

Metaphysical foundations: One and Multitude

The modern age is reluctant to engage with metaphysics: perhaps because the prevailing view is that there is a high degree of unreality intrinsic to non-physical objects; perhaps because trying to frame metaphysical laws is deemed to be too difficult or too big for ordinary human minds; perhaps because metaphysics is thought to have no relevance to practical life. But are any of these possibilities true?

The truth is that just because we don't consciously engage with metaphysical concepts, doesn't mean that we are not basing our life on a set of metaphysical assumptions: these assumptions are likely to have profound consequences on our decision-making processes. From this point of view metaphysics underpins ethics.

Much of our puzzling over philosophical matters can be reduced to questions of one and many: we link a host of individual instances of things or actions or qualities to one concept, and, in turn, take one concept and work it out into a particular instance, understanding that that instance is one of many. We better understand horses, for example, by understanding the common elements shared by all horses, and likewise we understand the species 'horse' by exploring how that fits into the genus 'animal'. Upwards and downwards there is a play between unity and multiplicity, and whether we follow the Platonic view that causality runs primarily from top downwards, or the materialists' view that causes build from bottom upwards, we cannot avoid dealing with the metaphysical issue of one and many. That is not to say that a materialist proceeds through a conscious exploration of metaphysics: a genuine materialist would be unwilling to admit that there are over-arching immaterial laws which control the way matter behaves, because this is already giving ground to at least some kind of top-down view of reality. We will leave this issue to some wiser person who can resolve the worrying contradictions which spring up even before the first sentence of material metaphysics is completed.

Instead we need to look at the foundations (if that's the right word) of top-down metaphysics as developed by the long centuries of the ancient Platonic tradition – at a minimum we can see this as the history which runs from Parmenides (around 500 BC) to Simplicius (around 570 AD), or something over a thousand years.

Perhaps the most systematic philosopher of Platonic metaphysics was Proclus, one of the last heads of the Athenian Platonic academy who died around 485 AD): relatively early in his writing career he wrote a short but highly condensed treatise sometimes called the *Metaphysical Elements* but more accurately called the *Elements of Theology*. It runs rather like Euclid's *Elements of Mathematics*, starting with the simplest and most fundamental propositions and gradually building on itself in order to unfold a complex and comprehensive map of reality. Interesting Proclus himself wrote a commentary on Euclid – so the parallels between the two works is not a matter of chance.

Here is the first proposition, upon which everything else will follow:

Proposition 1: Every multitude partakes in some respect of the One.

For if it in no way or degree participates of the One, neither will the whole be one, nor each of the many things from which multitude arises, but each multitude will originate from certain or particular things, and this will continue *ad infinitum*.

And of these infinities each will be again infinite multitude. For, if multitude partakes in no respect of any one, neither as a whole nor through any of its parts, it will be in every respect indeterminate.

Each of the many, whichever you may assume, will be one or not one; and if not one will be either many or nothing. But if each of the many is nothing, that likewise which arises from these will be nothing.

If each is many, each will consist of infinities without limit. But this is impossible. For there is no being constituted of infinities without limit, since there is nothing greater than the infinite itself; and that which consists of all is greater than each particular thing.

Neither is any thing composed of nothing.

Every multitude therefore partakes in some respect of the One.

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Proposition 2: Every thing which partakes of the One is alike one and not one.

For though it is not the One itself — since it participates of the One and is therefore other than it is — it experiences the One through participation, and is thus able to become one.

If therefore it is nothing besides the One, it is one alone, and will not participate of the One but will be the One itself.

But if it is something other than the One, which is not the One but a participant of it, it is alike one and non-one, — one being, indeed, since it partakes of oneness, but not oneness itself.

This therefore is neither the One itself, nor that which the One is.

But, since it is one and at the same time a participant of the One, and on this account not one *per se*, it is alike one and not one, because it is something other than the One. And so far as it is multiplied it is not one; and so far as it experiences a privation of number or multitude it is one.

Every thing, therefore, which participates of the One is alike one and not one.

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After these two propositions, and their supporting arguments, we get the following three propositions:

3) Every thing which becomes one, becomes so by the participation of the One, and is one so far as it experiences the participation of the One.

