



# Bhakti and Henadology

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## 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, and 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. For its part, bhakti is not a mere sectarian movement but 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 displays key commonalities with henadological Platonism. This paper begins the process of identifying these common themes with particular reference to the *Bhagavadgītā*. 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.

**Keywords** Bhakti · *Bhagavadgītā* · Henadology · Platonism · Polytheism · Proclus

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

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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 to 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 a principle of *existence* irreducible to being *qua* being, was to have profound consequences for Western thought, and for the Western reception of Indian thought.

Two recent articles by Vishwa Adluri, "Plotinus and the Orient: *Aoristos Dyas*" (2014) and "Philosophical Aspects of Bhakti in the *Nārāyaṇīya*" (2015), have urged a reconsideration of the parallels between Platonism and bhakti theory as represented in the *Mahābhārata*,<sup>1</sup> finding in the *Nārāyaṇīya* in particular a combination of elements that make it, and bhakti theory more generally, the optimal basis for the comparative study of Platonic (in the case of Adluri's articles, Plotinus specifically) and Indian thought. The present essay seeks to contribute specialist knowledge of henadological Platonism to this project of forming a bridge between bhakti theory and Platonism through a henadological reading of what has been called "the principal monument to bhakti," the *Bhagavadgītā*.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Adluri's articles, the present essay takes Proclus as its model for Platonic thought, inasmuch as he represents the fullest systematic articulation of Platonism in antiquity.

The present essay seeks the most fruitful conceptual foundation for dialogue between these philosophical traditions, in particular with respect to the set of "problems ... to be taken up in future research" as indicated by Adluri,<sup>3</sup> philosophical problems which concern the nature of the ultimate principle—the unity of the One and its relationship to multiplicities of diverse kinds—and the consequences for soteriology of the nature of unity. Accordingly, the Platonism upon which it draws is at once a synthesis and an explication of the tradition. Henadological Platonism is meant to reintroduce as a living philosophical position the fullest systematic expression Platonism achieved at the end of antiquity, as we find it especially in Proclus and Damascius, before it was subverted by Christian hegemony. The point of isolating pre-Christian Platonism for this endeavor is not historical, but systematic: the core issue of the relationship between "unity" and "being" simply cannot be perspicuously addressed in the new conceptual framework existing after the Christian onto-theological appropriation of Platonism, where "the One" is no longer "unity," but a single supreme being. Nor is my account of bhakti theory concerned with historical reconstruction, much less with textual intervention of the sort associated with "text-historical" Indology,<sup>4</sup> but with pure speculative philosophical possibility, which requires a commitment to the integrity of the text and the traditions that intersect it.<sup>5</sup> Nor do I, of course, propose to exhaust the

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> Adluri (2014), pp. 77–8. On henadological Platonism, see especially Butler (2005) and (2008b). For a critical assessment of this interpretative tendency, see Perl (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Adluri (2014), p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> Of the sort criticized in Adluri and Bagchee (2014); see especially chap. 3, "The Search for the Original *Gītā*."

<sup>5</sup> On the principles associated with such a hermeneutic, see further Butler (2016a).

meanings of the terms and texts I explicate in Indian thought, but rather to open up a bridge based on potentialities which may not have received proper attention or emphasis due to the intellectual influence of hegemonic monotheism. A bridge can necessarily be traveled in either direction; I am traveling it from henadological Platonism to bhakti theory, but it should be evident that it might look rather different traversed from the other direction.

As an example of the spirit in which these matters have been hitherto approached for the most part, Gregorios (2002) draws a polemically charged comparison between Plotinian Platonism and Advaita Vedānta, on the one hand, and “theurgical” Platonism and bhakti, on the other, stating that “Plotinus did not wholly approve the growing practice of theurgy in his tradition. For a true Neoplatonist to practice theurgy is similar to a pure Advaita Vedantin practising a Bhakti cult in India. It is often done, but is very difficult to justify philosophically.”<sup>6</sup> It is anachronistic, first, to attribute to Plotinus any attitude toward “theurgy” per se, inasmuch as the term does not arise until after his time; furthermore, inasmuch as the “theurgical” or “hieratic” tendency essentially accounts for all of the most well-known Platonists after Iamblichus’ time,<sup>7</sup> this severs Plotinus from his Platonic successors—with the exception, of course, of his latter-day monotheistic appropriators.<sup>8</sup> More relevant to the concerns of the present essay, however, is Gregorios’ alignment of the theurgical, or pro-ritual stance of the post-Plotinian Platonists with bhakti, and the invidious comparison he draws between both and the sublimity of Advaita, which alone embodies a philosophical position worthy of Plotinus, and vice versa, while “theurgical” Platonism is seen, like Bhakti, as virtually anti-philosophical in its very essence, the former on account of its ostensible “irrationalism,”<sup>9</sup> the latter on account of its supposed basis in “emotion.”<sup>10</sup> Both are relegated to the plane of mere “practices,” without a meaningful theoretical viewpoint at all.

