

Bhakti and Henadology[≡]

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The suppression of polytheistic Platonism in late antiquity, culminating in the prohibition of public teaching by Pagans in 529 CE, was the necessary precondition for the successful appropriation of Hellenic philosophy, which had been born and nurtured in a polytheistic religious environment, into Christian monotheistic thought. This appropriation involved a particularly bold transformation in the relationship between the first principle in Platonic thought, namely Unity or ‘the One’, and Being. ‘The One’, which the *Parmenides*, the most authoritative text for the metaphysics of late antique Platonism, explicitly states neither *is*, nor is *one* (141e), *is*, for the tradition of thought which will follow upon the silencing of Pagan Platonism, treated instead as identical with the monotheist’s God, the ‘supreme being’. The resulting amnesia with respect to the function of the Platonic first principle as the *principle of individuation* and not itself an *individual*, and as a principle of *existence* irreducible to being *qua* being, was to have profound consequences for Western thought.

[≡] This paper was presented at the 15th annual conference of the Dharma Academy of North America (DANAM), held in conjunction with the 2017 American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Meeting in Boston, MA. An earlier version was presented at the 33rd annual joint meeting of the SAGP and SSIPS, Fordham University, NYC (Oct. 23-25, 2015).

No project of comparison between Indian and Western thought can be indifferent to this history which casts its shadow upon their intellectual and spiritual encounter, *a fortiori* the project, popular since Bréhier, of comparison specifically between Indian thought and Platonism. Two recent articles by Vishwa Adluri¹ have opened a new and fruitful path for comparative work on Indian and Platonic thought, urging us to consider the parallels between Platonism and bhakti theory as represented in the *Mahābhārata*.² Adluri argues that we find a combination of elements in bhakti theory that make it the optimal basis for comparative study with Platonism, rather than Vedānta, which, Advaita in particular, has previously been privileged. The present talk, a shortened version of a forthcoming article, seeks to contribute specialist knowledge of henadological Platonism to this project of forming the bridge between bhakti theory and Platonism, through a reading of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The systematic Platonism of late antiquity understands ‘the One’ not as an eminent singular entity, but as the *principle of individuation*. Positing ‘the One’ prior to Being in the chain of hypostases establishes *unity* as the primary and originary

¹ Adluri (2014) and (2015).

² On the *Mahābhārata* as “the principal monument to bhakti,” see Adluri and Bagchee (2016), pp. 91-103. My term ‘bhakti theory’ should be understood to have the same sense as Adluri’s term “philosophy of bhakti” as used “to describe the intellectual aspects of Bhakti, specifically its cognitive-theoretical insight into the relation of the One and the many,” (Ibid., p. 79 n. 2).

attribute of *each thing*. ‘Henad’ simply means ‘unit’, and ‘henadology’ is the science of units *qua* units, and the ground of ontology, which is the science of beings *qua* beings. The terms ‘henology’ and ‘henadology’ may be used interchangeably once we grasp that inasmuch as the One Itself “neither is, nor is one”, inquiry into the One (‘henology’) just is, necessarily, inquiry into units (henads). Henadology forms thus a systematic ground and counterweight to substance-based ontology.³ Henadology also has an organic bond with theology as the science of supra-essential individuals or Gods. Thus we find that systematic Platonism articulated polytheism through the doctrine of ‘divine henads’. And insofar as it posits unity—that is, *existential individuality*—as basic, henadology can situate itself as a critique of ontology exhibiting both analytical *and* soteriological value.

³ Etienne Gilson (in *L’être et l’essence* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948)), who coined the term ‘henology’, seems to have been the first modern thinker to speak of an opposition between henology and ontology, which is further developed in the works of Jean Trouillard, e.g., *L’un et l’âme selon Proclus* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1972); see also Wayne Hankey, “Aquinas’ First Principle: Being or Unity?” *Dionysius* 4 (1980), pp. 133-172; Reiner Schürman, “Neoplatonic Henology as an Overcoming of Metaphysics,” *Research in Phenomenology* 13 (1983), pp. 25-41. It would be fair to say, however, that modern authors, under the spell to varying degrees of the monotheistic appropriation of Platonic thought, which reifies the One and obscures its systematic function as principle of individuation, have not gone far enough in appreciating that the core of this opposition lies in grasping the metaphysical priority for henology of *individuation* (‘who’) to formal *differentiation* (‘what’).

