason, how could it be reason's generator?" (VI.8.10.5–16).



just the unities manifested in different beings but are individuals prior to their being participated by beings, which Proclus expressly and repeatedly denies. Such a position would undermine not only the coherence of Proclus' system by regarding the Gods as individuals prior to being participated, but also the rational coherence of reality itself, by making being dependent on a merely "given," "factual" multiplicity of First Principles. Indeed, as so often in contemporary discourse, "facticity" here seems to be little more than a euphemism for irrationality, positivism, or fideism: we must simply accept the "given" myths, which, inasmuch as they are revelations of divine individuals, provide data about the Gods which in principle cannot be attained philosophically. "The threshold between the realm of form and that of *huparxis* [i.e., divine individuality] is therefore a gateway into the factual and the unique as the domain of revelation."<sup>54</sup> The appeal to "facticity" is no less irrational than the appeal to "mysticism" that Butler decries.<sup>55</sup> If, on the other hand, we understand the Gods as the participated modes of unity exhibited by different beings, we can, without positing a hypostasized One prior to the many Gods, make sense of the Gods as principles of being in all its diversity, made known in their individuality by the beings that participate in them. According to Proclus, the Gods, as unities alone and so beyond being, can be apprehended neither by opinion nor by discursive reason nor by intellection. "But," he continues, "from the things that are dependent on them, their individualities (ἰδιότητες) are known, and this necessarily. For the differences of the participants are distinguished along with the individualities of the participated" (*El. theol.*, prop. 123). Butler makes much of the distinction between henadic individuality and ontic difference, arguing that the former cannot be known from the latter, but only by revelation. But here we are told that the individualities of the Gods are made known by the differences of beings, thus avoiding the recourse to raw facticity as the source of our knowledge of divine individuality. The many Gods are made known by being in its intelligible diversity.

The henads, as the participated integrities of beings, transcend the hierarchy of hypostases, so that, as Butler remarks, "beings are divinized directly at each level."<sup>56</sup> Procession is thus indeed radically polycentric, in that different beings proceed not from a single God but from a multiplicity of individual unities, or Gods. Or rather, as in Plotinus, procession is omniscient: divine causal power, that is, unity-as-integrity, is immediately present throughout all being at all levels: "All things are full of Gods" (*El. theol.*, prop. 145) and

54. Butler (2008), 109.

55. Butler (2008), 101.

56. Butler (2005), 103. Butler cites Guérard, "La théorie des hénades," 81, in support of this reading.

“the Gods have filled all things with themselves” (*El. theol.*, prop.121). But once we pass from “polycentric” to “omnicentric,” the opposition between one and many disappears. Divinity is differently at work everywhere, in all things. The many Gods are *how* unity-as-integrity is everywhere differently, as the principle at once of unification and of individuation. Thus Proclus emphasizes the continuity of the divine: “And thus the procession of the Gods is one and continuous (μία καὶ συνεχής) from above, completed from the intelligible and hidden henads to the last division of the divine cause ... And one series and indissoluble order extends from above, through the insurpassable goodness of the primal cause and its unitary power ... And thus all things are continuous with one another” (*Platonic Theology*, VI.2, 345). This continuity offers an explanation of why, according to Proclus, the number of Gods is finite (*El. theol.*, prop. 149) but indeterminable:<sup>57</sup> the Gods are not infinitely but, we may say, indefinitely many. Wherever we look, we find divinity, as causal power, in a unique way, and in this sense there are many Gods. The One is not one, but is principle at once of unity and of multiplicity, by making beings one in many different ways; and these ways are the many Gods. “All things are full of Gods:” hence we may, as it were, zero in at any point or region of being and find *a* divinity, *its* divinity, *this* divinity.<sup>58</sup> And, precisely because we are zeroing in, we always find *a* God, never “the One itself,” which as unity simply (ἁπλῶς) is thus infinitely absent, as not any one of the henads. Each individual God is a unique moment of all-pervading divine causal power, which “itself” is everywhere and nowhere (*El. theol.*, prop. 98), neither one nor many.

### III. THOMAS AQUINAS

Thomas Aquinas, as a Christian philosopher and theologian, sets himself firmly in opposition to any doctrine of “many Gods” and is generally regarded as a principal exponent of “classical monotheism.” Does he not argue at length that God is one and indeed “maximally one” (ST Ia, q. 11, art. 4)? Does he not expressly praise Dionysius for “correcting” Proclus’ doctrine of many Gods, productive of different kinds of beings, by explaining instead that all of these are essentially the one God (*In De causis* I, lect.3)? And yet the issue is less straightforward than it appears, when we look at Aquinas’ doctrine of divine unity in a broader perspective, taking into consideration the apophatic dimension of his doctrine of God as *ipsum esse* and his explanation of what is and what is not meant by saying that God is one.

