Beginning with the Unlimited:
Badiou and Plotinus on What Comes First

Anna Cornelia Ploug

> καὶ τοῦτο αὐτῇ ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος (VI.9.9, 334)
> "and this is its [soul's] beginning and end"

The philosophical system of *L'être et l'événement* is launched with the explicit denial of 'The One' as grounding principle, because any philosophy that begins by positing an original unity (whether a unique, absolute being or an atom) will, according to Alain Badiou, inevitably turn out to be nothing but disguised theology. This denial, captured in the formula "l'un, en effet, n'est pas" (Badiou 1988, 47), constitutes the precursory decision taken by Badiou in order to develop an ontological architecture, which permits pure multiplicity as its base.

Who would be a more obvious counterpart for this announcement than Plotinus, the ultimate thinker of The One? While Badiou is not concerned specifically with reading or criticising neither Plotinus nor Neoplatonism as such, all the necessary aspects that he seeks to escape are present in the latter: The One of the *Enneads* is a transcendent unity, inaccessible to thought and beyond being. Badiou, on his part, insists that since The One is not, what originally is rather amounts to 'inconsistent' multiplicity, the *pur multiple*. Furthermore, he points to the process of 'structuring situations', i.e. arranging utter differentiation into consistent wholes, as the only place for unity: unity is nothing more than the *operation* of unifying, the *compte-pour-un*. However, I will argue that our understanding can benefit from subjecting certain schemes in the two authors to reconciliation instead of merely accepting the seeming antagonism. More specifically, I will show that there can be found a decisive resemblance in their perspectives on what comes first.

A closer look at the way in which Badiou and Plotinus employs, respectively, the pure multiple and the One as means for understanding the constitutional process of thought or 'the production of presentation', reveals striking similarities. What Plotinus does, when he makes 'Intellect' constitute itself in a

Anna Cornelia Ploug
acploug@hotmail.com

gaze of and towards the One, might actually be something quite different from the purely theological objective that Badiou dismisses. In what follows, I will argue that there are good reasons to parallel the development of the ontological framework as presented in the beginning meditations of *L'être et l'événement* with that of the constitution of Intellect – and with it thought – by a "gaze upon the One" in selected treatises of Plotinus' *Enneads*.[1]

I will propose a comparison of two figures which at a first glance appear as each other's exemplary opposite: the paradigmatic version of the One in classical Neoplatonism, presented in all its ineffable glory in (in particular) *Ennead VI.9*, on the one hand, and the affirmation of what is supposed to be the One's logical contradiction, i.e. pure multiplicity, presented in the first meditations of Badiou's *L'être et l'événement*, on the other. This procedure will reveal that the disagreement between the contrasting claims of the explicit rejection of any essential one-ness in Badiou and the never before so insistent assertion of the superiority of the One in Plotinus[2] in fact masks a shared philosophical choice of composition: an ontological composition that grants ultimate importance to something *which comes first*, and ascribes to this principle – this beginning – the role of being a non-given condition of existence and of the very act of thinking.

As a preliminary pursuit, it might be worthwhile to consider the degree to which the One in Plotinus *does* in fact add up to the objective of the critique of the first chapters of *L'être et l'événement*. My presentation therefore begins with a brief examination of the terminology and basic ontological structure at work in Plotinus, leading up to an analysis of whether the Plotinian notion of the One can rightly be considered prey to Badiou's criticism (section I). I will then point to four significant similarities between Badiou's concept of the pure multiple and Plotinus' concept of the One, to be presented in the following sections. First, in section II, the inaccessibility of *the first* to thought, i.e. the fact that both

---

[1] References to the *Enneads* will be given in the following form: '[Ennead].[Treatise].[Chapter], [Page]', e.g. 'V.4.2, 149' (according to the order given by Porphyry and maintained by Loeb Classical Library, in translation by A.H. Armstrong).

[2] The foundation of this notion of The One as well as Intellect can be found in Parmenides' first and second hypotheses, which pivot on a negative and an affirmative approach, respectively. While these notions indeed precede Plotinus' adaptation, the latter is particularly noteworthy in emphasising the metaphysical and not merely logical impact of the hypotheses, thus palpably taking sides in the debate on the interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides* prevalent at the time, cf. Wallis 1995, 21.

authors operate with an essentially *incomprehensible* beginning (i), and, as a result, their turning to negative denomination as the only viable approach to capture this inarticulate first (ii). Second, in section III, I will turn the attention to a specific notion of the infinite, which *the first* is expressively associated with in both Badiou and Plotinus (iii), and then assess its epistemological function as a (retrospectively established) necessary condition for the constitution of thought (iv).

By revealing the intersection of philosophical strategies in Badiou and Plotinus, such comparison points towards a universal concept of *principium*, or what in the following will be referred to straightforwardly as *the first*. Although neither of the mentioned thinkers are particularly preoccupied with explicit reflections on how to begin, i.e. on what constitutes the basis in an ontological system, or starting point in an epistemic endeavour, they implicitly respond to this very question as well as propose a solution to it by outlining the nature of the One and the pure multiple, respectively.

When we compare fundamental structural features, while concentrating on the constitutional process of particular ontological levels, we are laying the groundwork for an identification of certain traits that can be ascribed to what might simply be denominated *that which comes first*. This, in turn, points towards a more general issue known as the 'problem of beginning' in philosophy, i.e. the way in which thinking relates to its prior conditions. Through an examination of the suggested common structures of two apparently opposed thinkers, we will enable the question of beginning to be posed in a more qualified way, namely precisely as a question simultaneously involving an epistemological and an ontological concern. We will find that ultimately, when it comes to the opening of a philosophical system, some particular *modes of composition* are so powerful that their imposition can be traced as a shared scheme among thinkers who are otherwise not only remote from each other in terms of time and language, but also, judging by appearances, conceptually incompatible.