Vedānta has been the favored object of comparison with Platonism in previous scholarship.⁴ Building upon Adluri's insights, however, I wish to argue that only in bhakti theory does systematic Platonism find a clear counterpart. Platonism had a unique aptitude as a vehicle for the ultimate synthesis of ancient thought in the West because of its capacity to acknowledge diverse principles without loss. Bhakti theory, which bridges diverse genres of Indian thought, including the theophanic/cultic, the epic, and the philosophical, similarly seeks as early as the *Gītā* itself to incorporate diverse philosophical perspectives into a broader synthesis. Bhakti is not a mere sectarian movement but rather an inquiry at once speculative and practical, delving profoundly into the nature of the relationship between the human and the divine. Nor is henadological Platonism a mere product of late Pagan theological special pleading, but rather a similar grand synthesis of the intellectual and the devotional that seeks to do justice fully to both.

But most importantly, only in bhakti theory do we find a counterpart to the key structure in systematic Platonism, namely a first principle which is *a principle of individuation beyond being*. This fundamental Platonic distinction between Unity and Being—between henology and ontology—is captured in bhakti theory in the conceptual

⁴ The state of the comparative literature on Platonism and Indian thought can be fairly judged from the essays in R. Baine Harris, ed. (1982) and Paulos Mar Gregorios, ed. (2002).

distinction between the object of devotion as *Īśvara* or *Bhagavan*, a divine person and free agency, as *who*, on the one hand, and as *Brahman*, as Being, or *what*, on the other.⁵

In placing the former prior to the latter, such as when Kṛṣṇa states “I am the foundation of *Brahman*” (BG 14.27), bhakti theory shows itself more closely aligned with Platonism than Vedānta, which consistently affirms the priority of Brahman, of Being, over the principle of personhood.

The identification of personhood with divinity is expressed in bhakti theory through the concept of *puruṣa*; thus, the *Gītā* states that “the divine-principle [*adhidaivata*] is *puruṣa*” (8.4).⁶ For the Platonist, the highest mode of existence, that of the henads, is personhood ontologically *prior to form*, which in turn is reflected in mortal singulars who are persons and *posterior to form* as participants in *infima species*.

⁵ Note in this light the remarks of Adluri and Bagchee on BG 8.1 and 8.3, in response to Garbe’s attempts to see a manifestation of the tension between a ‘theism’ of Kṛṣṇa and a ‘pantheism’ of Brahman in Kṛṣṇa’s failure to reply to Arjuna’s question ‘What is this *Brahman*?’ with ‘I am it’: “The question ‘what is this *Brahman*?’ (*kiṁ tad brahma*) can simply be a request for clarification about the nature of Brahman rather than a request for identification. Especially as a philosophical concept, introduced by *kiṁ* (what) rather than *kaḥ* (who), the passage seems to require the kind of conceptual explanation Kṛṣṇa provides rather than the kind of demonstrative response Garbe imagines ... Only in the second verse do we get an interrogative pronoun (*kaḥ*), which van Buitenen rightly renders as ‘who’. Arjuna asks, ‘Who in this body is the ‘sacrificial’ one ...’ to which Kṛṣṇa responds, ‘I myself am ...’,” (Adluri and Bagchee (2014), p. 180). Indeed, already in the Ṛg Veda (10.121) there is an effort to make the ‘who’ (*ka*) thematic as such.

⁶ Passages from the *Gītā* are as translated by Feuerstein (2014), sometimes slightly modified.

And so in the devotional encounter, whether as conceptualized in bhakti theory or in the writings of theurgical Platonists, the worshiper affirms their unique personhood in the relation to a unique deity. In this worship there is transcendence of relations constituted by identity and difference, likeness or unlikeness, relations, that is, *mediated by Forms*. Similarly, 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,⁷ from which one is liberated in the devotional relationship.⁸

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 *epistrophē*. The one is eidetic, through Forms or *eidē*. The other is theurgical, through participation in peculiar divine series.⁹ While eidetic reversion requires passing through intermediary forms to reach more universal principles, theurgic reversion is *immediate* for a member of any class of beings, because each plane of being is *directly* produced by the Gods. Similarly, in the *Gītā* Kṛṣṇa states that “I am

⁷ See the discussion of this and related passages in Nelson (2004), n. 11 on p. 349.

⁸ The importance of *svabhāva* and *svadharma* in the *Gītā* parallels in this respect that of technical terms with a ‘self-’ component such as *autotelês*, *authupostatos*, 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, though the latter, as occurring in a Vedāntic framework, differs in other respects, particularly in being tied conceptually to a fixed ontic hierarchy (*tāratamya*) *within* Brahman.

