

ONE

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF ONE

Multiple sovereignty is not good. Let there be one sovereign!

—Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

If one, or One, can be operating in something as unlikely as a drawn O, at least in Giotto's case, then the prevalence of One as a ruling paradigm is surely more extensive than what first meets the eye. How do we uncover this prevalence, especially within the vast history that constitutes the West and its thinking? Let us begin in a less lofty, even more unlikely place, to show the full extent of its reach. Let us begin in the mundane and often crass realm of humor, and with the variations on a joke.

ONE'S PUNCH LINE

Among the most paradigmatic of joke structures is the light bulb joke, built around the disparagement of a particular class of people (ethnic, special interests, etc.). The base joke runs: How many [fill in the blank with chosen group] does it take to screw in a light bulb? Answer: Ten—one to hold the light bulb, nine to turn the ladder. The joke is so stale now it no longer provokes a laugh. But the variations are infinite: "How many Scots does it take? Sixteen—one to hold the light bulb, fifteen to get drunk and make the room spin"; "How many Pentecostals? Three—one to turn it, and two to catch it when it falls"; "How many Surrealists? To get to the other side." And so on. (The latter example cleverly combines two of the most common joke paradigms.) Why does the light bulb joke keep turning out new variations? Why its longevity? (We have recently had: "How many Coalition fighter pilots in Afghanistan does it take to change a light bulb? No! You mean it was one of ours?") We could here invoke Nietzsche, who

said that laughter simply means “to gloat, but with a good conscience” (the German word used here is literally *schadenfroh*, or taking malicious joy at the expense of others).¹ And certainly the light bulb joke would support this definition. But we could say that the joke owes its long life also to a structure predicated upon the concept of one. And this at several levels.

First, we know what the answer should be: it only takes *one* person to screw in a light bulb under any normal circumstances. If somehow more than one is needed, this shows incompetence, deficiency, ignorance, or stupidity, or it shows up a general or specific foible. And precisely the message being sent by the joke is that one or more of these qualities is present in the group being mocked. The obvious right way requires one person, and only folly, or ridiculous circumstances, would require more than one. When we laugh at any variant of the joke, we do so from a firm grounding in the standard that is one (not just the original version of the joke, but the implied singular answer).

But this standard operates at another level. The joke structure presupposes an agreed sense of normality, and that those who do not conform to the norm, for whatever reason, are worthy of ridicule. We know that racism, upon which this joke first gained its popularity, assumes a superiority, where one's own race stands above others, so that the norm is defined by a specific group of people and their custom. But even in milder versions, where the particular habits or foibles of a people are being pilloried, a unifying sense of normality exists, beyond which lies excessive behavior: Scots are excessive in their drinking habits, Pentecostals in their worship practice, Surrealists in their view of the world, Coalition fighters in their lack of discriminatory power, etc. To belittle, in any degree, is to discredit one's attainment of the accepted standard.

But jokes as a whole operate beyond the normal: what makes a joke a joke is that which goes beyond what we expect. Even contemporary comedians, who trade in humor based on common human traits, make us laugh only when those traits are presented to us outside their normal context. And to “stand up” in front of a crowd may be all that is required to take us outside of normality, since relational or sexual habits (to use standard material) are for the most part not funny *in situ*, but become funny when presented to us at some remove, where our normalities suddenly become strangely, and ridiculously, eccentric. The light bulb joke reduces this remove to its most basic. (Whereas the original chicken crossing the road joke gains its humor precisely by frustrating our expectations of being removed from the norm: “to get to the other side” is the very thing that mundane normality expects, and therefore we laugh, because we were not expecting the expected.)

But the joke structure is a testimony to the one at even a more complex level, at the level of hermeneutics. For the joke assumes a single shared

meaning. We know that when meaning is not grasped it can be terribly unforgiving, as everyone has experienced the embarrassment of being left alone in puzzlement after a punch line. We have to “get” a joke, and if we fail, we are left to chagrin. Language’s obvious fact is that it is predicated upon shared meaning, and meaning is predicated on a shared acceptance of what the semiologists call the referent, what any sign is referring to in its signification. The overall referent for a joke, the punch line, *must* be singular, or the joke simply fails to engender laughter. Multiple meanings may work for irony, but irony seldom makes us laugh out loud. Joke tellers and professional comedians base their entire careers on whether or not people laugh out loud, which is to say they trade on a singular meaning, one that everyone interprets the same (or at least broadly the same). Hermeneutically, they assume—they require—one “punch” to the punch line. Only the most sophisticated of jokes can make people laugh through multiple interpretations, and in such cases the laughter is usually more muted, as the mind thinks through the various possibilities of meaning. (I suspect the Surrealist variant of the light bulb joke would, on average, cause the least amount of overt laughter, since its punch line begins to introduce several ways of interpretation—not least because the crossing chicken joke is in many ways an anti-joke, with a punch line that uses the expected unexpectedly.) The punchiest jokes are those we all agree on immediately, from a gut reaction, which is why body (and bawdy) jokes remain so endless—“How many eunuchs does it take to screw in a light bulb? Answer: Eunuchs, screw?” Cerebral jokes, jokes that make us think at some deeper level, are generally not funny: “How many light bulbs does it take to change a human? Answer: It doesn’t matter—humans remain forever in the dark.”

Why begin with a joke? The light bulb joke shows us how permeating the concept of the one can be, at any level of culture or society. The *one* person required to screw it in becomes a metonym for the one meaning, the one interpretation, the one structure that we all share, even though it remains unacknowledged. It takes at least two for a joke to work (jokes told to oneself are not jokes as such—they are preparations for a future encounter), but the one in the joke remains the binding factor, the thing that *unites* two or more people in a common venture. And though it remains unacknowledged, the one nevertheless remains present throughout, undergirding the entire structure and encounter, a tacit hegemony. Of course to mention it ruins the joke, which is why the above analysis saps the humor out of the original contexts (if humor there ever was). But the one is nevertheless *understood*, and it is that unspoken activity of understanding that lies at the heart of Western conceptions of ourselves and reality.