In order to unravel the notion of 'rational thought', it proves prudent to examine its perpetual companion throughout Western thought, namely the *principium*. Such an examination – on this occasion in the form of a reading attentive to the joint concern of a Neoplatonic text and a contemporary work – will allow

us to better understand the fundamental issue of *beginning,* an issue that seems to be continually renewing itself, and which has been dealt with in different disguises throughout the history of philosophy. Confronting Badiou and Plotinus, the question can be articulated as the problem of how the production of thought necessarily involves the positing of something incomprehensible, something that is, precisely, *beyond* our reach.

Section I: The Plotinian One and Badiou's refusal of any such thing
The One of the Enneads
The ontological system that can be reconstructed from Plotinus' thought is first and foremost characterised by having (at least) three levels: the One, Intellect and Soul, also known as the three *hypostases,* starting from the most simple and continuing to increasingly complex natures. Already at this point, we ought to reconsider our terminology: strictly speaking, the first hypostasis – the One – cannot be a proper object of ontology, since it is categorised as something essentially above mere existence in the classical Platonist formulae ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας ('beyond being', *Republic 509b,* Plato 2003, 95; V.4.2, 148). Besides, there is no such thing as a Plotinian 'system': the text of the *Enneads* does not constitute a consistent and coherent unity and does not propose an exhaustive interpretation of reality, but rather presents specific – though often interconnected – ponderings and insights. Instead, following the notable Plotinus scholar A.H. Armstrong, we could speak of a certain philosophical *architecture* peculiar to Plotinus[3], one that gives prominence to the functionality or effects of the relations that make up the structure. Such an approach furthermore allows for a comparison with Badiou's philosophy.

The One (τὸ ἕν) is the name given to the hypostasis of highest perfection, the pure simplicity about which nothing can be said. The One is infamously characterised as 'ineffable' because of its resistance to predication: as soon as it is designated, its supremacy is also limited. This simplicity must, however, be understood basically as non-limitation, and therefore involves eternity (or lack

---

[3] *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Armstrong 1940).

of temporality), self-causation (or lack of need for an external agent) and omnipresence (or lack of locality and material extension) – 'infinity', in short. Due to this perfection, the One is the source of everything, i.e. of all beings, life and thought, all of which comes into existence through a process often referred to as *emanation,* canonically illustrated in the metaphor of a fountain. Plotinus also invokes an analogy with light: there "must be a radiation from it [the One] while it remains unchanged, like the bright light of the sun which, so to speak, runs round it, springing from it continually while it remains unchanged" (V.1.6, 31). Material analogies are just one (obviously risky) way of expressing the emergence of other hypostases from the One. The concept of emanation or rather *procession* is – in spite of its richness – not inside the objective of our question; for our purposes, it suffices to identify this (non-)entity as the precondition *par excellence.* In the words of Plotinus: "how is that one the principle [ἀρχή] of all things? Is it because as principle it keeps them in being, making each one of them exist? Yes, and because it brought them into existence" (V.3.15, 125). 'That one' is thus transcendent to and necessary for any being to exist.

Intellect (νοῦς) is the first offspring emerging from the excess that necessarily follows from the One's perfection (V.4.1, 143). The activity of this second hypostasis is called νόησις and represents the most essential form of thought: by assuming a merely logical distinction between thinker and thought, or between the thinker and the object of thought, *noêsis* designates an ideal form of reflexivity, and as such serves as model for the more advanced forms of thinking following upon it. Just as Intellect is said to 'imitate' the One, so does Soul (ψυχή), the third hypostasis, imitate the former by being "the expressed thought of Intellect" (V.1.3, 19). In the extreme end of the scale Plotinus finally places Matter, which is dependent on receiving form and determination 'from above', and thereby constitutes the very limit of being. As Richard Wallis notes, "complexity increases towards the centre of the metaphysical hierarchy" (Wallis 1995, 91), and Intellect and Soul are accordingly placed in-between what we might call 'two kinds of nothing'.

Plotinus describes Intellect as "a multiplicity which is undivided and yet again divided" (VI.9.5, 319): it is unity *and* multiplicity, with regards to its neighbours on each side. This double determination is expressed in the epithet "One-

Many" (V.1.8, 43), which refers to a sort of second-rate unity, and is taken from the second hypothesis of Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* (cf. Dodds 1928, 132). By virtue of both its origin in and difference from the One, it does not share the absolute and exceptional simplicity of the latter, which is why it – to some degree – must be predicated as not-simple, i.e. complex. At the same time, Intellect is so near its origin that "its multiplicity is a one-everywhere; for although it is a multiplicity it is at the same time identical with itself and there is no way in which you could divide it" (V.3.15, 125). Intellect is thus neither composed nor completely simple, but rather a curious admixture situated between two extremes: the ultimate Unity 'upwards' (III.8.9, 393), and the temporal manifold of the world of souls 'downwards' (V.1.7, 39). The One and Soul function here as two poles – simple/complex, infinite/finite – between which Intellect finds its proper place.