⁹ On the two modes of reversion, see Butler (2007).

the same in all beings ... But those who worship Me with devotion, they are in Me and I am also in them” (9.29). In a henadological reading, the ‘sameness’ affirmed by the God is relative to the class of beings, and hence mediated, whereas the relationship of the God ‘in’ the worshiper and the worshiper ‘in’ the God is existential and immediate. This latter relationship is the only one that can exist between utterly unique entities *qua* unique, insofar as there can be no form mediating this relation.¹⁰ Hence the Platonist understands the structure of the henadic manifold as *all-in-each*, because mediation would render the divine individual *less one*. In the *Gītā* as well, of course, Kṛṣṇa invites Arjuna to see the other Gods in him (11.6), as well as the universe itself (11.7); and reciprocal affirmations are made on behalf of Śiva, of Durgā, or of other deities as objects of bhakti, a typical expression of what I have termed the ‘polycentric’ character of polytheism.¹¹ It is not necessary to subordinate these many *īśvaras* to some Other beyond them, once we recognize that ultimacy is constitutive of the integrity of each. The reciprocal positing of Gods as center and periphery relative to one another is essential to polytheism, which is not defined by a division of labor. Nor is this mutual

¹⁰ Note the *Gītā*’s characterization of the *ātman* as “incommensurable” (*aprameyasya*) (2.18).

¹¹ For a fuller account of the structural characteristics of the henadic manifold, see Butler (2005); on ‘polycentric polytheism’, see Butler (2008a).

recognition a mere concession to competing traditions, an historicizing and reductionist perspective.

The henological criterion of integrity, according to which a thing is in its best state when it is most *one*, plays a crucial role in the conception of *action* both in Platonism and in bhakti theory. Kṛṣṇa's reply to Arjuna in Book 2 of the *Gītā* begins from affirming 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 Plato's *Phaedo* does in its final immortality argument. The *Phaedo* (105b-106c) compares the role of fire, which is inseparable from causing heat, to the soul, which is inseparable from giving life.

It cannot be a question here of a merely generic essence of soul, but rather of *who* peculiarly lives in *this* living being. The salvific project of identifying oneself with what is immortal in one therefore coincides with the epistemic project of identifying the genuine source of agency in the self. Action, therefore, rather than ontic composition, is placed at the center of the problem of identity. Action is, of course, thematic for the *Gītā*. And for Plato, agency, action, is prior to form: Cause (Causality), in the doctrine of principles from Plato's *Philebus*, is prior to Mixture and its elements,

Limit and the Unlimited. Furthermore, in his 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 from which the soul chooses its life—this *taxis* arises instead *from the choice itself*, from the act of choosing (*Republic* 618b).¹²

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, albeit to a higher degree. The strict correspondence of mode of devotion to mode of individuation is stated programmatically as well 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 the *Gītā* (7.20-23) which contrasts recourse to the *person* of Kṛṣṇa to those worshipers who, guided by desires and the constraints of their nature, have recourse to this or that deity in a rule-governed

¹² See the discussion of the philosophical significance of Plato’s recourse to reincarnation in Butler (2014). 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., Sharma (1962), pp. 196-203).

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.

fashion for finite purposes. The concern of this passage, I would argue, is not to elevate one God over the rest, which would be banal, but rather to elevate the devotion to Gods *in Themselves*, as unique divine persons, over that devotion seeking some discrete goal. Keeping open the space for a piety toward any God just for *who* They are 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 such as 'pleasure', rather than a proper-named individual. The reductive classifications of the Gods to narrowly circumscribed 'powers', such as treating Aphrodite as 'Goddess of Love', is actually far more popular among moderns than it was with the ancients,¹⁴ for while those engaging peripherally with a deity might seek them out for such narrow purposes, deities as the center of the devotional regard have always had a theoretically unlimited competence.

¹⁴ For a more insightful treatment of Hellenic polytheism, see H.S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), who is specifically critical of the structuralist effort to reduce Hellenic polytheism to a system of differential 'powers', even if he is somewhat too sympathetic, as a result, to Burkert's reductionist view of it as a 'chaos' of historical contingencies ("The Greek pantheon: *kosmos* or chaos?", pp. 26-36). For a similar critique of the structuralist interpretation, but with a greater appreciation for the *theoretical* value of the concept of the divine as 'person', see Gabriella Pironti's study of Aphrodite, *Entre ciel et guerre: Figures d'Aphrodite en Grèce ancienne* (Liège: Centre International d'Étude de la Religion Grecque Antique, 2007.)

In this fashion, the relation to the God in bhakti can also be seen to ontologically ground intersubjective recognition. If the worshiper is “constrained by their own nature” (7.20), this constrains the Gods for them, too. Hence Kṛṣṇa affirms that He is “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” (9.24). This ‘fall’ is directly linked to the classifications that follow (9.25): while bhakti involves the reciprocal recognition of oneself as a unique subject, and not as *falling under* a class in a transaction, worship offered to a God *qua* Gods as a class is offered by a human *as a human*, that is, member of a natural kind, rather than by a unique individual worshiper as such (9.25). Worship offered to the God’s ‘Me’, the unique agent operating the first-person singular, confers the same status upon *myself*. The singular is thus ‘saved’ both in the epistemic, and in the soteriological sense.

