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## The One, But Not the Only

Lauren Durham  
*University of Dayton*

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## The One, But Not the Only

### Writing Process

For this particular assignment, we had to reconstruct the main points that Plotinus, an ancient philosopher and educator, presents in his work titled the *Enneads*. In order to reorganize and retell his elaborate ideas appropriately, we had to come to understand the text in a way that would make our own interpretations easy to convey to audiences. In addition to reconstructing the *Enneads*, a comparison between a previously read creation story and Plotinus's ideas had to be made. After numerous in-class discussions, I established a logical order to present Plotinus's various cosmological entities. I felt that beginning with the most powerful entity, The One, helped funnel clear descriptions for the rest of the cosmology. After thoroughly reading the text and drawing on group work, I felt that the two creation accounts in Genesis 1-3 contain striking similarities between God and The One while noticeable differences are also present. After developing multiple drafts and receiving suggestions from my professor and peers, I felt that my final draft explained Plotinus's philosophical ideas in a clear, logical manner.

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# The One, But Not the Only

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*Lauren Durham*

A deep fascination in answering life's greatest, most challenging questions has propelled philosophers and deep thinkers for centuries. Curiosity and a devotion to knowledge have led individuals to construct elaborate theories that attempt to explain the origins of humanity and what lies beyond the visible, tangible world. In the third century, Alexandria was the ideal location for anyone looking to expand their views, and as an effect, Hellenistic philosophy flourished there. Plotinus (d. 270 CE), an Egyptian philosopher and educator, revolutionized society's views of the cosmos with his text *The Enneads*. Although his thoughts stemmed from the beliefs of the famous Plato, Plotinus presented a multitude of his own ideas about the cosmos. He believed that different entities, organized in a hierarchy, emanate, or reproduce, until individual souls and beings exist. In *The Enneads*, The One, an all-powerful, all-knowing entity from which creation originates, remains above The Intelligence and The Soul. Intelligence stands superior to The Soul, but the two work together in The One's image to form the material world.

Plotinus's cosmology assigns The One as the most powerful entity with the other two hypostases below. With its independent perfection and power, The One does not need anything but itself (451-452). It can stand alone, yet it plays a part in producing everything else in the cosmos. Plotinus explains, "What becomes perfect becomes productive. The eternally perfect is eternally productive, and what it produces is eternal, too, although its inferior" (451). As a result of The One's perfection, it unknowingly reproduces, creating other entities without playing an active role in the creation. This process is known as emanation. Plotinus compares the act of emanation to the sun (452). When light and heat beam down on the Earth, the sun stays the same as it was before. Although rays of sunlight affect life below, the sun naturally gives a part of itself away while still

remaining whole. The One acts in a very similar way: While an image of its perfection is emanated, the creation lacks the full prestige of its creator. Plotinus articulates the ultimate power and perfection that defines The One.

From The One comes the next hypostasis, Intelligence, which understands that its power, purpose, and entire existence depend on The One. Plotinus describes the essence of Intelligence, saying, “There is contained all that is immortal, intelligent, divine. There is the place of every soul. There is the place of rest” (450). Within this description, Plotinus shows his audience the perfection that Intelligence embodies. However, the lack of full divinity in comparison to The One is also evident. Because Intelligence is merely a product of The One, it does not embody the full divinity and perfection that its creator beholds. The One creates Being alongside Intelligence and intertwines the two. According to Plotinus, “It is true that The Intelligence and Being exist simultaneously and together and never apart ... The Intelligence inasmuch as it thinks, and Being inasmuch as it is the object of thought” (450). Although its relationship with Intelligence is so interconnected, Being is not one of the three hypostases. Being, however, is formed through emanation in the same way that Intelligence and Plotinus’s third and final hypostasis, The Soul, are created.