A joke is a *conceit* par excellence. It is first an idea played out in the mind, and then a trick played out on, and with, others. At the root of the

word *conceit* is conception, and we should begin any analysis of the one by understanding that it, the one, especially as One, is a *concept*. As understood in philosophy (at least from the dominant Kantian tradition), a concept we know as a notion that unites a manifold together under a singular entity.² It is a process that originates in the mind, as opposed to a percept, an object of perception received through our sensate faculties. A concept is understanding, at least insofar as a manifold is comprehended as sharing certain features that can be reduced to a single description, category, or idea. When Kant talked about concepts, he understood this as the capacity of the mind to *synthesize* disparate entities together into a single notion, a synthesis that of course requires the rational ability to discern the one out from the many. The concept of the one is therefore standing under our entire notion of rationality, as *concept* (even as its own paradox: the One's own manifold is a series of other singular ones). Which is why it can be understood, but need not necessarily be articulated as such. It may take a philosopher like Kant to analyze the concept in detail, but operationally we have assumed its existence since long before Kant.

The light bulb joke evidences this concept to us in a conceit. We conceive of something that allows us to agree on the one without actually acknowledging it, and when we understand, when we “get” the joke, we can keep the reality of its existence unspoken, though we “acknowledge” it by laughing. Laughter acts as the outward gesture of understanding, which itself is kept silent in the conceptual chambers of the mind (one can pretend to get a joke just by laughing). The one is therefore *understood*, implied but not expressed. The one has largely been *understood* throughout the West in this way. It is a concept that sits at the heart of all our understanding, tacitly. And when we bring it to light, so to speak, we see how pervasive it is. Just as light pervades when it is present, so too the one, as One, becomes a conceptual radiance that allows us to see beyond the mess of multiplicity and nothingness. Thus, the philosophical and theological history of the connection between divine unity and light. Not only does it take the One to set the light in place (“Let there be light”), but the One is Light (“I am the light of the world”). This connection becomes the joke (as parody) of Thomas Pynchon’s “Byron the Bulb” story in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which Byron, a light bulb, becomes not only sentient but *immortal*, never burning out, desiring to exceed his role as “conveyor of light energy alone,” but “condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything.”³

But what allows us to make such metaphorical leaps? How can we move from a bad joke to profound notions of understanding and conceptualization with such apparent ease? Let us then look now at how this *concept* of one may have come about, as something more than a mere joke.

FROM THE MANY, ONE: THE HEBREWS

There is no one starting place from which to trace out the history of the One. It would be convenient, and corroborating, to say there was one origin, one beginning point. But the truth is, we have to construct a story from out of many, a history of ideas that functions as a conceptual thread through the many possibilities that undoubtedly exist. If we approach the matter chronologically, we might well begin with the Hebrews, whose monotheism has been so formative for us here in the West.

The Ancient Israelites of course were not strictly monotheistic from the start. Their God was one among many gods. His role, as the first version of the creation story in Genesis makes clear, was one of primordial separation. His first act was separating light from darkness, according to Genesis 1.3: in the beginning was a formless void (the void that resides in our O), and God split its pervasive darkness into two entities, darkness and light. The rest of the days are spent likewise, separating out the various features of the cosmos, so that by the end of the sixth day, the heavens and the earth are finished as a “multitude” (Gen. 2.1), and the story ends with “generations” (2.4a). Even God himself, as Elohim, is plural, as he speaks to a creating “us” upon whose image he will base humankind (1.26–27), whom in turn he will instruct to be fruitful and multiply (1.28). The second version of creation (2.4b–25) is less cosmological, more earthbound, and focuses on the budding forth of creation as some kind of grand exfoliation. The culmination of this story is also the creation of humankind, but it goes in the opposite direction. Where in the first version humankind began as a singular creation—“male and female he created them” simultaneously (1.27)—ending up among the multitude, in the second version they begin as separate entities—“for out of Man this one was taken” successively (2.23)—and end up as “one flesh” (2.24).⁴ Here in this redaction, we already see the direction the ancient Hebrew scholars wanted us to move: from the many to the one. Through separation, we are then united. From the manifold, we become one.

Becoming one for the Hebrews was part of their very self-identity. Yahweh had brought Abraham out of Ur, the land of the Chaldeans and their gods, to possess his own land, Canaan. His offspring would be manifold, and Yahweh would be their God, Abraham the great patriarch. This pattern is then repeated with Moses in the exodus out of Egypt. There, Yahweh leads His people from slavery back to their own land, the land of their forefathers, and makes his claim upon His people even more exclusively. Despite apparent confusion (“If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?,’ what shall I say to them?” [Ex. 3.13–14]), He and only He is their God. This movement toward monotheism, though not yet

strict (“Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?” [Ex. 15.9]), reaches the level of commandment on Mount Sinai, where Yahweh’s first injunction is that his people should have no other gods before them (Ex. 20.3). By the time of the Deuteronomic Yahweh, God has become more exclusive and singular—jealous, even—and, as he now makes repeatedly clear, there is no other god besides Him. Thus, in the great *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6.4, the Lord is *one* God. And His chosen people are selected “out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut. 7.6). One God, one people.