For the Platonist, the soul is at once *what* and *who*. It is a *what* as the participant of forms and the result of the activity of ontic principles, while it is a *who* in intimate relationship to henads who are themselves unique persons. To the soul’s *whatness*, philosophy ministers, while *ritual action*, theurgy, is for its *whoness*, the project of becoming who one *uniquely* is. The *Gītā*, too, affirms an essential bond between ritual action (*yajña*) and the constitution of the mortal soul. *Yajña* is revealed as the paradigm

of action that does not bind the agent ontologically. *Yajña* ties action to personhood, that of the God and of the worshiper.

Kṛṣṇa states that “this world is bound by action, save when this action is intended as *yajña*” (3.9); we read that Prajāpati “emanated creatures together with *yajña*” (3.10). We thus see *yajña*, the coming together of Gods and mortals in ritual action, as inseparable from cosmic formation itself. *Yajña* embodies the emanation of living beings as ends in themselves, and not means to any end. Their autotelic nature is thus affirmed in their ontological production, just as for the Platonist mortals are affirmed in their uniqueness, beyond the cycles of formal production, in theurgic reversion upon the unique Gods. Kṛṣṇa states that with ritual action, “you may sustain the Gods so that the Gods may sustain you. Sustaining one another, you shall obtain the supreme benefit,” (3.11). Here we should understand by the supreme benefit, the *relationship* itself. The transactional ritual economy is established on a plane just below: “sustained by *yajña*, the Gods will give you the desired enjoyment” (3.12).

Kṛṣṇa states further that “action arises from *brahman*. *Brahman* is born from the Imperishable. Therefore the omnipresent *brahman* is ever established in *yajña*” (3.15). Result-oriented action and the products of that action are identified with Being, *Brahman*, as an integral system which the God transcends as imperishable personhood,

which is recognized, uniquely, in devotion. When Kṛṣṇa states simply “I am the foundation of *Brahman*” (14.27), we can understand Him as saying that *Brahman*, unity of action as *Being*, is born from personhood, from the God as person acting through the ontic system but irreducible to it.

The separability, in principle if not in fact, of ‘existential’ personhood from Being¹⁵ is in itself the power in principle to surrender all actions *qua* productive, that is, with respect to their results, to *the constitution of the world*, to Being in its unity. Hence in the *Gītā* “the wise” are said to “act unattached, desiring to accomplish the world’s welfare” (3.25). Recognizing the constitutive role of productive action for the *world’s* unity grants the world its integrity *as well as* discerning the individual’s irreducibility to it. Thus the self lives off the leavings of *yajña* (3.13), preserving its unity, while giving over to the cosmos the productive, result-oriented aspect of action that belongs to the unity of Being, to *Brahman*. The good of the agent and of the cosmos are thus seen henologically, that is, the good for these things just *are* their respective unities.¹⁶

¹⁵ ‘Existence’, as opposed to Being, which pertains to the henads as *huperousios*, ‘supra-essential’, translates the Greek term *huparxis*. Historically speaking, this is the origin of the priority of ‘existence’ over ‘essence’ which we find in Avicenna, et al. and then in modern ‘Existentialist’ thought, albeit of course this doctrine’s roots in polytheistic henadology were quickly forgotten.

¹⁶ Hence the identity, in Platonism of ‘the One’ of Plato’s *Parmenides* and ‘the Good’ of the *Republic*, which Proclus articulates thus: “If that which conserves and holds together the being of each several thing is unity (since by unity each is maintained in being, but by dispersion displaced from being): the Good, where present, makes a thing

Finally, productive action is transmuted into sacral action through 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, knowledge consumes the eidetic, categorial, and hence productive dimension of action and leaves the existential, the unique, which is ‘ash’, because it offers no further ‘fuel’ for cognitive appropriation. There is a potential in knowledge for a desire irreducible to the desire for any *whatness*, for it is the desire instead for a *who*, and which is, just by virtue of that, desire *by* 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 through *yajña*-knowledge [*jñānayajñena*]; thus is My conviction,” (18.70). Hence bhakti theory, just like henadological Platonism, encompasses at once the lawfulness of the theoretical, as well as the desire embodied in the dialogical or intersubjective relation

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one, and holds it together in virtue of this unification,” (*ET* prop. 13, trans. Dodds, mod.).

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