I wish to argue, by contrast, for a constructive affinity between bhakti theory and systematic Platonism in two crucial respects. In the first place, there is the conciliatory breadth of ancient Platonism, a philosophy in accord with the wider praxis of polytheism, which sought to incorporate the full range of religious practices and philosophical orientations into an embracing structure. Platonism had a unique aptitude to be the vehicle for this synthesis because it is capable of acknowledging diverse principles

<sup>6</sup> Mar Gregorios (2002), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> See the remarks of Damascius, *In Phaed.* I, 172, in which we may clearly count Damascius himself in the “hieratic” tendency, given his strong affinities with both Iamblichus and Proclus.

<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Mar Gregorios conflates theurgy and Gnosticism (26), even though Plotinus’ reasons for criticizing Gnosticism are such as “theurgical” Platonists like Iamblichus and his successors would have shared; in particular, the fact that the Gnostics “contract the divine into one” (*Enneads* II.9.9.36–7), i.e., that they were monotheists. More importantly, however, Mar Gregorios shows no grasp here of the theoretical basis of theurgy, on which see, e.g., Shaw (2014), Addey (2014); see as well Butler (2007), for the specific henadological grounding of theurgy, and Butler (2016b) on the continuities between Plotinus and the subsequent Platonic tradition on the key points in this respect. It is also unclear what Mar Gregorios intends to convey by his claim that “most of [Plotinus’ successors] were Asians who put more emphasis on acts of worship than on mental or intellectual exercises” (*ibid.*). There seems little point in characterizing quintessentially Hellenized Syrians such as Iamblichus and Damascius, or a Phoenician such as Porphyry, or a Lycian such as Proclus as “Asian” in any particular sense, much less the seemingly stereotypical one here.

<sup>9</sup> Viz. E. R. Dodds’ famous denunciation of Iamblichus’ *De mysteriis* as “a manifesto of irrationalism, an assertion that the road to salvation is found not in reason but in ritual” (1951, p. 287). For a perceptive assessment of Dodds’ attitude toward the later antique Neoplatonists, see Hankey (2007).

<sup>10</sup> On bhakti as “emotionalism,” see Adluri and Bagchee (2016), p. 88.

without loss. We see the same impulse toward incorporating philosophical and devotional imperatives in bhakti theory, which bridges diverse genres of Indian thought, including the theophanic/cultic, the epic, and the philosophical, and also seeks as early as the *Gītā* itself to incorporate diverse philosophical perspectives into a broader synthesis. Bhakti from this perspective is not a mere welter of competing sectarian movements but rather an inquiry at once speculative and practical, delving profoundly into the nature of the relationship between the human and the divine. And by the same token, henadological Platonism is recognized in this light not as the product of some late Pagan effort at theological special pleading, but as a similar grand synthesis of the intellectual and the devotional that seeks to do justice fully to each.

Second, in bhakti theory, we find a 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*. This fundamental Platonic distinction between Unity (units) and Being—between henology and ontology—is captured in bhakti theory in the conceptual distinction between the object of devotion as *Īśvara* or *Bhagavān*, a divine person and free agency, as *who*, on the one hand, and as *Brahman*, as Being, or *what*, on the other, especially when it goes as far as to grant ontological priority to the former over the latter, such as when Kṛṣṇa states “I am the foundation of *Brahman*” (*BG* 14.27).<sup>11</sup> This is not to reify an opposition between *Īśvara* and *Brahman*: the perfection of *īśvara* is expressed precisely in being the “supreme *brahman*,” and much of the development of bhakti theory has taken place within the context of Vedāntic discourse centered on the inquiry into *Brahman*. But compare in this regard, Sharma (1982), who identifies the Neoplatonic One with *Brahman* throughout and without argument, leaving no room for any meaningful distinction between the One and Being, whereas the latter is essential for grasping systematic Platonism. For a different model, we may look to the later antique Platonists, for whom Aristotle’s prioritization of substance and, ultimately, of thought thinking itself over the Platonic inquiry into unity and “number” (i.e., henadology) corresponds to the differences in the goals Aristotle is pursuing, and does not prevent the reintegration of his thought into an overarching Platonic structure. The ability to center the inquiry upon *Brahman*, and prioritize it ontologically as a consequence, can be understood as a similar scope distinction within the polycentric intellectual and devotional economy of Hinduism.<sup>12</sup>