The Hebrew Pentateuch, therefore, gives us the full trajectory of this movement from the many to the one. It does not operate simply within the heavens, but, perhaps more importantly, within the peoples of the earth. And though the one is always seen against the backdrop of the many (the one chosen nation is defined by the promise of its multitudinous progeny; the Israelites’ neighbors are never not a threat), it remains prominently in the foreground as the defining feature, upon which the cultic laws and practices are formed, administered, and adjudicated. Holiness and purity here are concepts deriving from the one, as the first separates out, and the second maintains singular distinction. *Religiously*, then, we have inherited the one as that which underlies the marks of piety, of faithfulness, and of righteousness. The God who is One, or who is our God alone, demands from us unalloyed allegiance and obedience. In return, we will be blessed as one people, the chosen people of God.

The curious story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 can be read in this light. To select one from among the many, not only does the One have to be drawn out as separate, but the many must be maintained in order for the One to be selected and held distinct. The end of chapter 11 begins the story of Abram, the future patriarch who will become Abraham, the one called out to be the forefather of a great nation. The beginning of chapter 11 sets us up for the power of the One. Following the flood narrative of Noah and his descendants, we learn in its opening verse that the whole earth had become one in language and speech. This linguistic unity leads to enterprise and ambition, as the people gather and say, “Come let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered abroad the face of the whole earth” (v. 4). We have already seen what such a tower can represent: the straight line as human aspiration beyond itself, that figure which becomes one in all its pure verticality and numerical consolidation. And a “name for ourselves” is merely an extension of this consolidation, as the manifold is consolidated in the name, which then bears identity and reputation. But Yahweh takes umbrage at this ambition. It is more than just hubris; it is threat. In a response reminiscent of Gen. 3, when Adam and

Eve have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He says (again to His plural “us”): “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (v.6). The power of the one is too great even for the divine sovereign here. Thus, He and His plural divine come down and confuse the one, scattering the people over the face of the earth in multilingual exile. Yahweh will have no threat to His power, and therefore no conditions of homogeneity which consolidate power. Not unless He initiates those conditions himself. And that is precisely what chapter 12 entails: God taking the One into His own hands. Out of the heterogeneous, the homogeneous may come, and when God sets the conditions, and governs the consolidation, the one can truly become the force He meant it to be, as it moves toward its promised land, a beacon for all nations.⁵

This familiar story of becoming one, of course, is not only a religious story. It is at the same time political (theocracy and monarchical kingdom), social (tribal Israel), judicial (the Levitical law), genealogical (the descendants of Abraham), ethnic (the Jewish people after the Diaspora), historical (the history of the Jews), textual (the Book), and national (the nation-state of Israel). Of these, we may pause for a moment with history. One of the great legacies this story has passed on is the outworking of God *in history*, as the Israelites are continually reminded to recall their history in the prescribed rituals and rites. The very centerpiece of Hebrew ritual, the Passover, is a celebration of Yahweh’s historical delivery, which set in motion that progression of events which later German theologians would call *Heilsgeschichte*, the history of God’s workings (taken both ways together: God’s workings *in history*, and God’s workings *as history*). This historical trajectory is likewise predicated on the one, the one historical timeline, divinely set out, that unfolds from beginning to end in linear fashion. It is what will allow later Jewish theologians their messianism and later Christian theologians their eschatology, as world affairs align themselves to a singular narrative, prescribed and preordained. Seeing history as one, as one coherent narrative, grounded not in mythic retelling and circular reinvention but in a procession of factual events, with chronological succession and internally cohesive development, is what lies behind our general historical understanding to this day, however we interpret the manifold events that make up any one history. We continue to see History as one meta-event. Even the premise behind Kuhn’s paradigm shift owes its historical rationale to this meta-event, as does the suggestion in this book that we have been moving from the One to the O. We cannot escape this linear view of history, it seems, and whether or not we impute progression into its movement, we still conceive of its unfolding as we do

any narrative—predicated on a singular story line, plot, argument, or thesis. This book is no exception, we repeat.

We begin with the Hebrews because their story of the One is a story embedded in history, unfolding in the vicissitudes of life's messy details, in order that a single sacred narrative might emerge. But, the *Shema* notwithstanding, the story does not yet *conceptualize* the One. In Hebrew wisdom, the One is not present in any defining way. Proverbial wisdom takes its aphoristic truth from the manifold of life experience (and in the compilation of many sayings), the Psalmist gives voice to devotional concerns (in the compilation of many hymns), the Preacher in Ecclesiastes tells us there is a season for everything, and Job's narrator is concerned with justice, which clearly does not have one interpretation, despite what Job's friends contend. It is to the Greeks we must turn to see the conceptualization of One in its most emergent form.

THE NATURE OF ONE: THE PRESOCRATICS

The earliest Greeks might at first seem the most remote from singularity, if we take their mythology and their pantheon as indicative of their thinking. But with the coming of Greek philosophy, in what we know today as the Presocratics, we start to see a new approach to the question of reality. Instead of narrativized accounts for what we find in our world—how the gods and humans came to be, how and why great battles were fought, how great heroes rose above the rest, how humans and the gods react under certain epic circumstances—the philosophers began observing the world and contemplating conceptual ideas that might unify reality under one explanation. What accounted for this radical shift in thinking has been the cause of much and varied speculation. But without this shift, we would not have conceptual thinking as we know it today, and would certainly not have what later philosophers have called *henology*, the rationalizing concept, or conceptual rationalizing, of the One.⁶

The earliest of the Presocratic philosophers, the Milesians, asked questions of the cosmos in ways not dissimilar to modern scientists: What is the world made of, and can it be reduced to a single substance? Each of these material monists put forward his own theory: for Thales it was water, for Anaximander it was the *apeiron*, an “indefinite” substance that had no boundaries but remained in motion, and for Anaximenes it was air, at least in the form of a dense atmospheric mist. These elemental reductions accounted for not merely nature in stasis, but the entire cosmic reality in motion and change. The question of change, or the mutability of all things, was of crucial concern for these early thinkers, and the attempt to deduce the cause of change from a single substance provides the concept of One

its chance to sediment out from the flowing currents of mythic narrative. It is one thing to unify the many under one. We might say the Homeric epic functioned in this purpose. It is quite another thing to account for the flow of change, of the many begetting more, by claiming that the change itself is a result of a single substance, which has been transformed into the multiplicity and flux we see and experience in nature. This paradox of the one from the many the Milesians never fully resolved, except to concede that however material the single explanatory substance may be, it still can be viewed in divine terms.