Plotinus is a typical Neoplatonic thinker in assuming an ontological hierarchy ordered in degrees of simplicity, yet he develops this tradition further in an original and challenging manner, the main characteristic of which can be illustrated in comparison with Aristotle. For Plotinus, *the first* cannot be admitted thinking, as in the latter, where the Unmoved Mover is precisely characterised as that which is fulfilled in the contemplation of itself (*Metaphysics Λ*, 1074b30-35, Aristotle 1935, 165). For Aristotle, who, it should be noted, does not hold this ultimate being as in any way transcending the world or being as such, thought is actualised through being determined by its object. As a result, thought and existence coincide in the activity of thinking. While Aristotle regards this act as completely simple, Plotinus insists on the – perhaps purely logical – agent/object duality involved, and thereby refuses its claim on being first (V.1.9, 43).

This degradation of Intellect from being first represents a major break with traditional Greek thought (Wallis 1995, 57). The requirement of an entity beyond Intellect – the so-called '*Principle of Prior Simplicity*' (O'Meara 1995, 41; cf. V.3.16, 129) – implies, besides the complex description of Intellect, also a particular transcendent placement of the One. For the One to condition the content of the intelligible sphere, it must itself be situated 'on the other side' of

this sphere (e.g. V.4.2, 149; III.8.10, 397). Now, when Intellect cannot be *principle,* that is, *the very first* (VI.7.37, 201), it must owe its being to something else, something that precedes it and is superior to it with regard to simplicity. In considering the relation between One and Many (Intellect) in Plotinus, it becomes clear that he introduces a tension between the static One and the dynamic nature of its outcome. By positing a unity as the supreme and unattainable point of reference – the *principium* that underlies and conditions everything there is – Plotinus appears as the paradigmatic thinker of the One, in all its transcendence, ineffability and excessive production.

Badiou's refusal of the One

Badiou, on the other hand, begins his 'meta-ontological' endeavour by stating that there is no such thing as an One, and, by consequence, that all there is must be multiples of multiples (relying on the dichotomy simple/complex). Traditionally, Badiou explains, we have been stuck in the paradoxical situation of refusing what is presented to us, and terming it non-existing, as a consequence of having previously established the claim that presentation is nothing but secondary, distorted appearance. The need to overcome this basic difference compels us to *decide* to "rompre avec les arcanes de l'un et du multiple où la philosophie naît et disparaît" (Badiou 1988, 31), which Badiou does simply by declaring that "l'un *n'est pas*". This decision is requisite to prepare the possibility of what Peter Hallward calls "a truly modern (or 'post-theological') ontology" (Hallward 2003, 75), because this alone permits an account of being not based on a necessary ordering of the world. It seems that Badiou is forced to present his axioms in order to enable an ontology capable of endorsing radical breaks with its own order, thereby allowing the possibility of what is later on referred to as 'events': the elimination of a 'grounding' nature with a fixed and necessary order as its essence constitutes the basis of this demand.

When we posit the One, Badiou argues, the assertiveness of a position fundamentally *other to* our own is established, and this allows for an ethics based on difference to be introduced, difference being "ontologiquement 'garantie' comme expérience d'une distance, ou d'une non-identité essentielle, dont le *franchissement* est l'expérience éthique elle-même" (Badiou 2003, 45). What

Badiou opposes with his opening decision is thus essentially a religious ethics, which implies an onto-theological account of reality. For Badiou, in turn, what is 'left' of this One is an operation of counting – *le compte-pour-un* – of what actually *is*, i.e. the multiple or the negated One. The object of ontology is thus the multiple as such, that is, various modes of presentation, which is, precisely, all there can be said to exists: "l'ontologie ne peut qu'être *théorie des multiplicité inconsistantes en tant que telles*" (Badiou 1988, 36).

In Plotinus, the multiple represents the minimal difference engendered from the One, and Intellect is at this moment not yet formed into a matured and self-contained nature, but derives its determination from an estrangement from its source alone. It seems that Plotinus builds his philosophy upon the recognition of a fundamental difference with respect to a purely undifferenti-ated One, and this scheme indeed figured as the primary model for understand-ing the ontological status of God in Early Medieval Christian theology. Albeit the One in Plotinus is rarely referred to in terms of 'creator', moral authority or, as in Augustine, a personal companion in individuals' lives, it is clear that the One does serve as an ungraspable, transcendent non-worldly figure, and that everything else ultimately depends on it. Consequently, the Plotinian One seems to be an excellent candidate for the negative counterpart implied by Badiou's philosophy and an exemplary instance of what Badiou labels the 'God of met-aphysics' (Badiou 1998, 14).

Badiou's critique of the One is has the refusal of a uniting principle of being as its main feature: "Il n'y a nul Dieu. Ce qui se dira aussi: l'Un n'est pas" because, as the passage continues, "[l]e multiple 'sans un' – tout multiple n'étant jamais à son tour que multiple de multiples – est la loi de l'être" (Badiou 2003, 49). Such a God is what Badiou calls *Dieu-Principe* (Badiou 1998, 18), and is characterised by the logical anteriority and conditioning function that is entailed by the status of being *principium*. In this way it meets the second of the two requirements of the preliminary definition of *principia* that Descartes sets out in a paradigmatic way in the *Lettre-Préface*[4] (Descartes 2009, 252). The refusal of the One expresses an unwillingness to maintain such a 'God of metaphysics', that is completely indifferent to and yet necessary for what it engenders, as is

---

[4] Descartes' preface to the French translation of his *Principes de la philosophie,* 1647.

perfectly expressed in the attitude of the One towards the lower hypostases. A principle of being that stays untouched by the product of its excess, and is un-conceivable by finite thought, accomplishes with meticulous accuracy Badiou's definition of a theological concern – hence the apparent opposition between his philosophical endeavour and that of Plotinus. It should be noted, however, that when the One is marked 'the Good' and when the ascent towards it is described as motivated by emotions such as longing and devotion, Plotinus is no doubt intending a God of religion in the sense that The One represents the goal for virtuous finite souls to aspire towards. In this respect, there can be no reconciliation between the two.[5]

Thus, we see in Badiou a clear rejection of the Plotinian One *qua* God of religion, as well as a declared refusal of the One *qua* God of metaphysics. Regarding the latter, however, the question is not yet fully exhausted, since certain traits of Plotinus' philosophy seem to follow a structure of thought similar to Badiou's, rather than being incompatible with the latter's proposals of substitutes of the One, or the God-Principle. We will now consider the first pair of shared traits to be found in Plotinus and Badiou's particular points of departure.

