

Bhakti and Henadology*

Edward P. Butler

ABSTRACT: In henadological Platonism, the significance of ‘the One’ is understood to lie, not in an eminent singular entity, but in the modes of unity and the ways of being a unit. The science of units *qua* units is a systematic ground and counterweight to substance-based ontology. It manifests an organic bond with theology as the science of relation to supra-essential individuals or Gods. Because of the basic nature of unity relative to being, doctrines respecting unity tend to situate themselves as critiques of ontology; they exhibit both an analytical and a soteriological value. Bhakti is not a sectarian movement but is rather an inquiry at once speculative and practical into the nature of the relationship between the human and the divine. It bridges the diverse genres of ancient Indian thought (including the theophanic/cultic, the epic, along with diverse philosophical perspectives) and it displays key commonalities with henadological Platonism. This paper begins the process of identifying these common themes with particular reference to the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Chief among its themes is the distinction between structuring cause and structured mixture, which runs through Platonism from the *Phaedo* to the doctrine of principles, and which parallels the account of action in the *Gītā* as freedom independent of result, insofar as the latter pertains to the solidarity of worldly causality heteronomous to the agency of the *ātman*.

A recent article¹ has opened a new and fruitful path for comparative work on Indian and Hellenic thought, urging us to consider the parallels between Platonism and bhakti theory as represented in the *Mahābhārata*. The present essay seeks to contribute to this project, based upon specialist knowledge of henadological Platonism, but making no claims to specialist knowledge of the Indian texts it treats. Furthermore, my intention is not to argue for historical influence, but rather to ascertain the proper conceptual foundation for comparison and dialogue between these philosophical traditions.

Accordingly, the Platonism upon which I draw is not intended to represent a particular historical moment or phase of it, but rather the fullest systematic expression Platonism

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¹ Vishwa Adluri, “Plotinus and the Orient: *Aoristos Dyas*,” in Pauliina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism* (New York City: Routledge, 2014), pp. 77-99.

achieved at the end of antiquity, as we find it in Proclus and Damascius. Vedānta has been the favored object of comparison with Platonism in previous scholarship,² yet only in bhakti theory do we find a clear counterpart to the most important structure in systematic Platonism, namely a first principle which is a principle of individuation beyond being, from which being is emergent and upon which being is dependent. The Platonic distinction between Unity (units) and Being as fundamental orientations for thought, that is, between henology and ontology, is captured in bhakti theory in the conceptual distinction between the object of devotion as *Īśvara* or *Bhagavat*, a divine person and free agency, as *who*, on the one hand, and as *Brahman*, the principle of Being, or *what*, on the other.

Personhood, who-ness as distinct from what-ness, is far richer than mere anthropomorphism, and while there is no single technical term answering to it in Platonism, it can be inferred from the attributes accorded in Proclus to the henads or Gods.³ The identification of personhood with divinity as such is expressed in bhakti theory through the concept of *puruṣa*; thus, for example, the *Gītā* states that “the divine-principle [*adhidaivata*] is *puruṣa*” (8.4).⁴ For the Platonist, the highest mode of existence, that of the henads, which is personhood ontologically prior to form, is in turn reflected ambivalently in mortal singulars who are persons but also participants in form. In the

² The state of the comparative literature on Platonism and Indian thought can be fairly judged from the essays in *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982) and *Neoplatonism and Indian Philosophy*, ed. Paulos Mar Gregorios (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002).

³ Such as, but not limited to, having uniqueness or peculiarity (*idiotês*) superior to difference, existence (*huparxis*) superior to being as essence or substance, being self-constituting (*authupostatos*), self-perfect or being an end in oneself (*autotelês*), autarchic (*autarkês*), and, of course, having knowledge and will (*boulêsis*).

⁴ Passages from the *Gītā* are as translated by Georg Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā: A New Translation* (Boston: Shambhala, 2014), though sometimes slightly modified.

devotional encounter, whether as conceptualized in bhakti theory or in the writings of theurgical Platonists, through the principle that like is known by like, the worshiper affirms their unique personhood and transcends formal relations, that is, those relationships constituted by identity or likeness. Such relations, even essential ones, are posited in this encounter as adventitious. In texts such as the *Bhāgavata Purāna* (2.10.6), for example, we find an opposition between unique or own-form (*svarūpa*) and form (*rūpa*) in general, from which one is liberated in the devotional relation.⁵ In henadology, the ontological ground for the liberation of unique personhood in the worshiper is given through the structural difference between two kinds of reversion, or *epistrophê*, the one eidetic, that is, according to forms or *eidê*, the other theurgical, through participation in divine series.⁶ Because each plane of being is directly produced by a proper order of supra-essential Gods, theurgical reversion is immediate for a member of any class of beings, without an ascent through intermediate levels of formation. Similarly, in the *Gītā* Kṛṣṇa states that “I am the same in all beings ... But those who worship Me with devotion, they are in Me and I am also in them” (9.29), which occasioned discussions in the literature concerning the God’s seemingly contradictory impartial and partial disposition;⁷ but this contradiction resolves itself in a henadological reading, insofar as