Heraclitus of Ephesus had much better success with the unity of opposites by claiming fire as the elemental or archetypal material, not to which all things can be reduced (sea and earth were also primordial), but by which all things can be explained. Fire is in constant motion, forever changing its aspect, and yet it always remains the same essential substance. By maintaining this internal contradiction, fire allowed Heraclitus to account for the coexistence of opposites. "Change reposes," he famously said.⁷ Or more famously, he turned it around, and said we never step into the same river twice. The one constant, "river," is by definition forever changing. What of course allows this *coincidentia oppositorum* is the concept, which we capture by the inverted commas. The label or signifier "river" is the name we give to the synthesis of all features we associate with naturally flowing fresh water bordered by two opposing banks. We reduced it to the one name as concept, "river," which universalizes the shared traits under a single entity. Likewise, if all things can be explained as a material we call "fire," our multitudinous world, normally in flux, can be fixed in place, at least as long as we capture it in the unifying concept that is one (fire), much as a camera captures the frozen moment of moving reality, to be preserved in the one that is the photograph.

This conceptual move, fire as an archetypal element, is closely associated with another of Heraclitus's essential terms, the *Logos*. As understood by Heraclitus, the *Logos* is an underlying coherence of reality, by which all things find their proper ratio or measure or balance with each other and with the totality that is the cosmos. The *Logos* is the great uniting concept behind all relations, and all opposites. It provides commensurability to that which may at first seem incommensurable. It gives common measure, harmony, proportion, or ration. "Listening not to me but to the *Logos* it is wise to agree that all things are one," Heraclitus says.⁸ The *Logos*, as unified measurement, allows us to properly account for things. It is therefore related to rational thought (discerning measure) and eventually to language, and the words that make up language. It is by rationality that we conceptualize, unify, bring things together under one structure of commensurability, and it is through language that we fix this commensurability in place (the word

river providing the constant signifier for the notion or concept of flowing fresh water bounded by opposing banks).⁹ The Logos functions as the ultimate conceptual unifier, and thus, even in Heraclitus, it is linked to the divine.¹⁰ It is no wonder then that Yahweh felt threatened by the singular language of Babel. The Logos we do not see; it is hidden, operating in the background like a barometric pressure. But its hidden nature is its power. "Essential nature is accustomed to hide itself," says Heraclitus.¹¹ The mistake of Babel was in bringing this hidden power to view in the form of a tower. Had the Babelites spent more of their efforts in constructing concepts, rather than tokens, they may have been spared their fate. Or so Hegel might have said, that grand absolutizer of rational thought.¹²

With Heraclitus's introduction of the Logos, we move into a whole new phase of the One. No longer does it manifest itself through the historical particularity of a people singled out. Rather, it sits behind all reality as something *understood*, as our rational thought brings it to an understanding common to all. "Therefore it is necessary to follow the common; but although the Logos is common, the many live as though they had a private understanding."¹³

Perhaps the most particular understanding of the One as One comes with Heraclitus's contemporary, Pythagoras. This famous mathematician was also in his way a religious leader, and his followers, the Pythagoreans, were split into two camps, those who followed his religious teachings, and those who followed his more philosophical and conceptual teachings. But it is important not to separate these camps too widely, since the conceptual and the religious are deeply entwined for Pythagoras, as they are for most numerical mystics (e.g., the Kabbalarians). Central to both sides is that number is the reality of all things. By this Pythagoras meant that the cosmos was constructed out of harmony (*harmonia*, or "attunement"), which itself was constructed from numerical and mathematical principles. Most important of these principles was the *tetractys*, or the first four cardinal numbers (1, 2, 3, and 4), which through their various relations governed all of reality, including the very music of the spheres.¹⁴ The heavenly harmony was foundational to the earthly harmony, and by understanding and interpreting numbers, one developed a key to the cosmos and to the underlying principles of all we experience. Hence, number *as* reality. Rather than an elemental substance like water or fire, all things can be reduced to number as principle. And not just ontologically, but epistemologically: we cannot know anything unless it is, in effect, countable.

Of the first four numbers, the first, number one—the Greeks, we recall, did not admit the concept or symbol of zero—held natural priority. What fascinated the Pythagoreans was the consistency of this most prime of numbers. When multiplied with another number, it consistently yields

that other number, but when multiplied by itself, it was the only number to yield itself as the other number. Moreover, as Aristotle tells us, the essence of numbers for the Pythagoreans is their property as either even or odd, the first being unlimited, the second limited. What makes the number one unique is its unity as *both*: the number one is even *and* odd simultaneously. It is, therefore the generator of all other numbers.¹⁵ It coheres all extensions of itself together in unity, and remains both limited and unlimited. Like Heraclitus's fire it thus holds together opposites within itself, and makes them commensurate.