Section II: Incomprehensibility and negation
The first's resistance to thought (i)
First of all, the 'pure' or 'inconsistent multiple' shares with 'the One' the char-acteristic of resistance towards being thought; both are principally incompre-hensible. As soon as they are conceptualised, they become, respectively, struc-tured situations ('onified') and Intellect (multiplied), which amounts to the same thing: they lose their essential determination (or, in technical terms, *lack* of de-termination) and simply cease to be. In general, 'being thought' involves being defined and thus contrasted with something else; an element other than the original object of thought is thus implicated. To *con-sist* is to be held together due to a distance to the not-same surroundings, and consistency is thus received

---

[5] And it would indeed be foolish to deny this aspect of Plotinus' thought. The One is not for no reason the preliminary figure of what becomes the Christian Father, and Plotinus exhibits – as does subsequently Augustine in a more evident way – the personal and engaged attitude that the Soul-hypostasis as well as individual souls unfolds in relation to the One. Yet, there are not, in Plotinus himself, any binding religious implications, and the identification of the hypostases with the Christian trinity in Augustine is clearly an interested and violent reading, cf. Wallis 1995, 167.

by means of a limitation. Traditionally, existence has been considered as relying upon such a practice of distinction, something well illustrated in Badiou's emphasis upon the Leibniz-quote: "Ce qui n'est pas *un* être n'est pas un *être*" (Badiou 1988, 31). In singling out this aspect of separation or negative determination, we can identify thinking with the multiplying act of the Intellect in Plotinus and, conversely, the count-as-one in Badiou. For both, thinking presupposes defining and ordering by predication. And in both, what is first cannot be comprehended, that is, embraced conceptually, because being a term, "cela ne pourrait vouloir dire qu'une chose, c'est qu'il a été compté pour un" (Badiou 1988, 67): conceptual knowledge involves demarcation.

For Plotinus, plurality is a necessary condition for something to become intelligible as an object – otherwise "there will not be a thought of it, but only a touching [θίξις] and a sort of contact [ἐπαφὴ] without speech or thought" (V.3.10, 107). Plotinus here distinguishes between what can be said, i.e. what is expressible in discursive thought and can be exhaustively grasped and defined as a specific entity, and that which can only be 'touched' due to its resistance to articulation and intelligibility (by being ἄρρητος καὶ ἀνόητος). Plotinus furthermore argues that a proposition must necessarily have a content comprising a diverse set of elements in order for it to be informative. There can only be thought when the possibility of distinguishing is present, and consequently "the simplest of all" can neither practice the activity of thinking (V.3.13, 121), nor constitute an object of thought.

In both Plotinus and Badiou, 'the first' – as we label the inconsistent multiple/the One to the degree that they are similar – opposes comprehension because of its requirements of not being limited through a definition. It is, in traditional terms, *ineffable,* or, in the case of Badiou, *un-presentable.* The pure multiple, which Badiou in the following passage distinguishes from the 'ordered' multiple, the πολλὰ, resists thought:

> amont de son effet [the operation of count-as-one], selon le pur non-être de l'un, apparaît, pour disparaître, l'imprésentable multiplicité, le πλῆθος, dont – pour un Grec – l'illimitation, l'ἄπειρός, nomme en effet qu'elle ne se soutient d'aucune situation pensable (Badiou 1988, 45).

For something to be thought, it needs to be 'something', that is, to be according to a situation, to be counted as an element by means of a structuring principle. What is thus structured is what Badiou names the 'pure multiple', the not-One. This 'material prior to determination' withstands any conceptualisation due to the fact that "la multiplicité inconsistante est en effet, comme telle, impensable", and we are therefore forced to present it to ourselves in the image of a dream, as Plato did (Badiou 1988, 44); we have no means allowing us to grasp it in thought.

At least this remains the case until the ('evental') invention of set theory, which gives us a term for that-which-is-not-counted-as-one: the empty set. With this concept, Cantor provides us with a tool to circumvent the inaccessibility of the inconsistent multiple by supplying it with "la fixité d'une pensée" (Badiou 1988, 46), that is, the unique and basic relation in the system, the *belonging*, which "permet de penser le multiple pur sans recourir à l'Un" (Badiou 1988, 119). So it seems that Badiou finds in mathematics – more precisely in a specific interpretation of set theory (viz. the Zermelo-Fraenkel axiomatisation) – the means to avoid one of the original characteristics of the One, namely its ineffability. It remains one of Badiou's core assumptions that set theory provides a method for expressing the inconsistent multiple to the extent that this is at all possible: "les mathématiques (...) prononcent ce qui est dicible de l'être-en-tant-qu'être" (Badiou 1988, 14).

What *can* actually be said will turn out to be fairly modest, or rather; it will be formulated in purely negative terms, and will therefore be parasitic upon what we normally ascribe to and predicate about beings.[6] Before returning to this solution, we ought to take a look at the way in which Plotinus deals with the ineffability of the One.