57. On this see Butler (2008), 107.

58. Cf. MacIsaac, “Origin of Determination,” 143: for Proclus “there is a potentially infinite internal regress in any term, because each term shares the structure of the whole ... The many entities in his system can be thought of as moments in the continuous unfolding of power from the One ...”.

Aquinas arrives at his doctrine of God as “just being” (*esse tantum*) or “being itself subsistent by itself” (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*) by a line of reasoning closely parallel to Plotinus’ argument to the One as the cause of being to all things. He begins by observing the distinction, within every being (*ens*), between its essence, or what it is, and its being (*esse*), by which it is (*De ente et essentia* III.6, III.9). From this distinction it follows that beings, as distinct, intelligible “whats,” do not account for their own existence: *what* they are does not explain *that* they are. Consequently, Aquinas argues that all beings are caused to be, i.e., depend for their existence on, a “first cause” in which there is no distinction between essence and *esse*: “And since everything which is through another is traced back to that which is by itself as to a first cause, it follows that there is some thing which is cause of being to all things, in that it itself is just being (*esse tantum*) ... and this is God” (*De ente* III.7). Since Aquinas reaches this conclusion by observing that beings do not account for their own existence, his identification of God as *esse tantum*, like Plotinus’ doctrine of the One, is an expression of the existential dependence of beings as beings. On the basis of this argument, *esse tantum* cannot be an expression of what God is, which, according to Aquinas, cannot be known from creatures (e.g., ST Ia, q. 2, art. 2, obj. 2 and ad 3; ST Ia, q. 3, prooem.; *Summa contra gentiles* I.14).<sup>59</sup> Rather, it means only “that in virtue of which there are beings.”<sup>60</sup> What Aquinas means by *esse tantum* or *ipsum esse* is thus closely similar to what Plotinus means by the One: not any being (*ens*), nor the being (*esse*) of this or that distinct thing, but the “power” or enabling condition by which there are any beings at all. God is “outside the order of beings (*extra ordinem entium*), as a certain cause pouring forth all that is (*totum ens*) and all its differences” (*In Peri hermeneias* I.14), and again, “the first cause is above being (*supra ens*), insofar as it is infinite being (*esse*) itself” (*In De causis*, prop. VI, lect. 6).

59. Cf. Brian Davies, “Kenny on Aquinas on Being,” *The Modern Schoolman* 82 (2005): 126: “Aquinas’s claim that God’s essence is *esse* is predominantly negative in import. It is not telling us what God is in any intelligible sense.” So also Philipp W. Rosemann, *Omne ens est aliquid: Introduction à la lecture du système philosophique de saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1996), 113–14: “Although we can state that God is ‘being subsistent by itself,’ this notion does not correspond, in truth, to anything we could imagine;” and Jean-Luc Marion, “Saint Thomas d’Aquin et l’onto-théologie,” *Revue thomiste* 95 (1995): 64: “Since it is ordinarily admitted that the divine *esse* remains, for Thomas Aquinas ... without a concept of being, without essence, without definition, without knowability, in short a negative name, why claim to treat it as an affirmative name, providing the equivalent of an essence, the equivalent of a concept, the equivalent of a definition, the equivalent of a knowledge?”

60. Cf. Brian Davies, “Thomas Aquinas,” in *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jorge J.E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 646: “For [Aquinas], ‘How come any universe?’ is a pressing and legitimate query, one to which there must be an answer. And he gives the name ‘God’ to whatever the answer is.”

Precisely because God is nothing but *esse*, it follows that he is absolutely simple, that is, in no way composite. Like Plotinus, Aquinas argues that no composite can be “the first cause,” that on which all beings as such depend, because any composite is dependent not only on its components but on the unification whereby they constitute one being: “Every composite is posterior to its components and dependent on them ... Every composite has a cause, for those things which are diverse in themselves do not come together into anything one except through some cause uniting them. But God does not have a cause ... since he is the first efficient cause” (ST Ia, q. 3, art. 7, resp.). God, therefore, just as *esse*, the universal principle of all being whatsoever, cannot be composite: “In every composite there is something which is not it itself. Although it can indeed be said of that which has form that it has something else which is not itself ..., nonetheless in the form itself there is nothing alien. Wherefore, since God is form itself, or rather being itself (*ipsum esse*), he can in no way be composite” (ST Ia, q. 3, art. 7, resp.). Thus the simplicity of God follows from Aquinas’ doctrine of God as just *esse* rather than a being (*ens*), a thing that has *esse*, and thus includes an essence distinct from its *esse*.