- 4) Every thing which is united is different from the One itself.
 5) All multitude is posterior to the One.

This last proposition is important: it is really the metaphysical response to the question of whether reality is top-down (and therefore starts with a One) or bottom up (starting with a multiplicity – the almost infinite particles of matter). Here is Proclus’s supporting argument:

For if multitude is prior to the One, the One indeed will participate of multitude, but multitude which is prior will not participate of the One, since prior to the existence of the One that multitude was. For it does not participate of that which is not: because a participant of the One is one and at the same time not one — but, on the hypothesis, the One will not yet subsist, that which is first being multitude. But it is impossible that there should be a certain multitude which in no respect whatever participates of the One. (*See the first proposition*) Multitude, therefore, is not prior to the One.

But if multitude and the One subsist simultaneously, they will be naturally co-ordinate with each other, and intimately related. Nothing in time prohibits this, since neither is the One essentially many, nor is multitude the One, because they are directly opposite to each other by nature, if neither is prior or posterior to the other. Hence multitude essentially will not be one, and each of the things which are in it will not be one, and this will be the case to infinity, which is impossible. Multitude, therefore, according to its own nature participates of the One, and there is no thing of it which is not one. For if it is not one it will be an infinite, consisting of infinites, as has been demonstrated. Hence it entirely participates of the One. If therefore the One, which is essentially one, in no possible respect participates of multitude, multitude will be wholly posterior to the One — participating indeed of the One, but not being participated by it.

But if the One participates of multitude, subsisting indeed as one according to its essence, but as not one according to participation, the One will be multitude, just as multitude is united by reason of the One. The One therefore will communicate with multitude, and multitude with the One. But things which coalesce and communicate with each other in a certain respect, if they are impelled together by another, that is prior to them: but if they themselves harmonize they are not antagonistic to each other. For opposites do not hasten to each other.

If therefore the One and multitude are oppositely divided, and multitude so far as it is multitude is not one, and the One so far as it is one is not multitude, neither will one of these subsisting in the other be one and at the same time two.

And if there is something prior to them, which impels them to harmonize, this will be either one or not one. But if it is not one, it will be either many or nothing. But neither will it be many, lest multitude should be prior to the One, nor will it be nothing. For how could nothing impel together those things which are something or many? It is therefore one alone. For this one is not many, lest there should be a progression to infinity. It is therefore the One itself, and all multitude proceeds from the One itself.

If we can see the inescapable reasoning behind the idea that One exists *causally* before many, then the next step is to consider how One proceeds from itself and produces (or, if you like, emanates) multiplicity. For Proclus the first unified things (that is to say things which are both one and not-one) can only be unified from things which are one, and only later in the metaphysical scheme can we have unified things made up of other unified things. Thus his sixth proposition is, “Every multitude consists either of things united, or of unities.”

If the top of the metaphysical scheme is One alone, what comes next, if we are to follow the implications of this proposition, are things which the simplest of things – not complexes made up of complexes – and these are the “divine units”: things which are dominated by One, but which have a minimum of multiplicity to differentiate them from the One itself.

An essential part of the path of philosophy is the training of the mind in order to look at each thing as it is, rather than as part of a greater complexity. For example, to look at justice simply as itself, rather than as embedded in the workings of a society, a court of law, or an ecological system.

This is not something which is commonly required of us in our ordinary educational systems (at least not to any great extent); but in Platonic metaphysics such an ability is essential, and the pursuit of metaphysics is itself an opportunity to exercise the mind in this way. Like any new exercise, the initial stages are difficult – perhaps even painful! – but persistence is the key, and since metaphysical principles underlie all levels of reality, pushing passed the early resistance to thinking without concretizing will yield unexpected but great rewards. As Socrates says in the seventh book of the *Republic* (527e), “the soul through these disciplines has an organ purified and enlightened, which is blinded and buried by studies of a different kind, an organ better worth saving than ten thousand eyes, since truth becomes visible through this alone.”

Where before there is haziness and even darkness, the determined metaphysician will eventually say,

“Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.”