As previously noted, Intellect cannot capture the One: "our awareness of that One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with other intelligible things, but by a way of a presence superior to knowledge" (VI.9.4, 315). Plotinus clearly refuses to describe or predicate the eminence of the One, as any such attempt can only be undertaken from our distinctive point

---

[6] In Badiou's words, it will be *subtractive* of being.

of view, and would thus limit the One by understanding it in finite terms. The only encounter with the One that is conceivable is what Plotinus occasionally describes as vision, or "not a contemplation but another kind of seeing, a being out of one self [ἔκστασις] and simplifying and giving one self over" (VI.9.11, 343).[7] What makes this frontier of thought and language so productive is that it indicates a limit of rationality, by pointing towards something unattainable for reason (something ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ, cf. VI.9.9, 338f.), and simultaneously gives us an account of what *is* actually said about that-of-which-nothing-can-be-said, since Plotinus nevertheless persistently attempts to capture it.

Naming by negating (ii)

Plotinus' use of the term 'ineffable' should be taken quite literally (in contrast to many Platonists, who by the term seem merely to express the difficulty of describing the highest principle, or who uses it in a much more confused fashion, cf. Dominic O'Meara 1995, 54-56). For him, there can be no question of making the One an intelligible object, since this would involve a limitation of its nature and thus a contradiction. Plotinus instead approaches the One by means of three classical ways[8] to respond to the ineffable: *via negationis,* i.e. the description of what the One is *not* (λέγομεν ὃ μὴ ἔστιν, V.3.14, 121); *via analogiae,* as when he compares the One to the geometrical centre of a circle (V.1.11, 49f.) or compares emanation to the coldness emitted from snow; and, finally, *via emminentia,* i.e. the supplement that must necessarily be added on top of any negative description in order for the supreme reality to be distinguishable from the lowest reality, since Matter is described as being formless (ἀ-μόρφον) and without thought just as the One. The *via emminentia* adjoins to the negative qualities of the One the crucial precision that they do not express a lack, but on the contrary, reveal an overabundance in the sense that the One, by virtue of being the

---

[7] It is this sort of passage that has given rise to the regularly held but very rigid interpretation of Plotinus as a mystic devoid of rationality. While it is true that this supra-rational union with the One, which Plotinus – according to the biography written by Porphyry – was known to have experienced no less than four times in his life, is deeply embedded in the religious aspect of Neoplatonism, it should not be dismissed as useless neither to philosophical questions in general, nor to our specific concern.

[8] ἀναλογία, ἀφαίρεσις and γνώσεις ἐξ αὐτοῦ (VI.7.36, 199).

generator of all form and all activity, does not itself require the characteristics of its products.

Plotinus presents – in what Deirdre Carabine labels "the way of the non-concept in Plotinus" (Carabine 1995, 137) – a particularly radical form of negative theology, or what might more appropriately be called *henology* (cf. 'τὸ ἐν'), when he insists on employing efforts to make the One comprehensible even though its nature forbids it.[9] Whereas the *via negationis* in other thinkers represents a manner of acknowledging the insufficiency of human reason to embrace supreme reality, it is in Plotinus imposed as a necessity with reference to the nature of the latter – no one, not even the One itself, is capable of thinking the One.

This approach is not unlike that of Badiou, who seems to follow a similar 'way of non-concept', by ultimately inserting "a none rather than a one" (Hallward 2003, 82). The only thing that can be affirmed about what is first is *le vide*, i.e. the opposition to determination as such. As a consequence, the inconsistent multiple can indeed be thought, but only as a nothing or a void; as the absence of limitation or the counterpart of presentation. In set theory, this void is what is captured by the name 'Ø', the empty set. There is no conceptualising at play; there is only an arbitrary (mathematical) act of denomination. Set theory is said to *think* the multiple "sans en définir la signification" (Badiou 1988, 95) and "sans recourir à l'Un" (Badiou 1988, 119). Strictly speaking, in negating the one, what we end up with is not a 'full' plurality as such; what we gain is rather a *multiple-de-rien*:

> Tout multiple est composé de multiples, c'est la loi ontologique première. Mais par où commencer? (...) Il faut de toute nécessité que la 'première' multiplicité présentée sans concept soit multiple de rien (Badiou 1988, 70).

---

[9] This – to grasp the One – is certainly not the main purpose for Plotinus, who is very much concerned with establishing the ineffability of the One. What I am suggesting is merely that, in proposing a *via negationis,* Plotinus provides us with resourceful material in our effort to understand his notion of Intellect, or, to be more accurate, the relation between the absolute and transcendent source and its (less simple) outcome.

The void or 'nothing' (Greek has the convenient οὐδ-έν, 'not-one', as Badiou notes) does not contain any difference, which would permit a distinction in and thereby conceptualisation of its content: "L'imprésentable est inextensionnel, et donc in-différent" (Badiou 1988, 80). Given that any conceptual framing of *the first* would involve reintroducing unity into ontology, and thereby interfere with the committed loyalty to the denial of the one, the basis or beginning of the Badiouan architecture must be posed by means of axiomatisation (Badiou 1988, 55). In spite of its non-conceivability, its 'not-one-ness', the inconsistent multiple nonetheless does receive a proper name, and functions as a 'conditioning material' for the structuring of situations. Multiples are made consistent by being counted in regard to a certain principle, and consequently always also include or 'contain' *the first* (Ø) in terms of the void 'proper to' the specific situation (as the empty set is a necessary subset of any set). In a word, the name of the first ontological level is 'nothing'. In Plotinus as well as in Badiou, the approximation of *the first* is handled by a procedure of naming by negating: "Le vide n'a aucun élément, il est donc imprésentable, et nous n'avons à faire qu'à son nom propre, lequel présente l'être dans son manque" (Badiou 1988, 103f).