⁵ The importance of *svabhāva* and *svadharma* in the *Gītā* parallels in this respect that of technical terms with a ‘self-’ component such as *autotelês*, *authupostatôs*, and *autarkês* in henadology. I would suggest further that the technical role of *idiotês*, ‘peculiar/peculiarity’, in Proclus’ thought can be compared fruitfully with that of *viśeṣa*, ‘particular/particularity’ in Madhva.

⁶ I have discussed the two modes of reversion in “Offering to the Gods: A Neoplatonic Perspective,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 2.1 (2007), pp. 1-20.

⁷ David Buchta, “Dependent Agency and Hierarchical Determinism in the Theology of Madhva,” pp. 256-276 in Matthew R. Dasti and Edwin F. Bryant, eds., *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 274f.

the ‘sameness’ displayed by the God is relative to the class of beings, whereas the relationship of the God being ‘in’ the worshiper and they ‘in’ the God is existential. This relationship is the only one that can exist between utterly unique entities *qua* unique, insofar as there can be no common form to mediate this relation.⁸ Hence the Platonist understands the structure of the henadic manifold as all-in-each, because mediation would render the individual unit less one. In the *Gītā* as well, of course, Kṛṣṇa invites Arjuna to see all the other Gods in him (11.6), as well as the whole universe (11.7), a typical affirmation of what I have termed the ‘polycentric’ character of polytheism.⁹

In trying to marshal evidence for a common complex of ideas at the heart of bhakti theory and henadological Platonism, we fortunately find, early in the *Gītā* and early in the Platonic tradition, a point of near doctrinal symmetry. Kṛṣṇa’s reply to Arjuna in Book 2 begins from the affirmation of the immortality of whatever is truly proper to the self through the independence of a causal agency from compresence of its opposite, affirming the Parmenidean principle that “Of nonbeing there is no coming-into-being; of being there is no disappearance” (2.16), just as the *Phaedo* does in its final immortality argument. Abhinavagupta, in his commentary on Book 2 of the *Gītā*, seems to echo the very words of the *Phaedo* (105b-106c): whereas the *Phaedo* compares the role of fire as inseparable from bringing heat and the soul as inseparable from bringing life, Abhinavagupta affirms that “As the heat belongs to the sun and cannot be separated from it, in the same way, the own-nature (*svabhāva*) of various creatures is not different from

⁸ Note the *Gītā*’s characterization of the *ātman* as “incommensurable” (*aprameyasya*) (2.18).

⁹ For a fuller account of the structural characteristics of the henadic manifold, see “Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold,” *Dionysius* 23 (2005), pp. 83-104; on ‘polycentric polytheism’, see “Polycentric Polytheism and the Philosophy of Religion,” *The Pomegranate* 10.2 (2008), pp. 207-229.

these creatures.”¹⁰ It can no more be a question in the *Phaedo* passage of a generic essence of soul than it can be in Abhinavagupta of the mere species-character of creatures. Instead, in both it is a matter of *who* is peculiarly alive in *this* living being. The salvific project of identifying oneself with what is immortal in oneself therefore coincides with the epistemic project of identifying a genuine source of agency in the self amid manifold alienating determinations. Action, therefore, rather than ontic composition, is placed at the center of the problem of identity. Action is, of course, thematic for the *Gītā*; but for Plato, too, agency is prior to form, as Cause, in the doctrine of principles from the *Philebus*, is prior to form as Mixture and its elements, Limit and the Unlimited. So too, in his own account of the process of reincarnation in the individual soul, Plato explains that the order or structure of the soul, its *taxis*, is not to be found in the paradigms among which the soul chooses, because this *taxis* arises instead *from the choice itself* (*Republic* 618b). In this fashion the *who* of the soul, the one who chooses, is distinguished from whatever the soul may become, and hence from whatness altogether.¹¹

This ontological doctrine is the highest sense of the primacy of action to its results. Action performed without concern for its result, a central theme of the *Gītā*, may be compared with action as *praxis* in Aristotelian ethical theory, with the difference that

¹⁰ Abhinavagupta’s *Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita (Gītārtha-saṁgraha)*, trans. Boris Marjanovic, 2nd ed. (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2004), p. 50.