What henadology brings to the distinction between Unity and Being is just what bhakti brings to the distinction between *Īśvara* and *Brahman*, namely, concreteness. “The One” neither is, nor is one; what there are, in the ultimate sense, are henads, and then their relations and other activities and the cosmos emergent from them. In Western Platonism, once the supra-essential henads had been dismissed, there was nothing to prevent the distinction between unity and being, and hence between henology and ontology, from being rendered otiose, a mere gesture of so-called “negative theology.” Similarly, the value of the actually existing, unique individuals who are the objects of bhakti is neither that of a mere jumble of contingent sects and emotional attachments, on the one hand, nor of monotheism as seen through a prismatic lens, on the other.

<sup>11</sup> Passages from the *Gītā* are as translated by Van Buitenen (1981).

<sup>12</sup> On the emergence of ontology through the inquiry into *brahman*, see further Butler (2017).

Instead, bhakti is, as Biardeau aptly characterizes it, a “universe,”<sup>13</sup> that is, a *kosmos* of deities each recognized in their ineffable uniqueness. Bhakti is polytheism as the metaphysics of uniqueness.

It is the same to say ‘henad’ as to say ‘principle’, if in fact the principle is in all cases the most unificatory element. So anyone who is talking about the One in any respect would then be discoursing about principles ... All the henads are in each other and are united with each other, and their unity is far greater than the community and sameness among beings. In these latter, too, [in beings] there is compounding of Forms, and likeness and friendship and participation in one another; but the unity of those former entities, inasmuch as it is a unity of henads, is far more unitary and ineffable and unsurpassable; for they are all in all of them, which is not the case with the Forms. These [the Forms] are participated in by each other, but they are not all in all. And yet, in spite of this degree of unity in that realm, how marvellous and unmixed is their purity, and *the individuality [idiotēs] of each of them is a much more perfect thing than the otherness of the Forms...* (Proclus, *In Parm.* 1048, trans. Morrow & Dillon, modified, emphasis mine).

Henadological Platonism 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, is not a matter of subordinating Being to some further singular entity. Rather, it establishes prior to being a distinct *mode of existence*, establishing *unity* as the primary and originary attribute of *each* thing. To these Platonists, the procession of Being is not the emergence of many from one, a reading inherently attractive to monotheist interpreters, but rather the declension of many *ways of being* from out of one originary *way of being*. The primordial way of being is that of the *henads*, absolute “existential”<sup>14</sup> individuals who exist prior to Being Itself. “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” (Plato, *Parmenides* 141e), inquiry into the One (“henology”) just is, necessarily, inquiry into units (henads). Henadology forms thus a systematic ground and counterweight to substance-based ontology.<sup>15</sup> Henadology also has an organic bond with theology as the science of relation to supra-essential individuals or Gods. Thus, we find a systematic Platonism where polytheism was articulated through the

<sup>13</sup> Biardeau (1994), pp. 88ff.

<sup>14</sup> “Existence” as distinct from Being renders the terminological distinction in the later antique Platonists between *huparxis*, on the one hand, and *einai, to on*, or, most analogously, *hupostasis* on the other. Henadological Platonism may in this respect be very cautiously termed an *existentialism*.

<sup>15</sup> 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 Hankey (1980); Schürman (1983). 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”).

doctrine of “divine henads.” And insofar as it posits unity—that is, *existential individuality*—as basic, henology easily situates itself as a critique of ontology exhibiting both analytical *and* soteriological value. For the manner in which the mortal individual is epistemically “saved,” we shall see, reveals in itself the structure of the other salvation, too.

So much, then, may be said concerning the situation of the primal henads and their communion with and distinction from one another, of which we are wont to call the one peculiarity [*idiotēta*], the other unity [*henōsin*], distinguishing them thus also by name from the sameness and difference manifested at the level of Real Being. For these henads are supra-essential, and, to use technical terms, are ‘flowers’ and ‘summits’. (Proclus, *In Parm.* 1049, trans. Morrow & Dillon, mod.).