Aquinas’ account of the unity of God in *Summa theologiae* Ia, q. 3 follows from, returns to, and completes the doctrine of God’s simplicity.<sup>61</sup> There cannot, he argues, be many subsistent *esses*, for each of these would have to be distinguished from the others by something other than *esse*. Hence each of them would not be just *esse*, or subsistent *esse*, but would be compounded with a distinguishing essence distinct from itself. “If therefore there were many Gods, it would follow that they differ. Something, therefore, would pertain to one which did not to another” (ST Ia, q. 11, art. 3, resp.). Similarly in the *Summa contra gentiles* he argues, “If there are two Gods ... [and ‘God’ is predicated univocally of both], it follows that the name ‘God’ is said of both with the same meaning. And thus it follows that in both there is one nature according to this meaning. Therefore this nature is in both either according to one being (*esse*) or according to a different being in each. If according to one, they will therefore not be two but one only; for there is not one being of two things if they are substantially distinct. But if there is a different being in each, therefore the quiddity of neither will be its own being (*esse*) ... Therefore neither of these two is what we understand by the name of God. Thus it is impossible to posit two Gods.” Aquinas’ arguments thus parallel Proclus’ explanation of why each henad, precisely as *a* unity, as the participated unity of something, is not αὐτοέν, while the latter infinitely transcends the many Gods that are participated by and constitutive of different kinds of

61. On the cyclical structure of *Summa theologiae* Ia, questions 3–11, see Wayne J. Hankey, *God in Himself* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1987), 57–80, esp. 72–80.

beings. For Proclus, unity is present in beings in many distinct participated ways, as the unity of this or that thing. Consequently each of these many participated unities, or Gods, is not ἀπλῶς ἓν. In Aquinas' account of God as *esse tantum* or *ipsum esse*, the terms *tantum* and *ipsum* correspond precisely to this ἀπλῶς, referring to the "first cause" as unlimited, not contracted to or participated by anything. So, for Aquinas, being (*esse*) is present in many distinct contracted ways, as the being of this or that thing. And consequently, each of these many contracted or participated *esses* is not God, *esse tantum* or *ipsum*. The latter, therefore, is not many.

But for the same reason, just as Aquinas' God is not many, so he is not one in any positive or numerical sense. If he were, he would, once again, be contracted, be *an esse*, *this esse*, not *esse tantum*. In discussing the sense in which God is one, Aquinas carefully distinguishes "one which is the principle of number" from "one which is convertible with being" (ST Ia, Q. 11, art. 3, ad 2). The former signifies numerical singularity, while the latter is negative in meaning: "'One' does not add anything to being (*ens*), but only negation of division ... And from this it is evident that 'one' is convertible with 'being' ... The composite has not being while its parts are divided, but after they constitute and compose that composite. Whence it is manifest that the being (*esse*) of anything consists in indivision; and hence it is that everything guards its unity as it guards its being" (ST Ia, q. 11, art. 1, resp). And, crucially, it is only in the latter sense, not in the sense of numerical singularity, that 'one' is predicated of God. In article three of this question, "Whether God is one?" the second objection runs, "'One' which is the principle of number cannot be predicated of God, since no quantity is predicated of God." In replying to this objection, Aquinas does not deny this. On the contrary, he agrees: "One which is the principle of number is not predicated of God." Numerical unity would, indeed, impose a limitation on God. God, then, is not quantitatively or numerically one. The 'one' predicated of God, therefore, is not the 'one' which is the principle of number, but rather the "'one' which is convertible with being" (ST Ia, q. 11, art. 3, ad 2). Since this signifies only "negation of division," it follows that 'one' is predicated of God only by way of remotion: "God ... is not known to us except by way of privation and remotion. Thus there is no reason why certain privative terms should not be predicated of God ... and in the same way it is said of God that he is one" (ST Ia, q. 11, art. 3, ad 2). "God is one," then, means only that *esse tantum*, as such, is not divided by anything, for it would then not be just *esse*. It says nothing positive about God, imposes no quantitative or numerical limitation on him, and adds nothing to the statement that God is not many.<sup>62</sup>