In both thinkers, we thus find i) a strong emphasising on the way in which *the first* resists thought, and ii) the subsequent employment of a negative approach, by means of which this first, despite its incomprehensibility, is successfully made operative in the account of 'later' and dependent levels of reality. In both, "*οὐδέν ἔστιν*" (Badiou 1988, 45) is the central claim set forth in regard to what is first: the Plotinian One is *nothing* of what we know and are familiar to – it is way *beyond* these things, and the inconsistent multiple in Badiou is, by resisting conceptualisation, *not-one*, or, more precisely, the void of any given situation, i.e. that which is *never* presented to us except as the lack and condition of all presentation. The stipulation of 'what comes first' is not confined to a strictly negatively formulated identification in neither Badiou nor Plotinus, however, and so we will now proceed to a consideration of a specific historically loaded term, which both thinkers ascribe to their respective version of *the first*; the infinite.

Section III: Infinity and condition
Imperfect infinity (iii)

In order to investigate the notion of infinity, we resort to the instructive distinction between *indefinitum* and *infinitum* as introduced by Descartes in *Principiae Philosophiae*. In §27 of Part I, he writes: *Hæcque* [the divisibility of matter, the number of stars etc.] *indefinita dicemus potius quam infinita: tum ut nomen infiniti soli Deo reservemus*[10] (Descartes 2009, 102). Descartes further explains how the *infinitum* of God is to be understood not only negatively in the sense that we do not observe any limitation, but that we also *positive nullos <limites> esse intelligimus*. This positive affirmation of the infinite – that is, the notion of an infinity, which is impossible to envelop in thought – provides a unique denomination of God, because it draws attention to an excessive aspect rather than focusing the qualification of God's nature on his essential difference from worldly reality. The distinction indefinite/infinite corresponds roughly to the dichotomy determined/incomprehensible (cf. Plotinus' 'only a touching'; the genuine infinite cannot be comprehended, but surpasses thought). In Badiou, the couple corresponds to the successive adding of parts to a never-ending and therefore potential infinite sequence on the one hand, and actual infinity on the other hand: in other words, pre- and post-Cantorian infinity, respectively. In Badiou's opinion, we are with Cantor finally able to conceive infinity in its absolute form: as actual infinity.

Plotinus' understanding of the One does indeed conform to the Cartesian *infinitus*: the One "must be understood as infinite not because its size and number cannot be measured or counted but because its power cannot be comprehended" (VI.9.6, 323). The negations ascribed to the One appropriately express a countering of any form of restriction: infinity literally equals being 'without limit' (ἄ-πειρον). Even the name 'τὸ ἕν' defies predication, and should be read as a negative claim. As Plotinus writes:

> But perhaps this name 'One' contains [only] a denial of multiplicity. This is why the Pythagoreans symbolically indicated it to each other by the name of Apollo, in negation

---

[10] The French translation says "Et nous appellerons ces choses indéfinies plutôt qu'infinies, afin de réserver à Dieu seul le nom d'infini" (Descartes 2009, 103).

of the multiple. But if the One – name and reality expressed – was to be taken posi-
tively it would be less clear than if we did not give it a name at all (V.5.6, 175).

Although the anecdotic reference to Ἀ-πολλών does not reflect a meaning origi-
nally contained in the name of the god, Plotinus' notice of the word bears wit-
ness to his insistence on the predicative-resistant status of the highest principle.
An insistence that is also recurrent in Badiou, who would perceive any limita-
tion in the multiple as a reintroduction of the One. This is basically the same
line of argument as in Plotinus, if we hold in mind that the 'One' that is implied
by limitation in Badiou corresponds to the 'many' implied by limitation in Plo-
tinus. The idea is the same: *the first* needs to be infinite/unlimited in order to
oppose fragmentation. The nothing of *the first* is (in Badiou's terms) what con-
nects the given 'presentation' with 'the unpresentable', and recalling the lack in
any situation thus points towards the pure multiple, i.e. the foundation, – just
as negative speech points to the One, i.e. the foundation, in Plotinus. Nothing
is the name given to designate the fact that what we experience is the constant
excess of something extraordinary to thought. What such a basis or first nature
amounts to (beside its lack of limits) stays incomprehensible after all. Not quite
transcendent, not untouchable, but indeed un-graspable. This is what allows
Badiou to write that:

> L'infini, comme déjà savait Pascal, est la banalité de toute situation, et non le prédicat
> d'une transcendance. Car l'infini, comme l'a montré Cantor avec la création de la
> théorie des ensembles, n'est en effet que la forme la plus générale de l'être-multiple
> (Badiou 2003, 50).

The refusal of granting infinity a transcendent position plays a major part in the
project of its secularisation. Instead of belonging exclusively to an unfamiliar
realm, the infinite is conceived as inherent in each situation: substantially by
virtue of constituting the material, which the consistent situation is composed
of, and epistemologically in the sense that it discloses itself by a sign, the 'always
also contained' empty set.