Personhood, who-ness as distinct from what-ness, is a concept far richer than mere anthropomorphism. In English, we can only express “individuality” *negatively*, as the negation of further divisibility of the particulars falling under *infima species*. This feature of the language lends apparent support to an ontology in which *omnis determinatio est negatio*, and an “individual” is individuated purely in distinction from everything else, by repulsion, so to speak. Greek, by contrast, has the term *idios* for what is peculiar to a unique entity, and Platonists use *idiotēs* to refer to this property of “peculiarity,” which transcends sameness and difference, for these are differential, diacritical. It is telling, perhaps, that the technical terminology concerning *positive individuation* has so languished in English that we have only the pejorative “idiot” from the Greek, while “peculiar,” from the Latin, has taken on a primary connotation of the strange. That *idiotēs* is used as a technical term to articulate the uniqueness of each divine henad as something beyond identity-and-difference expresses the fundamental character of polytheisms as *religions of relation* in the intersubjective sense.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of “person” with which I am working is categorically distinct from that developed by Christian thinkers through the term *prosōpon*, which originally meant “face” or “mask,” but gradually developed an extended use in Greek to refer to the diverse “roles” one plays in life, and which was rendered by Cicero through the Latin term *persona*.<sup>17</sup> The essential difference between “person” in this sense and the personhood to be inferred from the Platonic usage of a term like *idiotēs* is that the former refers primarily to *what* one is or does, and only by a tenuous extension to *who* one is in an absolute sense. Hence, the Stoic Hierocles can say that brothers, for example, have from nature the same *prosōpon*, while Epictetus uses the term to elucidate “who one is” entirely in terms of one’s relationships and social roles (De Lacy, 166). It is not surprising, in this light, that Christian theologians adopted *prosōpon* to refer to “persons” differentiating a single God, precisely inasmuch as they did not wish these “persons” to be *individuals*, to whom the possibility of *intersubjective relations* pertains, but

<sup>16</sup> For polytheisms as “religions of relation” I am indebted to Thrax (2015).

<sup>17</sup> De Lacy (1977) offers a thorough discussion of the term’s documented usage prior to Cicero and the use he makes of the concept (presumably following Panaetius) in *De Officiis*.

rather *relational terms* within a self-relating godhead.<sup>18</sup> *Idios*, on the other hand, refers to what is peculiar to one, to what is inalienably or inescapably one's own.

*Prosōpon* pertains to the domain of relations, and a theory of “personhood” based upon it would necessarily be relational in a sense eliminative of the unique person: “In the Trinity, ‘person’ consists in *pure* relationality; *persona est relatio* ... the agent is nothing; the activity is everything ... there is no ‘I’ remaining behind the deeds and actions of the divine persons; their actions *are* their ‘I.’”<sup>19</sup> The technical development of the term within Platonic thought, by contrast, specifically affirms the priority of *idiotēs* to all relations so that the existence of both relations and entities *in relation* is secured—indeed, this is what is meant in a concrete sense by the priority of the One to Being. Hence, in the *Elements of Theology*, we read that the henads transcend relation (*schesis*) (prop. 126), inasmuch as relation is a “qualification of being” (*prosthesis tou einai*) (prop. 122). In a detailed discussion of the status of relations among deities in his *Parmenides* commentary, Proclus explains that

we must remove from them any notion of bare relation, devoid of essence; for nothing of that sort is proper to the Gods. Instead of relativity we must apply the concept of self-identity, and prior even to this self-identity the existence [*huparxin*] of each entity in itself; for each [of the Gods] exists primarily ‘for itself’, and in itself is united to the rest [*ta alla*] ... Such an entity There, then, is non-relational, though productive of a relation. (*IP* 936).

In prop. 115 of the *ET* the henads are said to transcend the hypostases of Being, Life, and Intellect inasmuch as “these three, though mutually distinct, are each implicit in the other two.” Being, Life, and Intellect, therefore, embody the relationality of the “persons” of the Trinity. They achieve *their* self-substantiation by returning, as parts, to their originating wholeness, whereas the “for itself” of the henads, by establishing their existence prior to determination by their relations, saves them from being dissolved into a third term which would embody the being “for another” of those relations.