Similar to how Intelligence relies on The One, The Soul depends on Intelligence. Through multiplicity, or the process of creating more, The Soul forms directly from Intelligence. In a similar manner as before, The Soul receives only a fraction of The One’s divinity through its creation process. Because it comes from Intelligence and not directly from The One, The Soul’s level of perfection is less than The Intelligence’s. Although less perfect than the hypostases above, The Soul has its own set of responsibilities. Plotinus elaborates, “The Soul’s presence gives value to a universe that before was no more than an inert corpse, water and earth, or weather darksome matter and nonbeing” (449). The Soul is responsible for giving life to the material world through multiplicity. Individual souls are created by The Soul, so the two entities have natural connections to one another. Although The Soul has relations to the souls it produces, The Soul’s perfection cannot be tainted by the ignorance that consumes beings and individual souls in the material world. Through emanation beginning with The One, audiences can understand how the three hypostases coexist.

The two remaining groups in Plotinus’s cosmos, souls and beings, remain in the material world. While The Soul is merely a thought or concept, individual souls exist within each being. Because they are formed by The Soul, they embody

a divine purpose. With each earthly temptation, the soul's connection to a higher power gets lost. Although the freedoms and choices faced by individual souls can lead to their divine creator, they can also lead to evil and confusion (448-449). Individual souls tend to forget their origins due to the distractions within the material world. They are often so focused on what is directly in front of them that they miss the bigger picture. The great challenge of existence calls upon individual souls to search for their foundations, which can be found within the wisdom and comfort of The Soul. Similar to souls, beings are formed from the multiplicity of The Soul and ultimately The Intelligence. Plotinus describes the two entities in his cosmology that make up the tangible world to demonstrate the concept of multiplicity.

As shown, Plotinus crafts a cosmology that begins with the most important hypostasis, The One, and everything else in creation supposedly emanates from it. Because Plotinus's description of The One so closely resembles monotheistic beliefs, *The Enneads* have been compared to religious creation stories for centuries. Genesis 1-3, the Jewish and Christian creation accounts, convey God as an active and protective fatherly figure. In the first account, God creates the sky, the sun, day, night, plants, animals, and humans by simply commanding his will to be done (1-2). Creation is described as harmonious and a reflection of God himself. In the second account, God creates man (Adam) before woman (Eve). They are placed in the Garden of Eden and are warned by God to avoid eating fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge (2). When Adam and Eve ultimately disobey, God is furious and banishes them from the oasis he created. Both of these accounts in Genesis 1-3 show God's active involvement with his creation.

Plotinus's idea of The One in *The Enneads* partially contradicts Genesis, thus resulting in an apparently counterintuitive argument. God's attentiveness in creating the world contrasts with the idea that The One is not aware of his emanation. According to Plotinus, "What is begotten by The One must be said to be begotten without any motion on the part of The One" (451). In the first account of Genesis, God strategically plans out how the world will function. This meticulous involvement shows readers that God, the most powerful presence in Christianity and Judaism, wanted his creation to reflect his divinity and be designed in a particular way. In the second account of Genesis, God directly communicates with Adam and Eve to protect them, and after they disobey, God reprimands them. These examples show how God, the highest power in the two faith practices, interacts with creation. Plotinus's origins of the three hypostases

compared to beings do, however, align with Genesis's description of God and humanity. In the *Enneads*, beings are said to be of the material world and created from The Intelligence (452). As demonstrated through the creation stories, human beings are made by God, thus proving a distinction between God's divinity and humankind's dependency on a higher power. These examples show that while God remains superior to humanity, The One may play a more active part in the creation of beings than Plotinus recognizes or depicts.

Plotinus's cosmology in *The Enneads* altered the ways people in the Middle Ages viewed themselves and a world greater than their own. Philosophical ways of thinking generated patterns of open-mindedness relating to life's most difficult questions. While no one truly knows what lies beyond the material world, Plotinus's attempt at explaining the unknown aligns with the beliefs of numerous religions. Present-day Christianity and Judaism specifically mirror certain aspects of Plotinus's ideas within their teachings. The concept of The One closely resembles God, making the presentation of cosmology easier for religious communities to comprehend. Although other theories have developed, Plotinus's hierarchy of the three hypostases—The One, The Intelligence, and The Soul—still holds merit today.