¹¹ I have discussed the philosophical significance of Plato’s recourse to reincarnation in “Animal and Paradigm in Plato”, *Epoché* 18.2 (Spring 2014), pp. 311-323. By contrast, *choice* plays only a very small part in Indian accounts of reincarnation, however this I would argue has to do with the much narrower role reincarnation is playing in Plato. It should be noted that similar consequences of the doctrine of reincarnation for the philosophical question of individuation arise in Madhva, for whom the doctrine plays a crucial role in his argument for intrinsic difference (*svarūpabheda*) (see, e.g., B.N.K. Sharma, *Philosophy of Śrī Madhvācārya* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962, pp. 196-203).

in the latter, actions are apparently by nature either *praxeis* or *poiêseis*, either action in the autotelic sense or in the productive sense, while in bhakti theory, the same actions can be performed either for the sake of their result *or* for their own sake.¹² Nevertheless, the two accounts can be seen as sharing a common implicit henological line of reasoning. That is, what is different about the action carried out for its own sake is its integrity, compared to the internal multiplicity of the action carried out for a discrete end—in other words, the autotelic action is *more one*. In this way, action done for its own sake also conserves the integrity of the agent.

Similarly, a God loved for their own sake, and not some end, has as object and cause of this devotion an integrity superior to that of the God as embodying this or that form. In Proclus (*In Tim.* I, 212.24-6), we read that we should become “one” (*monos*), integral in ourselves, which also entails uniqueness,¹³ in order to associate with the deity who is ‘one’ in the same sense. The strict correspondence of mode of devotion to mode of individuation is stated programmatically in the *Gītā*: “The faith of every [being] corresponds to his essence ... This [mortal] person is of the form of faith” (17.3). Moreover, we see this correspondence embodied in the passage from 7.20-23, the concern of which, I would argue, is not to elevate one God over the rest, which would be banal, but rather to elevate the devotion to a God in themselves over that devotion seeking some discrete end, in other words, affirming the primacy of *praxis* over *poiêsis* in devotion. The God as worshiped for some specific end is necessarily worshiped in a

¹² Though a *praxis* be performed for some extrinsic end, it seems that it is still a *praxis* (*Nic. Eth.* 1105a30-35), and does not become production, since the genus of *praxis* and of *poiêsis* are different (1140b3-4).

¹³ Because an integral unit can have no attribute by participation (Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, prop. 118), which means that all the attributes of such a unit are themselves unique and inalienable.

‘limited’ and ‘temporary’ fashion. Keeping open the space for a more profound piety toward each or any God is the purpose of the polytheist’s resistance toward reductive classifications of their Gods, as we see when Socrates, near the beginning of the *Philebus* (12c), rejects the reduction of Aphrodite to a concept, rather than a proper-named individual. In this fashion, the bhakti relation to the God ontologically grounds intersubjective recognition, which can spread to encompass the relationship to all beings as ends in themselves and not means. Alternatively, as in 7.20, the worshiper is “constrained by their own nature,” that is, by a restrictive experience of the *svabhāva* which constrains them and reciprocally constrains the Gods, too. Hence Kṛṣṇa affirms at 9.24 that “I am the enjoyer and the Lord of all the sacrifices. But those of limited mind do not recognize me in my true nature and so they fall.” This ‘fall’ is directly linked to the classifications listed in 9.25: while bhakti involves the reciprocal recognition of oneself as a unique subject, and not as ‘falling under’ a class of object in a transaction, worship offered to a God *qua* Gods as a class of objects is offered in turn as a human, member of that class of objects. Worship offered to the God’s ‘Me’, the unique agent operating the first-person singular, confers the same status upon *myself*. In this fashion, the singular is ‘saved’ both in the epistemic, and in the soteriological sense.

Once it is purified from seeking any discrete end, sacrifice (*yajñā*) is revealed as the paradigm of action that does not bind the agent ontologically. This henological criterion also, as we have seen, applies to the God, who may be grasped as more or less *one* depending upon whether they are worshiped for their own sake and as unique or for some desired result and hence according to membership in some class of Gods, or even simply in the class of Gods. The theory of *yajñā* in the *Gītā* therefore ties together the

account of action and the account of the nature of divine personhood. The conception of action as sacrifice is what makes it possible for the *Gītā*'s account of action to go beyond Aristotle's account of *praxis*, because it explains how action in general can be conceived as *praxis*, instead of only a specific class of actions. Prajāpati, we read, "emanated creatures together with sacrifice" (3.10), directly after the statement that "this world is bound by action save when this action is intended as sacrifice" (3.9), that is, intended as Prajāpati intended it, where sacrifice is inseparable from demiurgy itself. Sacrifice is inseparable from the emanation of living beings because living beings are ends in themselves, and not means to any end, and hence their very ontological production is itself through *praxis* and not *poiēsis*.