The identification of personhood with divinity as such seems to be expressed directly in the *Gītā*'s affirmation that the very principle of divinity, as it were, the *adhidaivata* is *puruṣa* (30[8].4). *Puruṣa* has in many instances a semantic domain overlapping with that of *Brahman*, but it need not be a question here of an exclusive denotation. From Aristotle's viewpoint, e.g., “unity” and “being” are convertible, the same in nature but diverse in concept, in accord with the proper, ontological scope of his inquiry, while the wider scope of henology permits it to recognize units who are at once supra-essential and also the highest (quasi-)class of beings.<sup>20</sup> That *puruṣa* can also, from a different perspective, be regarded as *saguṇa brahman*, as Being qualified in this or that fashion, is no different from the fact that a Platonic henad is at once supra-essential and also a causal agent on one or more planes of being. Nor does the fact that *puruṣa* can also refer to a singular individual with the ontological coordinates of the “Cosmic Man” of *RV* 10.90 prevent us from discerning a *personhood* of which the

<sup>18</sup> The Christian usage is complicated by the tendency to translate *hypostasis* also sometimes as “person” when referring to the Trinity, though properly “person” has nothing to do with the sense of this term.

<sup>19</sup> Volf (1998), p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> On the sense in which the Gods form a “(quasi-)class,” one which does not conform to the rules of Platonic class-logic as laid out, e.g., at *Elements of Theology* prop. 21 and 66, see Butler (2008c).

latter forms the paradigm, much as the *paradeigma* of cosmic formation in Plato's *Timaeus*, the *autozōion* or "Animal Itself," is at once *monogenēs*, sole of its kind, and also the paradigm for the paradigms of individual lives which are the objects of irreducible existential choice in Plato's *Republic*.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, there are other terminological loci besides *puruṣa* that are available to render the sense of henadological theistic "personhood" in different contexts, such as *ātman*, and it is beyond the scope of this essay to discern all of them. What ultimately matters is the potential for such terms to exceed determinations of essence and number, to express a priority over relations and class characteristics, in the service of a devotion linking a unique worshiper and a unique divinity. For the Platonist, the highest mode of existence, that of the henads, personhood ontologically *prior to form*, is in turn reflected in mortal singulars who are persons and *posterior to form* as participants in *infima species*. And so in the 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 own unique personhood, their own *idiotēs*, in the relation to the unique deity. The worshiper thereby themselves transcends those relationships constituted by identity and difference, likeness or unlikeness, those relations *mediated by Forms*. Such relations, even essential ones, are posited in this encounter as adventitious, external.

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 divine series.<sup>22</sup> While eidetic reversion requires passing through all the intermediary forms to reach the 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 equable to all creatures ... but those who share me with love are in me and I am in them" (31[9].29), which appears contradictory; but this contradiction resolves itself in a henadological reading, insofar as the "sameness" displayed 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, to which we may compare the *Gītā*'s characterization of the *ātman* at 24.18 as *aprameya*, removing it from the register of justification through the *pramanas*. The Platonist understands the structure of the henadic manifold as *all-in-each*, as distinct from *all-in-one*, 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 immediately in him (33[11].6), as well as the whole universe (33[11].7), a typical affirmation of what has been termed the "polycentric" character of polytheism.<sup>23</sup> The henadological reading also permits Kṛṣṇa to state accurately and without contradiction

<sup>21</sup> For more on this reading of the Platonic "paradigm," see Butler (2014).

<sup>22</sup> On the two modes of reversion, see Butler (2007). See also Adluri and Bagchee (2016), where it is argued that "to use a Plotinian expression ... Bhakti is best understood as a kind of reversion, simultaneously intellectual and experiential, in which the soul through insight into its relation to a greater totality comes to rest in itself;" (118).

<sup>23</sup> For a fuller account of the structural characteristics of the henadic manifold, see Butler (2005); on "polycentric polytheism," see Butler (2008a).

that “all creatures exist in me, but I do not exist in them” (31[9].4), if the scope of this statement is understood to pertain to the difference between supra-essential individuals and ontic individuals. (A Platonist would likely arrange the formulations we have been looking at here in terms of the mereological structure of wholes “before-the-parts,” “of-the-parts,” and “in-the-parts” (*Elements of Theology*, prop. 67).)