By extension, the number one is also the generator of reason. Reasoning entails measuring, and measuring requires some scale, and some unit of measurement. The One is the unifying principle of all measurement, since it allows both the limited and the unlimited their existence under the concept of the "unit" as such, a word etymologically built upon the one. The One is Unit, and as Unit it is therefore the unifying element behind reason, which is a faculty of measuring with conceptual units (the unit itself, as the undivided whole, being the primal concept). Even Reason itself is a Unit, if we take it as the whole of that ability to measure in ratio. The One then is, as the Pythagoreans thought, foundational even to our thinking about numbers, so that by Euclid's time several centuries later, One, as Badiou reminds us, was not even considered a number, but "supra-numeric."¹⁶ If numbers are about measuring and ordering, then thinking about numbers is itself numerical, even supra-numerical. Reason is accounting (for): reckoning by enumeration.

THE METAPHYSICS OF ONE: PLATO, ARISTOTLE

Plato

It is not surprising that Plato and his metaphysics owe a tremendous debt to Pythagoras, as is universally acknowledged. While other Presocratics argued around the points of the one and the many, some siding with the latter (the Pluralists Anaxagoras and Empedocles), more siding with the former (Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno, Melissus, and, arguably, the Atomists Leucippus and Democritus), it was clear which side would eventually prevail: Plato's rendering of Socrates's ideas sealed the matter. Many observable things there may be, even many unities, but only one thing can unify them all, and that is the One, when "the *one* is not taken from the things that come to be or perish," says Socrates.¹⁷ So how can we determine whether there are things, or *a* thing, that does not come to be or perish? That is the very question driving virtually all of Plato's dialogues, and which yields up Platonic metaphysics.

Yet we most often associate Plato and his metaphysics not with a monism but a *dualism*. Metaphysics assumes two realms, the perishable physical world of instability and change (*phusis*), and the absolute eternal world of immutable truth *beyond* the material (*metaphusis*). And we think of those great dualistic distinctions such as body and soul, or matter and mind, as immediate products of metaphysical thinking. How then can we say that Plato leads us to a One that surpasses even his supposed dualism? How does the One come together in Plato, either from the many, or from the dual nature inherent in a metaphysical structure of reality?

The consolidation of One in the metaphysics of Plato would require extensive analysis to do full justice to the complexities that it involves throughout the corpus of philosophy's most august Greek, far more extensive than we have space for here. Let us limit ourselves to the dialogue with the most pervasive and concentrated discussion of the One—that is, *Parmenides*, that fanciful invention of Plato's that brings together the Presocratics, the young Socrates, Plato's half-brother, and a figure named Aristotle. Here, the venerable Greek philosophical tradition seems to coalesce into one, as the question of the One figures centrally in the discussion, leading to that famous conclusion, which remains the most quoted line from the dialogue: "if one is not, nothing is."¹⁸ In briefly exploring this work, we can see how the One might emerge as the ruling paradigmatic or conceptual force.¹⁹

The dialogue itself is a complex piece of argumentation, an intricately constructed text in two basic parts, and we cannot take their every detail into account without overextending ourselves greatly for our present purposes. Let us then limit ourselves to how the One comes to the fore of the dialogue within the context of the one and the many. We first need to set up the scenario. Present in the discussion is the title's namesake, Parmenides, the Eleatic Presocratic whom we deliberately have not treated in any detail above, and Zeno, a younger Eleatic philosopher, noted for his paradoxes, and here a devoted disciple of Parmenides. Parmenides's thought, we can now say, was handed down to us largely in the form of a didactic poem, or proem, which discusses the nature of being and of not-being, and leads toward a monism in which all of reality possesses the same aspect or character, seen as a whole one that does not admit opposites.

There still remains just one account [or story, *mythos*] of a way, that it is. On this way there are very many signs that being uncreated and imperishable it is, whole and of a single kind and unshaken and perfect.²⁰

From this quote, we can see what attracted Plato, and why he placed Parmenides as a main character, so suited is Parmenides's account to the development of Platonic Forms. Zeno, the disciple, had argued that Parmenides's

claim about reality dictates against plurality necessarily, since plural things would be both like and unlike, and such contradiction or paradox could not obtain. The one must therefore supersede all appearance of contradiction or paradox. At the beginning of *Parmenides*, Zeno is just concluding the reading of his book that details this argument against the many, when the young Socrates challenges Zeno for clarification. To Socrates, the apparent contradiction seems unproblematic if we restrict ourselves to sensible objects, where we encounter the coexistence of the one and the many continuously, even in the same thing (one body has several members, etc.). But were these opposites to exist at the level of intelligible forms, this is another matter. And it is to the question of the Forms that the first half of the dialogue is devoted.

The first sections examine the young Socrates's theory of the Forms.²¹ What is the precise nature of these Forms ontologically, if they are, as Zeno claims, to surpass the binary distinction of likeness and unlikeness, and maintain oneness or unity? This Socrates wonders, and draws the elder Parmenides into the conversation. Parmenides proceeds to challenge some of Socrates's basic assumptions, culminating in his metaphysical belief that they exist in a realm distinct from the mutable world of sensible things. If this is so, Parmenides concludes, how could the Forms have any intelligible connection or relation to the sensible world? On what would that connection be based, and how, ultimately, could we *know* the Forms? Parmenides shows that contradiction is the only basis, and that, if Socrates wishes to maintain an absolute distinction between this world and the metaphysical world of the Forms, the latter will ultimately be unknowable to us. Thus, the dualism of this world/other world, of *physis/metaphysis*, of body/soul, which marks the doctrine of the Forms as it is more familiarly found in the later *Republic*, for example, is here drawn into question. And we can see why Plato uses Parmenides to elicit the doubt—he who held a thoroughgoing monistic belief that all things cohere in a one that does not admit opposites. If the Forms appear to lead to a defining dualism, Parmenides is the one to test the case, and push the matter to its farthest limit.