The devotional relationship established through *yajña* understood in this fashion is explicitly intersubjective in character: "With this you may sustain the Gods so that the Gods may sustain you. Sustaining one another, you shall obtain the supreme benefit," (3.11). Here the *relationship* itself is the supreme benefit, which is obtained in the very relationship. The transactional ritual economy is established on a plane just below—"sustained by sacrifice, the Gods will give you the desired food/enjoyment [*bhoga*]" (3.12)—and then in the cycle of ritual, rain, food, beings and ritual (3.14), which is finally theoretically articulated as follows: "[A]ction arises from *brahman*. *Brahman* is born from the Imperishable. Therefore the omnipresent *brahman* is ever established in sacrifice" (3.15). Here action and the cycle in which the products of results of action circulate between Gods and mortals are identified with the unit of Being, to which the God is prior as *akṣara puruṣa*, as imperishable personhood. *Akṣara* here is not a simple negation, but a causal negation in the same sense as we find throughout the works of

Platonists; in this case, the negation affirms the God's causality with respect to all temporal production. Kṛṣṇa can state simply "I am the foundation of *Brahman*" (14.27). Later, we read that there are two hypostases of personhood in the world, the perishable and the imperishable, of which "the perishable [*puruṣa*] is all beings, the imperishable [*puruṣa*] is called 'summit-abiding' [*kutastha*]" (15.16), this latter term corresponding closely to Platonic terminology such as *akrotês* in signaling a shift from the ontic to the henadic register, or at least *toward* it, from within being.¹⁴ The God is never simply identical with the summit of a series, however, just as Kṛṣṇa explains that He is beyond both the perishable and imperishable hypostases of personhood (15.18). Hence for the Platonist as well, the first moment of being, Limit, is "the God proceeding to the intelligible summit from the unparticipated and very first God" (*Theol. Plat.* III 12, 44.24-45.1), where it is not a question of two discrete Gods any more than of divinizing an ontological principle such as Limit, but of the procession of any God as such.

The separability of personhood from the unit of Being is in itself the power to surrender all actions *to the constitution of the world*, since Being Itself is also a being and all beings *qua* beings. Hence "the wise" are said to "act unattached, desiring to accomplish the world's welfare" (3.25), because the recognition of the constitutive role of action in the *world's* unity literally constitutes the world. In this fashion, the self lives off the leavings of sacrifice (3.13), that is, the *praxis* aspect of action, which preserves the self's unity, while giving over to the cosmos the productive or *poiêsis* aspect of action that belongs instead to the unity of Being. Thus we can see the basic henological criterion at work again, in which the good of the agent and of the cosmos are their respective

¹⁴ Thus *In Tim.* I, 319, "the highest summit of every series is fontal [*pêgaion*]," where *pêgê*, 'source', intelligible form, mediates between intellectual form and the henadic.

unities. Henology is above all non-reductive, insofar as it elevates the principle of *numerical difference* above that of being, but it is not nominalist, inasmuch as it grounds the procession of being, which is synonymous with form and universality, in the causal agency of the ultimate units.

The key to the transmutation of productive- or *poiêsis*-action into *praxis*, or ‘sacrificial’ action, in the *Gītā*’s sense, is knowledge: “[whose] action is burned in the fire of knowledge—him the wise call [truly] ‘learned’,” (4.19); “As a kindled fire reduces its fuel to ashes ... so the fire of knowledge reduces all actions to ashes” (4.37). That is, it consumes the *poiêsis* dimension of action, leaving only the *praxis* dimension, consumes the eidetic, categorial, or ontic dimension and leaves the existential, the unique, which is ‘ash’, because it offers no further ‘fuel’ for cognitive appropriation. In this sense, whereas the relationship between *praxis* and *theoria* may be open or problematic in Aristotle, bhakti theory discerns that ontologically primary theoretical activity that is, structurally, a *praxis*, namely the thought-thinking-itself of the henad as demiurge, which just by virtue of having nothing other than itself as object, *produces* the cosmos, giving order to the world and grounding all production. There is a potential in knowledge for a desire which is irreducible to the desire of any object, any *whatness*, for it is the desire instead of a *who*. This is beautifully encapsulated by Kṛṣṇa when he states near the *Gītā*’s end that “he who will study this lawful dialogue of ours, by him would I be desired [*iṣṭas*] through knowledge-sacrifice; thus is My conviction,” (18.70). In this fashion, bhakti theory encompasses at once the lawfulness and conviction-yielding power of the theoretical, as well as the desire of the dialogical or intersubjective relation.