In both Plotinus and Badiou, *the first* is associated with infinity as its only
suitable determination, which comes close to saying that it is 'determined' by

the very claim that any determination would be against its nature. Plotinus' thought indicates a rupture with his historical context in positing the first and highest level of reality as boundless instead of 'perfect', when the latter is taken in its original sense: as meaning 'achieved' or 'finished'. To be *per-fectus* is to be completed, which presupposes that the entity in question must at some point have been lacking something, in order for it to subsequently overcome this deficiency. ”But", Plotinus writes, "the One does not need itself: for it is itself” (VI.9.6, 325). This is even more lucidly expressed in the Greek word τέλειος, which the Latin translates in *perfectus*. The One can for obvious reasons hardly have been in such an erstwhile stage of insufficiency, just as it could never be ascribed a *telos*: Plotinus is consistent in his assertion that *the first* cannot intend anything as its end, nor is it in any way in need of anything – not even itself. It is thus by no means 'perfect', and it is this imperfection, in the proper sense of the word, that the One shares with the pure multiple. Neither meets the requirements for existing the way a being exists, and both supplies the necessary condition for determination and presentation. This is where the dynamic aspect of the constitution of presentation becomes decisive for our understanding of the conditioning function of *the first*.

Producing presentation (iv)

The fact that *the first,* by opposing any limit, represents a halt in that it neither longs for anything nor is categorised according to a structuring principle, places all constituting activity on the second level – a structural feature characteristic of both thinkers. This theoretical composition is well illustrated in the passages of the *Enneads* that formulate the ascent in a moral vocabulary. When we attempt to reach and present the One in thought, we are denied access, but something else crops up instead: "we can say nothing of it: we only try, as far as possible, to make signs to ourselves about it" (V.3.13, 117). These signs are to be understood as (our recognition of) the products that emanate from the One. So, what we say is something the One definitely is not, but which is nevertheless conditioned by the One and thus dependent on an (failed) attempt. In trying to speak about it, we fall back on a discourse which actually has ourselves as its

object: "For to say that it is the cause is not to predicate something incidental of it but of us" (VI.9.3, 315).

Intellect is essentially constituted by this figure: trying to grasp the One, it turns towards its own source, and when it unavoidably fails in forming an image or enclose its intended object in a concept, its 'gaze' is forced upon itself instead. Understanding Intellect as a notion coincides with understanding this 'logical history' or constitutive process. What we are dealing with is a circular structure of constitution, where the starting point as well as the result is Intellect (but in two different stages, or moments). The second hypostasis thus represents the simplest level whose nature can be understood as being conducted vectorially, so to speak, as it comes into being as a result of its labouring to capture an object, in strict opposition to *the first*, which, as we saw, can have no object or aim due to its infinity.

Infinity thus implies intrinsic excess, or something 'bigger than itself' (as any set is surpassed or exceeded by its proper subsets). Plotinus writes that 'the One gives what it does not have' (V.3.15, 123); it produces something foreign to itself, but – and this is crucial – it does so by means of this 'something else', or rather; existence emerges with *the first* as its *occasion,* the occasion remaining itself 'beyond being'. Intellect does not receive its nature from the One – its accomplished nature is more precisely due to its own act of constitution, and it is Intellect that "thinks the real beings and establishes them in existence" (V.9.5, 297).[11]

A similar structure is maintained in Badiou: while *the first* is a multiple of multiples, pure difference, the count is what unifies and makes beings come into existence, and it does so in a way that does not affect its anterior 'materials', the pure multiple (Hallward 2003, 63). This clearly mirrors Plotinus' 'ontological' architecture, in which the productive level is never – this is true for all hypostases – affected by its product. The excess is exactly something *more* than what is needed for the nature of *the first* to be sustained – yet excessive production is an expression of it that follows automatically. In other words: we do, at least in Plotinus, have a necessary production, a necessary expression of the

---

[11] The process involved is thus rather that of a self-constitution than a creation, an *avènement* rather than *événement* (Piglèr 2003, 43; Chrétien 2001/2, 258).

infinite, but, at the same time, what is generated is so by means of its own active power – it carries a constitutive capacity in itself, or in its relation to its origin.

In a similar way, since every situation is the result of a count, we can with Badiou retrospectively infer that there was, before the count, "un devoir-être-compté qui fait vaciller la présentation structurée vers le fantôme de l'inconsistance" (Badiou 1988, 66). This phantom is the constant reminder of the instability of every situation, which at the same time bears witness to the fact that the constitutive activity belongs to the 'second' (meta)ontological level, and not to *the first*, which is 'apathetic' in having no direction or purpose. In opposition to a typical theological claim, which operates with a creator/creation dichotomy, the ontological function of this foundational level is not that of an active force but that of a *principium*, itself outside activity and contingency, yet providing the necessary condition allowing for such (constituting) processes to occur.

Recalling the fact that infinity is always part of a constituted reality (a 'situation'), and that it has been given a name by negation, we can follow Badiou when he writes that "toute référence au vide produit un excès sur le compte-pour-un, une irruption d'inconsistance qui se propage – métaphysiquement – dans la situation avec une vitesse infinie" (Badiou 1988, 90). *The first* is accessible to us – in accordance with Badiou's original anti-theological demand – but only as a negation of the necessity of a given ordering of being in a presentation. This amounts to claiming that the omnipresence of the void includes and continually points to the possibility of breaking with the current arrangement.

We saw that the infinity pertaining to the first, in the qualified sense of a positive affirmation of excess, simultaneously involves the impossibility of it being given in presentation or existence, and yields its status as a condition required for the execution of any productive activity. In this way, grounding on something not itself graspable seems – in the authors dealt with – to be an inevitable quality of beginning. Differently put, the ineffable appears to have something catalytic to it in that it – in providing motivation – offers an opening of a constitutive process. In Badiou, this 'occasion' or opening does not operate as a moral encouragement as it does in Plotinus, where Intellect can accurately be put as 'un être de désir', to follow a renowned Platonic scholar (Arnou 1967,

65), but the function of a 'conditioning nothing' works in much the same way. Both thinkers show a peculiar obsession with *the first* as something 'pure', untouchable and free from (human, rational) determination, and which provides the reason for a second level to become productive.