Socrates's dilemma is in many respects the Kantian distinction of phenomena and noumena anticipated much in advance. To overcome the dilemma, Parmenides tells the callow Socrates that he must train himself further in the ways of philosophical discourse, particularly in the method of dialectical thinking. And in the second part of the dialogue, Parmenides is convinced by his interlocutors to demonstrate the rigors of such a dialectic, as a model, a *paradigm*, for how the promising young philosopher might sharpen his skill, and "achieve a full view of the truth."²²

The method of the dialectic, as Parmenides sees it, involves not only testing a positive hypothesis ("if each thing is"), but also its inverse ("if that same thing is not"). One must go through all the possible permutations in

both cases, and do so dialectically by engaging one's interlocutor in question and answer, so that (at least) two minds are working through the matter by the dictates of rational discourse and the measurements of reason (Logos). Only then can one arrive at a trustworthy conclusion, one grounded on tested and sure knowledge. Parmenides, after much reluctance, agrees to demonstrate, using the young Aristotle as his interlocutor. But he now must find a suitable topic on which to employ the method. "Shall I hypothesise about the one itself and consider what the consequences must be, if it is one or if it is not one?" asks Parmenides. "By all means," responds Zeno,²³ and the paradigmatic demonstration begins, ending many hypotheses and cogitations later with the famous litotes, "If one is not, nothing is."

We could spend many pages, as others have done, analyzing every last turn in the demonstration, and all the various hypotheses concerning the one (eight in total) that are weighed and counterweighed.²⁴ But this would steer us too far off course. Suffice it to say here that the one, in being put through its paces, and tested against limit and limitlessness, likeness and unlikeness, part and whole, equality and inequality, coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be, being and nonbeing, can finally be summed up in the negative phrase "If one is not, nothing is." Or so Parmenides would have us believe, in a conclusion that would seem to suggest that all depends on the one. But this famous apophatic conclusion is not the last word. For Parmenides goes on to say, as the very final words of the dialogue:

Let us say then this [the previous summation in the negative]—*and also* that, as it seems, whether one is or is not, it and the others both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear all things in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other.²⁵

Thus ends the dialogue. So what really has been concluded? Is there one, or is there not one? The final lines, with all their ambiguity, or contradiction, have caused many to conclude that *Parmenides* is aporetic, and belongs with the other aporetic dialogues in which no conclusive position is reached by the end, and the discussion simply ceases as if the exercise itself was more important than what was actually reached or agreed upon in the exercise. So seems to be the case here. How then could we draw out the one as supreme?

We might hold on to the penultimate conclusion—"If one is not, nothing is"—as the *real* conclusion, and lay the matter defiantly to rest, despite its negative rendering. And this would certainly serve our purposes. But we could also take the entire dialectical exercise as a parody, directed by Plato either against Zeno or the Eleatic philosophers in general. Or we might defend Parmenides, and say that dualism is done away with here by a more mystical (even Neoplatonic) understanding of the relation between

the metaphysical realm and the changeable physical realm, in which neither side can be thoroughly dismissed (“both appear and do not appear all things in all ways”), and truth emerges in a seeing that goes beyond any dualism, where the One is grasped in a Being beyond all being (and nonbeing).²⁶ Or, we might look at a more structural or literary way in which the one comes to gain the upper hand.

We must remember that the question of the one that occupies the second part is really only set up as an example of how to employ the dialectic in a more effectively rigorous manner. Granted, it directly pertains to the example that Zeno had raised in his book at the outset, and it is at the heart of Parmenides’s own thought. But it is still only an example, to show a more important point that Parmenides wants the young Socrates to understand: that the doctrine of the Forms needs to go through a greater and more reliable fine-tuning. But if the last point about the Forms in the first part—that they act as a kind of paradigm—was put into doubt, because their paradigmatic structure still could not account for how they might bridge the gap between the physical and the metaphysical, does this not put all paradigmatic structures into doubt, including the very one structuring the dialogue, the second part as paradigmatic of how the questions in the first part ought to be pursued and answered? If Parmenides’s example cannot convey the truth it needs to, that one truth will arise out of a multiple of (contradictory) hypotheses, how will the Forms? The possible aporetic conclusion of the second part concerning the one—that it appears to be one and not one at the same time—would seem to deny validity to the dialectic itself, as the one paradigmatic method by which to arrive at truth.

But if the one and the many seem to coexist in the dialogue at the level of basic structure, perhaps Plato is trying to point toward the One that allows this coexistence itself to exist—the Paradigm that keeps all things, including opposites, contained within our capacity to talk about them. And to see this One more clearly we need to move away from the minutiae of dialectic or disputation, especially in the second part, and consider the narrative structure instead. We know that it is divided into two basic parts: the first in which Socrates’s view of the Forms is critiqued by Parmenides, and the second in which the dialectic is actively demonstrated by using the one as an example. How are these two conversations relayed to us? The overall narrator is a certain Cephalus, who reports to us the content of the dialogue. At the beginning, Cephalus tells us that he met a friend in the marketplace, who knew another friend, Antiphon, who met with a figure named Pythodorus, who recounted to him the famed meeting of Socrates, Zeno, and Parmenides in the Great Panathenaea. Cephalus and his friend go to Antiphon’s house in order to hear him recite from memory this great encounter. Cephalus then writes that Antiphon said that Pythodorus said

what exactly transpired at this meeting, the entire dialogue that is to follow. Narratively, then, the dialogue comes to us at four times removed: the actual event, as related by Pythodorus, as related by Antiphon, as related by Cephalus. Hermeneutically, we have an account that requires five levels of signification: Plato, writing as Cephalus, writing for Antiphon, reporting for Pythodorus, reporting on the interlocutors of the supposed original event, Socrates, Parmenides, and the rest of the philosophers in company that day. How are we to trust the transmission of truth through these five levels? Even if we take the whole thing as an elaborate narrative ruse, why such elaboration? Why could not Plato simply relay the words of the original participants as he does in many other dialogues, or assume the voice of Socrates himself, as he does in the *Republic*? Why this excessive distancing from the original?