The question of the soteriological value of henology brings us to the role of personal agency, the person as cause. Kṛṣṇa’s reply to Arjuna in chapter two of the *Gītā* 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 “There is no becoming of what did not already exist, there is no unbecoming of what does exist” (24[2].16), just as Plato’s *Phaedo* does in its final immortality argument. The *Phaedo* compares the role of fire, which is inseparable from causing heat, to the soul, which is inseparable from giving life (105b-106c). It cannot be a question here of a merely generic essence of soul. Instead, 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—who *acts* in this being? 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, action, is prior to form: Cause (Causality), in the doctrine of principles from Plato’s *Philebus*, is prior to form, which is 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 its life—this *taxis* arises instead *from the choice itself*, from the act of choosing (*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.<sup>24</sup>

This ontological doctrine is the highest sense of the primacy of action over its results. Action performed without concern for its result, a central theme of the *Gītā*, may thus be compared with action as *praxis* in Aristotelian ethical theory. In Aristotle’s ethics, however, actions are apparently by nature either *praxeis*—action that is autotelic, done for its own sake—or *poiēseis*, production. In bhakti theory, by contrast, it appears that the same actions can be performed either for the sake of their result *or* for their own sake.<sup>25</sup> 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, separable end—in other words, the autotelic action is *more one*. In this way, action done for its own sake also conserves the integrity, the unity, of the agent.

<sup>24</sup> 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; this, however, 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).

<sup>25</sup> 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 *poiēsis* are different (1140b3–4).

Similarly, a God loved for their own sake, insofar as They are object and cause of this devotion, manifests an integrity superior to that of the God approached as embodying this or that form, or for the sake of some specific result. In Proclus (*In Tim.* I, 212.24–6), we read that we should become “one” (*monos*), integral in ourselves, which also entails uniqueness,<sup>26</sup> 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*: “A person ... is what his faith makes him” (39[17].3).

Moreover, we see this correspondence embodied in the passage from 29[7].20–23, in which resort to the *person* of Kṛṣṇa is contrasted with those worshipers who, guided by desires and the constraints of their nature, have recourse to this or that deity in a rule-governed fashion for finite purposes. The concern of this passage from the *Gītā*, I would argue, is not to merely elevate one God over the rest—for would this not be banal?—but rather to elevate the devotion to Gods *in Themselves*, as unique divine persons, over that devotion seeking some discrete goal. In Aristotelian terms, I would argue that this passage from the *Gītā* affirms the primacy of *praxis* over *poiēsis* in devotion. The God as worshiped for some specific goal is necessarily worshiped in a “limited” and “temporary” fashion.

The choice with which we are ultimately presented is whether the multiplicity of objects of devotional regard in bhakti is a purely contingent, merely historical diversity of competing sects, each with its own pocket monotheism, as it were, or whether the integrity of the entire Hindu tradition can be understood on a different basis, one which is informed by the non-entitative understanding of “the One” developed by polytheist Platonists, rather than the One of Christian philosophy. Is the Hindu tradition to be grasped as a field of externalities, of exclusive monotheisms competing to subordinate one another, superimposed upon a relic Vedic polytheism reduced to a sterile “cosmotheism” of rigidly defined divine functions, or instead as a living polytheism which has continuously developed its self-articulation over millennia? Is the latter even to be thinkable?<sup>27</sup>

Keeping open the space for this kind of profound piety toward any God and toward each God in principle 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, a proper-named individual, to a concept such as “pleasure.” Similarly Plutarch criticizes those who are tempted to demonstrate their own cleverness by reducing the Gods to mere names of this or that faculty of the psyche,

affirm[ing] Aphrodite to be nothing but our concupiscence; that Hermes is no more than the faculty of speech; that the Muses are only the names for the arts and sciences; and that Athena is only a fine word for prudence ... you see into what an abyss of atheism we are like to plunge ourselves, while we go about to

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> Note in this regard the criticism of Malinar in Adluri and Bagchee (2016), p. 109 n. 59. Malinar seeks to reduce bhakti to the articulation of social power relations. In Malinar’s words, “the relationship between the highest god and a potential king is made the model of the new theological interpretation of bhakti which implies exclusiveness and subordination.”

range and distribute the Gods among the various passions, faculties, and virtues of men.<sup>28</sup>

It is by no means merely a question here of the psychologizing reduction of the Gods to mortal passions, but also, and more importantly, of the reductive classifications of the Gods to narrowly circumscribed “powers” popular among moderns and routinely projected upon the ancients, such as when we speak of Aphrodite as “Goddess of Love.” While those who had some limited erotic end in mind might invoke Her in this regard, for the true devotee of this or any God, a devotee such as Sappho is of Aphrodite, any simplistic, transactional engagement with the deity is inevitably superseded by the attempt to establish *a relationship with the divine person as such*.