62. Cf. Davies, "Thomas Aquinas," 648.

For Aquinas, therefore, “God is one,” although true in this apophatic sense, is not a numerical answer to the question, “How many Gods are there?” Indeed, Aquinas also explains that “the one which is the principle of number is opposed to the multitude which is number as measure to measured ... But the one which is convertible with being is opposed to multitude by way of privation, as undivided to divided” (ST Ia, q. 11, art. 2, resp). Since only the latter, and not the former, can be said of God, it follows that God, as *ipsum esse*, transcends the opposition between numerical unity and numerical multiplicity, and is thus neither singular nor plural. Aquinas’s insistence that “God is one,” therefore, is not a quantitative limit on the number of Gods, but serves rather to identify *esse* with “indivision,” or integrity, as the principle by which beings are beings. Hence Aquinas does not, in Plotinus’ terms, “contract the divine into one,” that is, regard God as numerically one and thereby at once limit God by identifying him as “this one being,” and make differentiation and multiplicity into an alienation from divinity.

On the contrary, Aquinas expressly argues that God, as *ipsum esse*, i.e., as the absolute principle of all beings, is the ground of the distinction and individuality of beings no less than of their sameness and unity. As in Plotinus, this follows immediately and necessarily from the understanding of God or the One as the principle of all being as such, and hence of all aspects of all that exists. As we have seen, God pours forth “all that is and all its differences.” Thus Aquinas devotes an entire article of the *Summa theologiae* to demonstrating that “the multitude and distinction of things is from God” (Ia, q. 47, art. 1). Within the members of a species, he acknowledges, form is individuated by matter. But as Aquinas points out, “matter itself is created by God. Hence it follows that even the distinction which comes from matter is reduced to a higher cause” (ST Ia, q. 47, art. 1, resp.). Thus the ultimate “principle of individuation” is not matter but being (*esse*), or God. For what God causes is not this or that aspect of a thing, but the thing’s very being; that is, God makes the entire thing, and all that it includes, be. And as we have seen, the being (*esse*) of a thing is its unity, the integration of its contents into one whole, in virtue of which it is a being (*ens*). Consequently, the individualizing integrity of each thing, which is its being, is its mode of participation in God, as being itself. Thus Aquinas argues, against the Peripatetics, that God’s knowledge and providence include singular things, because his causality extends to this singularity: “The knowledge of God extends as far as his causality extends. Wherefore, since the active power of God extends not only to forms, from which the account of universality is received, but also to matter ... it is necessary that the knowledge of God extend even to singular things, which are individuated by matter” (ST Ia, q. 14, art. 11, resp). For this reason Aquinas expressly aligns himself with the “Platonici” and against

the Peripatetics in upholding particular divine providence.<sup>63</sup> This doctrine necessarily accompanies Thomas' Neoplatonic understanding of God as *esse*, the principle of being as such, in opposition to the Peripatetic understanding of God as form, the principle not of being as such but only of "whatness." "All things are subject to the divine providence, not only in what is universal, but even in what is singular ... For since every agent acts for an end, the ordering of effects to the end extends as far as the causality of the first agent extends ... But the causality of God ... extends to all beings, not only as to the principles of species, but also as to the principles of individuals ... Hence ... it is necessary that all things, insofar as they participate in being (*esse*), so far are subject to divine providence" (ST Ia, q. 22, art. 2, resp).

The sense in which Aquinas' God is one, therefore, does not entail a "subordination of multiplicity" any more than does Proclus' doctrine that the Gods are many. Here again, God, as *esse tantum* or *ipsum*, neither numerically one nor numerically many, is the ground of each being's integrity, and so of unity and multiplicity at once and equiprimordially. *Aliquid*, other, no less than *unum*, one, is a transcendental:<sup>64</sup> both are convertible with being and hence with each other. The being of a thing, which is its integrity, is its otherness from all other things no less than its own unity. Thus, as in Plotinus, if God, as *ipsum esse*, is not one but Unity itself, or better, unification itself, the principle by which every being is one, then he is likewise not other but Alterity itself, or better, "alterification" itself, the principle by which every being is other. Such a theology affords ample room for what Butler calls "the polytheist's experience of wonder" at the divine, neither one nor many, as the source of the manifold differences of beings. Here again, procession is omniscient.<sup>65</sup> God, that is, *esse*, produces each being in its uniqueness immediately, differently, and from within: "God is in all things ... as an agent is present to that on which it acts ... Since God is being (*esse*) itself by his essence, it follows that created being is his proper effect, as to ignite is the proper effect of fire. But God causes this effect in things ... as long as

63. On particular providence as a Neoplatonic theme in Aquinas, see Wayne J. Hankey, "Neoplatonist Surprises: The Doctrine of Providence of Plotinus and his Followers both Conscious and Unconscious," *Dionysius* 27 (2009): 119.