We can assume this deliberate narrative approach has a purpose, and we might say that Plato is trying to show us a unity, a One, amid what seems like apparent multiplicity, even structural multiplicity. Is this not what the dialectic is supposed to bring about ultimately, a unified truth through multiple interlocutors in dialogue? But rather than showing the Logos of dialectic bringing this about unequivocally, Plato opts to show us another possible route—a certain unifying structuring across the multiple planes of reportage, as seen even in the choice of names of the three reporting characters involved here: Cephalus (which means “head”) writes of Antiphon (which means “sounding in return”) who recites the words of Pythodorus (whose name evokes the locality of Delphi—“*Python*”—with its oracular pronouncements from the divine through the “*Pythia*,” the priestess). We should always be wary of investing too much into the use of names, especially with Plato, yet one cannot help but see an intention here, as if the oracle of the original divine event, given by a priestly mouthpiece, is repeated as an antiphon to be captured by our thinking minds. It is as if Plato wants to show that despite the multiple layers, the original event still comes to be possessed by our thinking selves as a single event,²⁷ one whose transmission is unified by the narrative structure, despite the undecidability of the argument’s conclusion, or the dialectic’s aporetic nature. The narrative remains universally applicable. The One is one Truth, which emerges from the many as a single account that we engage in narratively. That “account” may be Logos (rational argument) or Mythos (story), as it was for Parmenides (and we should keep in mind that Parmenides’s Truth came in the form of a poem, and not in the form of discursive reasoning). Or it may be both, as it seems to be in *Parmenides*, where Logos and Mythos must be unified in order for the account to be accounted for. As Heidegger reminds us, “For the Greeks, the opposite to ‘barbarism’ is not ‘culture’; it is dwelling within μῦθος [*mythos*] and λόγος [*logos*], for ‘μῦθος [*mythos*], ἔπος [*epos*] and λόγος

[[logos]' belong together essentially."²⁸ If the Forms are to have credibility, if the dialectic is to work, they both must let themselves be narrativized in a single form that allows knowledge to be transferred from one realm to the next—precisely the dilemma that initiates the central discussion of the dialogue: How would we *know* the Forms if they had independent being apart from our world? How would we know the One if it had independent being apart from the manifold that we live in? We could not, unless that One somehow inheres in the many that constitutes both the realms of Logos and Mythos. The metaphysics of the One for Plato here, in a dialogue most devoted to the One, is thus more sophisticated than merely a bifold distinction that keeps two worlds in their place, the one sovereign over the other: mutable/immutable, body/soul, *physis/metaphysis*, etc. We should remember that the very “meta-” prefix carries the sense both of something changed, substituted, or set beyond, *and* of something common or shared. These opposing lines of semantic force are precisely the kind of thing that fascinated much of Presocratic thought, and certainly preoccupied the Eleatic philosophers, and so here in Plato they come together in one synthetic narrative, in which the One is One by virtue of being narrativized in the one dialogue. This is to say, that despite the apparent manifold, and aporia, the discussion is One as narrative. And through that narrative, we participate in the One that grounds all narrative.

We will see in a moment how the Neoplatonists took this One even further, and made sure any dualism would not creep back in. But let us briefly point out that this One has, even recently, been seen as primarily *logocentric*, or requiring the Logos to ground all being and reality, whether in human existence or in human language and reason. But *Parmenides*, if our reading has any merit, shows us that a Platonic One is not simply Logos alone, that Logos and Mythos can and should themselves be unified (and we could enlist other dialogues in the Platonic canon to support this further—*Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, etc.). The narrative or form must never be fully separated from the content—which is to repeat the old saw that Plato is as much an artist as he is a rational philosopher. And this view will help us later as we move into the O. For now, let us return to our brief rendering of the One as it moves through ancient thought, and, before the Neoplatonists, briefly look at Plato's successor, Aristotle.

Aristotle

Aristotle had much to say about unity and the One, especially in his *Metaphysics*, where he begins with discussion about the Presocratics and their theories of explanation. In fact, much of what we know about the earliest Greek philosophers arises from this book. Numbers come from unity, he said,

speaking of the Pythagoreans (986a).²⁹ Or quoting Xenophanes: "Unity is God" (986b). But unlike the material monists, Aristotle himself does not think we can reduce all things to one substance, or unlike the Pythagoreans, to numbers. What interests him more is of course "primary being," that which is "never attributed as a predicate of something else," but of which other things are predicates, or that which is intrinsically defining of such a being, its "shape or form" (1017b). Primary beings are "first in all ways, first in discourse [*logos*], in knowledge and in time" (1028a). They are the essential nature of any thing, its "what-it-is." This being, as primary, already shows a predilection toward the unity of One that defines reality. But there are many primary beings, not just one. Is there a larger unity that grounds all other primaries?