In this fashion, the bhakti relation to the God can also be seen to ontologically ground intersubjective recognition, which can spread to encompass the relationship to all beings as ends in themselves and not means. Otherwise, as in 29[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 31[9].24f that “I am the recipient of all sacrifices and their master, though they do not really recognize me and therefore slip.” This “slip” or “fall” is directly linked to the classifications listed in 31[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 by a human *as a human*, that is, member of that class of objects, rather than by a unique individual worshiper as such. 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.

Philosophy declares that the forgetfulness of eternal *logoi* is the cause of departure from the Gods and recollection [*anamnēsis*] the cause of reversion [*epistrophe*] to Them; the Oracles, however, <say that> the paternal<sup>29</sup> signs [*sunthēmata*] <are the cause of reversion to the Gods>. But these two are in accord; for the soul is constituted both from holy *logoi* and from divine symbols, of which the former come from the intellective forms and the latter from the divine henads. We are on the one hand images [*eikones*] of the intellective essences, and also idols [*agalmata*] of the uncognizable [*agnōstos*] signs. (Proclus, *Eclogae de philosophia Chaldaica* V, trans. mine)

For the Platonist, as we can see from the above quote, 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. What philosophical insight is to the former, to the soul’s *whatness*, to the process of understanding what it is to be a human, and all the forms entailed in that, *ritual action*, theurgy, is to the latter, to its *whoness*, to the project of becoming who one *uniquely* is,

<sup>28</sup> Plutarch, *Amatorius* 13, trans. Goodwin, modified.

<sup>29</sup> On the technical sense of “paternal” here, see Butler (2016b), pp. 156–9. Briefly, the term designates the most primordial phase of activity of any God (including, as it so happens, Goddesses).

according to signs and tokens that may have significance for oneself alone. This corresponds to the ontological priority of metaphysical individuality over what is common (in Greek, *koinos*).

If we turn to the *Gītā* and look at it in this light, it, too, affirms an essential bond between ritual action—*yajña*, generally translated as “sacrifice”—and the constitution of the mortal soul. For if we take ritual action in its highest form as prescribed in the *Gītā*, as purified from seeking any goal separate from itself, *yajña* is revealed as the paradigm of action that does not bind the agent ontologically. In other words, we can see in the *Gītā*’s doctrine concerning *yajña* an affirmation of this same ontological priority of metaphysical individuality. The God, as well, as we have seen, may be grasped as more or less *one* depending upon whether they are worshiped for their own sake and as unique, or else for some desired result and hence according to membership in some class of Gods, or even simply in the class of Gods as such. The theory of *yajña* in the *Gītā* thus ties together with a unique depth of understanding the account of action and the account of the nature of personhood, both of the God and of the worshiper.

This conception of action between god and worshiper makes it possible, as well, for the *Gītā* to go beyond Aristotle’s account of *praxis*, by explaining how action in general, rather than only a specific class of actions, can be conceived as *praxis*. Kṛṣṇa states that “All the world is in bondage to the *karman* of action, except for action for purposes of sacrifice” (25[3].9); then we read that Prajāpati created creatures and sacrifice together (25[3].10). We can see *yajña*, in its highest form as Prajāpati intended it, as the coming together of Gods and mortals in ritual action, as inseparable from cosmic formation itself. *Yajña* would in this light be inseparable from the emanation of living beings, insofar as living beings are ends in themselves, and not means to any end. Their very ontological production is through *praxis* and not *poiēsis*. In the same way, for the Platonist mortal beings are affirmed in their uniqueness, beyond the cycles of formal production, in theurgic reversion upon the unique Gods.

The devotional relationship established through *yajña*, understood in this fashion, is explicitly *intersubjective* in character: “Give ye the Gods being with it, and the Gods shall give ye being. And thus giving each other being ye shall attain to the highest good” (25[3].11). Here the *relationship* itself is the supreme benefit. The transactional ritual economy is established on a plane just below: “Themselves enhanced in their being with sacrifice, the Gods shall give ye the pleasures ye desire: he who enjoys their gifts without return to them is but a thief” (25[3].12). This cycle of ritual, rain, food, beings and ritual (25[3].14), is the beneficent result of ritual action in its focus on concrete ends. This aspect of *yajña* is ontologically posterior to the relationship with the Gods which is its presupposition, but is not less important for that. Kṛṣṇa states: “This ritual action ... originates from the *brahman* ... Therefore the ubiquitous *brahman* is forever based upon sacrifice” (25[3].15).