By demonstrating how two texts that, despite their distance both in terms of programme and time, nonetheless invoke similar structural procedures, we are left with the tracing of a common concept in what we have hitherto referred to as *the first*; a notion of beginning in which the Plotinian One and the Badiouan pure multiple equally join. We have seen that *the first* implies a continuous excess; that it cannot be captured by thought, but takes part in every presentation through a negative name; that it is imperfect in the sense of being essentially unlimited; and that it conditions the emergence of any constitutional activity. One could say that Plotinus as well as Badiou operates with a *conditioning void*, and this points towards a common feature with regard to their 'ontological constructions': *the first* is posed as something essentially distinct from everything else, i.e. existence and determinate meaning, and as necessarily prior to it. Still, it may well be said to contribute to subsequent levels of reality, because of the fact that it functions as a constant reminder of the absence of finite form, which underlies every presentation, but it is, as such, solely defined by its difference. Moreover, the inaccessibility of this first generates a productive reaction: Intellect constitutes itself in a reflexive act; varying situations are structured according to arbitrary counting principles and, as a consequence, remain contingent and changeable. For Badiou as well as Plotinus, the essential function of the first level – the *principium* – is to represent the exact *opposite* and the enabling *condition* of *fragmentation into a plurality of individual units*, i.e. determinate existence of distinct beings and separate elements of knowledge.

These similarities amount to more than merely the curiosity of observation. On the one hand, one could on this basis initiate a reading of Badiou proceeding from the thesis that his attempt to escape the threat of onto-theology is not unambiguously successful: A mere denial of onto-theology remains 'parasitic' on its object, and so, for a disengagement to be successful, as Christopher Watkin puts it, "its arche-teleological structure (...) must be disrupted" (Watkin 2011, 38). In fact, in his very eagerness to eliminate a superior and

transcendent ordering of reality, Badiou reproduces the principal elements of the *principium*-function.

On the other hand, one could claim that we find in Plotinus – and in particular in his dynamic account of the constitution of Intellect from the One – some surprisingly modern traits, largely ignored by the literature, and with it bring *raison d'être* to the relatively unusual combination of authors. The Plotinian One might be fundamentally incomprehensible and different from determinate beings and rational thought, yet it is through the continually reproduced relation between the One and Intellect that other levels of reality are constituted. In this way, the One serves as an indispensable component in providing the condition of possibility of the operation of thought, a role that makes it intimately present on every later level.

In addition to this, the analysis here presented reveals how some models of thinking the beginning prove to be exceptionally stable and hence extremely difficult to break with in an unambiguous way. Does the very aspiration to enquire into something primary in itself yield an onto-theological response? Why is it that the origin of thinking seems to presume an entity radically different from itself? Must the first level of reality or the logical condition of being necessarily involve something incomprehensible, indefinable and fundamentally alien to rational thought, as in the (Plotinian) ontology of The One and the (Badiouan) ontology based on a denial of the latter? By examining the reappearing solutions and persistent presuppositions, we inform and refine the articulation of these fundamental questions of beginning, which evidently keep posing themselves throughout the history of philosophy and have not yet been sufficiently exhausted.

Bibliography

Aristotle. 1935. *Metaphysics, Volume 2, Books 10-14*. Translation by H. Tredennick and G.C. Armstrong. Loeb Classical Library 287. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Armstrong, A.H. 1940. *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arnou, René. 1967. *Le désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin,* 2nd edition. Rom: Presses de l'Université Grégorienne.

Badiou, Alain. 1988. *L'être et l'événement.* L'ordre philosophique, Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Badiou, Alain. 1998. *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire.* Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Badiou, Alain. 2003. *L'éthique. Essai sur la conscience du mal.* Caen: Editions Nous.

Carabine, Deirdre. 1995. *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriguena.* Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Chrétien, Jean-Louis. 2001/2. "Plotin en movement". Paris: *Archives de Philosophie*, 64, 243-258.

Descartes, Réné. 2009. *Principes de la philosophie.* Paris: Vrin.

Dodds, Eric Robertson. 1928. "The Parmenides of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic 'One'". *The Classical Quarterly*, 22 (3-4), 129-149. Cambridge University Press.

Hallward, Peter. 2003. *Badiou. A Subject to Truth.* Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.

O'Meara, Dominic. 1995. *Plotinus: An introduction to the Enneads.* New York: Clarendon Press Oxford.

Piglèr, Agnès. 2003. *Le vocabulaire de Plotin.* Paris: Les Éditions Ellipses.

Plato. 2003. *Republic, Volume II, Books 7-10.* Translation by C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy. Loeb Classical Library 276. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Plotinus. 1967. *Enneads, Volume III.* Translation by A.H. Armstrong. Loeb Classical Library 442. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Plotinus. 1984. *Enneads, Volume V.* Translation by A.H. Armstrong. Loeb Classical Library 444. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Plotinus. 1988. *Enneads, Volume VI: 6-9.* Translation by A.H. Armstrong. Loeb Classical Library 468. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wallis, Richard T. 1995. *Neoplatonism.* 2nd edition. London: Bristol Classical Press.

Watkin, Christoper. 2011. *Difficult Atheism. Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.