After devoting the entirety of Book Iota to the complexities of the one and the many, Aristotle turns his attention to the nature of divine being in Book Lambda. He begins by distinguishing three kinds of primary beings: sensible primary beings that either can perish (such as plants and animals) or cannot perish (such as the heavenly bodies), and an immovable being, which is neither perishable nor changeable. Aristotle is concerned ultimately with the question of motion, and that which motivates or moves something is a primal force with primary ontological status. He thus equates whatever produces movement or rest with primary being, saying that "without primary beings there would be neither active nor passive change" (1071a). But where does the process of change itself come from? For Aristotle, change does not come into being, but has always been (1071b). So how do we account for it? The problem with Plato's Forms, for Aristotle, is that they tend to be seen as static. They may have the capacity to enact change, but this capacity does not necessarily mean they will act on their potential. They therefore cannot account for change themselves. There needs to be some primary being that exists not with potentiality, but solely with actuality, remaining forever "in act," in order for the process of change itself to remain accounted for, and to keep changing. This necessitates a primary being that is eternally in act, a being that moves all other beings, and provides the possibility for movement itself. But of course this primary being cannot itself be moved—it must be eternally in active movement, or we could ask, regressively, and ad infinitum, what moves it, and what moves that which moves it, etc. Thus, Aristotle's famous "Prime Mover," the first mover that sets all movement into motion, but which itself is not moved, or is forever moving. This eternal, imperishable Mover is of course divine, God, the One who is always, and always One. It is not a Form that remains discontinuous with this physical world (Aristotle's complaint against Platonic Forms in general), but, by virtue of its eternal motivation, is driving everything, within *phusis* and *metaphusis* alike, along its designated path and toward its

designated goal as a unified whole. Thus, Aristotle ends this Book on the Prime Divine with the following significant passage:

And no one has thrown light on what it is to which numbers, or soul and body, or, in general, form and thing owe their unity. Nor is it possible to explain this unless one says as we do that this is due to the mover. And those who say that mathematical number is first and hence there must always be one thing after another and different principles for each, present the being of the universe as a series of episodes, in which none, by being or not being, contributes anything to another. Thus, their first principles are many, but actually things do not wish to be misgoverned. "Multiple sovereignty is not good. Let there be one sovereign!" (1075b–1076a)

The discussion ends with a political analogy, and a message that is clear: unity is found in the One that is the Prime Mover, unifying all numbers, and all levels of experience and reality, *body and soul* together. The sovereign is the head (*cephalus*) that keeps all things moving and functioning together. Working himself against a dualism, Aristotle solicits motive force not merely as the agent but as the very actuality by which all things cohere in unity and oneness. And thus, the form of the One becomes the teleological goal to which all things are driven. This One is not numerical as such: it is what allows numericality in the first instance, as he says later against the Pythagoreans in the concluding Book Nu (1088a). It is therefore generative, a being in eternal act—a pure Principle or Being that drives all other principles and beings. It is primary in the most comprehensive sense.

The metaphysics of the One in Plato and Aristotle, then, continually works toward *unity*, despite the duality inherent in the structure of metaphysical thinking itself. Aristotle tries to overcome this duality even more than his predecessor, and his *Metaphysics*, as a series of philosophical disquisitions about the nature of first principles as explanation, attempts to unify the concept itself of explanation under the category of the One, since thinking itself is a category of movement, generated by the most prime of all primary beings. The Prime Mover explains all rational explanation, then, just as in Plato the narrative generates the unity that allows us to speak of unity. These are essential developments, where ultimately, in both thinkers, the One leads to the divine, so that as in the quoted Xenophanes, God becomes unity itself. We see the apotheosis of this movement as we now turn to the Neoplatonists, who gave One its most supreme position, unifying philosophy and divinity together in a way that would have profound influence on all Western thought to come.

THE WHOLLY, PLENARY ONE: PLOTINUS

Where Plato and Aristotle remain implicit in their sense of unity, struggling against an invasive duality between this world and an ideal reality behind or beyond this world, the Neoplatonists are explicit about the One and unity. They do not speak about unifying two worlds, where the notion of unity carries the necessary act of bringing a manifold together under one entity (as in the concept). Their unity, their One, is primal in its most primordial sense. In the beginning there was only One, which defined all—as one. There was no manifold, no multiplicity, nothing to unify, only pure oneness.³⁰ This renders the concept of One commensurate with nothing, since if everything is One, there is nothing but One, and all is One as much as nothing is One.³¹ In Neoplatonism, there is always a thin transparent line between nothing and One, that is, between 0 and 1, since by making singularity consummate and all-encompassing, the concept of singularity itself runs the risk of dissipating altogether, at least in any quantitative sense.³² Neoplatonism tries to avoid this nothingness by keeping the One as purely qualitative—that is, as a kind of infinite and unlimited plenitude. The One is a plenary power—a fullness not only beyond all actuality, but beyond even Being itself. A fullness purely transcendent, beyond anything Aristotle could countenance, and beyond what Plato had envisioned. It is a fullness that reaches mystical levels, and begins to take itself out of the realm of philosophy. That is, it is Oneness beyond, ultimately, comprehension.

The great Neoplatonic figure, to whom we restrict ourselves here for the sake of space, is Plotinus (204–270 CE). His writings, *The Enneads*, as compiled by his disciple Porphyry, detail a system of thought that, though deeply indebted to Plato and his understanding of the metaphysical realm, goes beyond the question of Forms and the eternal absolute. It even takes the question of the Prime Mover farther. Where the Forms assumed that the world of *phusis* was illusory, at least insofar as its changeability and perishability did not make it *real* in any eternal and absolute sense, Plotinus's One did not discount the natural world as something to be discarded or dismissed. Where the Prime Mover took us back sequentially to a primordial generative force of Being, a pure actuality from which followed all other potentialities and actualities of being, a first source or cause, as it were, to which all being traces its roots, Plotinus's One stands prior to being, or Being.³³ It is pre-ontological in the sense that it does not rely on some first principle of being to account for itself, but brings all being, including Primary Being, into existence itself: “[I]n order that Being may be brought about, the source must be no Being but Being's generator, in what is to be thought of as the primal act of generation.”³⁴ It is therefore before even Principle. It is also before all actuality and potentiality, completely self-enclosed or self-sufficing,