Here the economy of result-oriented action and the products or results of that action is identified with Being (*Brahman*) as an integral system which the God transcends. The God transcends this system as *akṣara puruṣa*, as imperishable personhood. *Akṣara* here is a causal (or “transcendent”) negation in the same sense as we find in the works of Platonists.<sup>30</sup> For example, in speaking about Soul, Proclus explains, “When we say

<sup>30</sup> For a programmatic statement of “negations ... [as] causes of the corresponding assertions,” see Proclus, *In Parm.* 1072.19–1077.18. On “transcendent negation” see also Martin (1995).

that the Soul neither has the power of utterance nor is silent, we do not say these things about it in the sense that we would about stones or pieces of wood or any other thing without sensation, but in the sense that it *produces* voice and silence in the living being,” (*In Parm.* 1076, my emphasis). The denial of perishability in the God’s personhood can thus be seen *in addition* to affirm the God’s causality with respect to all temporal production, including the soul itself as a being in time.

When Kṛṣṇa states simply “I am the foundation of *Brahman*” (36[14].27), we can understand Him as saying, too, that *Brahman*, ontic action which constitutes the unity of Being, is born from the God as *person*, from *personhood*, acting within this ontic system but irreducible to it. The separability, in principle if not in fact, of “existential” personhood from Being<sup>31</sup> 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*, it is said that “the wise ... should do his acts ... only to hold the world together” (25[3].25). Recognizing the constitutive role of *poiēsis*, productive action, in the *world’s* unity, constitutes the world in its integrity *as well as* discerning the individual’s irreducibility to these ontic systems. Thus, the self lives off the leavings of *yajña* (25[3].13), which preserves the self’s unity, while giving over to the cosmos the productive, result-oriented aspect of action that belongs instead to the unity of Being, to *Brahman*. The good of the agent and of the cosmos can in this way be seen henologically, that is, that the goods of these things just *are* their respective unities, for as Proclus says, “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 one, and holds it together in virtue of this unification,” (*ET* prop. 13, trans. Dodds, mod.).

Transmuting productive or *poiēsis*-action into *sacral* action in the *Gītā*’s sense, is thus accomplished through knowledge: “The wise call that man a sage all of whose undertakings are devoid of the intention to achieve an object of desire, for his *karman* has been burned off by the fire of insight” (26[4].19f); “Just as a blazing fire reduces its kindling to ashes, Arjuna, so the fire of knowledge makes ashes of all *karman*” (26[4].37). That is, knowledge consumes the *poiēsis* dimension of action, leaving only its *praxis* dimension, consuming the eidetic, categorial, or ontic dimension and leaving 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 object, 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 commits to memory this our colloquy informed by Law, he will offer up to me a sacrifice of knowledge, so I hold,” (40[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.

Henology is above all non-reductive, insofar as it elevates the principle of *numerical difference* above that of being, but it is not nominalist, if by the latter we would

<sup>31</sup> “Existence,” as opposed to Being, which pertains to the henads as *hyperousios*, “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.

understand the “anti-realist” denial of any substantiality to formal or universal beings. Henology grounds the procession of Being, synonymous with form and universality, in the causal agency of the ultimate units (henads), at once affirming this mode of existence without treating it as absolute. Instead of a “One” that undermines multiplicity, we have instead found a unity that is *unities*. Nor, despite the efforts of too many Western scholars, is *Brahman* the monotheist “God,” a totalizing, hegemonic individual. The roots of the concept of *Brahman* lie instead in Vedic divine utterance, in the *continuum* formed by hymns praising the many Gods. In an atmosphere of hegemonic monotheism, it is difficult for us to appreciate the sophistication that allowed the *ῥisis* to discern the integrity of this continuum in itself, and make of it an object of reflection in and for itself, *without* thereby annihilating the personhood of the deities or of their worshipers. Through the emergence of bhakti theory, it was made clear that the concept of personhood was not reducible to conceptuality. This intellectual achievement is timelessly affirmed in the *Gītā*, where one divine individual reveals that he contains the universe itself to another, mortal individual, who is able to receive this knowledge because of the *relationship* he has had since childhood with this, his *Bhagavān*.

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