64. Rosemann, *Omne ens*, offers an exposition of Aquinas' entire philosophy from the point of view of *aliquid* as a transcendental.

65. Cf. Rosemann, *Omne ens*, 80: "God is not only the final end of every operation, he is equally its first mover ... The *modus essendi* [of each thing] takes its origin from the same transcendent order as the end of the operation, that is to say, from an order which is not graspable in the empirical world, but is nonetheless present in it as its 'condition of possibility.' Every activity of the being is, if you will, anchored in God himself ..." And again, 84: "The autonomous operation of each being proceeds from a center of action—its being—which, paradoxically, does not fully belong to it...One could perhaps say that this center of operation is lodged so intimately in the heart of the being that it is not accessible to it."

they are preserved in being, as light is caused in the air by the sun as long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore, as long as a thing has being, so long must God be present to it, according to the mode in which it has being. But being is that which is innermost to anything and what is most deeply in all things ... Wherefore it follows that God is in all things, and innermostly” (ST Ia, q. 8, art. 1, resp.). God is innermostly present to every being *according to the mode in which it has being*, and hence to each being uniquely, in its individuality. The contracted being which is the integrity of each thing is its unique particularization of all-pervading divine causality. Here too we may “zero in” on any point within reality, never to pin down God himself, but always to find at work a unique mode of divine productive power, or *esse*, “itself” neither one nor many.

It may well be that this account will meet the common fate of attempts at irenicism and satisfy no one. The adherent of polytheism may feel that it does not do justice to the unique personalities of the Gods as, in Butler’s words, “not *whats* but *whos*;<sup>66</sup> while the monotheist may feel that it opens a door to pagan cult and does not adequately preserve the singularity of “the one true God.” But that, in a way, is precisely the point: the opposition between polytheism and monotheism is fundamentally cultic and confessional rather than philosophical in nature. Is this not at least in part why Plotinus, writing in an age before such confessional oppositions had attained any great political significance, can speak unconcernedly of “God” and “Gods” in the same breath, whereas Proclus, writing an *apologia* for traditional Hellenic (and other) religions in the face of Christian oppression must insist resolutely on “many Gods,” and Aquinas, writing an *apologia* for a monotheistic faith, must insist resolutely on “one God”? And yet, at a deeper level, all three philosophers agree that the divine transcends all such quantitative determinations. For all of them, therefore, the One or God is the principle not of unity alone but of unity and multiplicity at once, co-implicitly and equiprimordially, and so surpasses both. For Plotinus and Aquinas no less than for Proclus, individuals are no mere “accidents of the *infima species*;<sup>67</sup> individuality has its source at the highest level and is the immediate expression of divinity. Following the tradition of Plotinus, not only Proclus but also Aquinas sees the need to look beyond the universality implied by form, to individuating integrity or integrating individuality as the ultimate principle of all things. This is, in part, the very meaning of the insistence that the One is beyond form, or, in Aquinas’ terms, that *esse* is a higher actuality than form. For none of these thinkers, therefore, does the ascent to the divine entail a “beatific dissolution

66. Butler (2005), 85.

67. Butler (2005), 84.



of all otherness,” unless this is equally a dissolution of all sameness, as the divine lies beyond all such determinations as their condition and principle. In short, the simplistic and inescapably ontic categories of “monotheism” and “polytheism” cannot successfully capture an authentically philosophical understanding of divinity. Let us end, as we began, with the words of A.H. Armstrong: “[U]nbounded plurality as well as unity is somehow grounded in [God’s] transcendent and eternal nature, which is beyond the opposition of one and many, as it is beyond all such dialectical oppositions and therefore unknowable.”<sup>68</sup> We may hope that devout thinkers on both sides of the confessional divide can overcome this opposition in the articulation of a shared vision of all reality in its intelligibility, that is, each being in its unique selfhood which is at once its own unity and its otherness from all other beings, as the immediate manifestation of the divine.

68. Armstrong, “Polytheism,” 187.

