

# Of Being and Unity

(De Ente et Uno)

By Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

translated by Victor Michael Hamm, 1943

[Editor's Preface]

## Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Of Being and Unity

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This translation uses the text of the 1557 (Venice) edition of Pico's *Opera Omnia*, as reprinted by Festugière in *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age* Vol. VII (1932), pp. 208-224, which text has been compared with that of the 1519 edition, available at the Newberry Library, Chicago. The translation has been aided by Father Festugière's French version of the Latin original, as well as by his notes.

### CONTENTS:

1. For the Neo-Platonists Unity precedes Being.
2. Plato nowhere says that the one is superior to being, but rather that the two are equal.
3. From the testimony of Parmenides, of Dionysius, and of Simplicius, we conclude the convertibility of unity and being.
4. In what sense one can say that something is superior to being.
5. In which is shown why the Peripatetics attribute to God many qualities which the Platonists deny Him, and how one may ascend through four degrees even to the cloud which God inhabits.
6. In which is solved the second difficulty of the Platonists, namely that with respect to prime matter.
7. In which is solved the third difficulty of the Platonists, on the subject of multiplicity, and in which it is demonstrated that it is not possible to say that unity is more common than being, without coming to a conclusion which Plato rejects.
8. In which is shown in what manner these four attributes: being, unity, truth, and goodness, are present in all that exists beneath God.
9. In which it is indicated how these four attributes pertain to God.
10. In which the whole discussion is related to the conduct of life and the reform of morals.

## To Angelo Poliziano

### PREFACE

You were telling me lately of the dispute which you and Lorenzo de' Medici had concerning *being* and *unity*, and how, taking his stand with the Platonists, that man of a genius so powerful and versatile that he seems made for all things, who finds (wonderful to relate!) even in the incessant occupations of the State leisure for some literary study or conversation, argued against Aristotle, whose *Ethics* you expounded publicly this year. And since those who estrange Aristotle from Plato estrange themselves also from my point of view -- for I hold to the concord of both systems --, you ask me how we might defend the Stagirite on this point and bring him into agreement with his master, Plato. I have told you what came into my mind at that time, and it was rather a confirmation of your own objections against Lorenzo than a contribution of anything new. But you are not content with that. Without waiting for the developments which will come to the subject in my future *Concord of Plato and Aristotle*<sup>1</sup>, you beg me to run over for you now, in the shape of a brief commentary, those things which I told you in the presence of our friend Domenico Benevieni, so dear to us for his knowledge and his integrity. How can I refuse you? Especially in a literary matter like this, and in the case of a friend who is almost my self? Pardon me, nevertheless, if I risk at times to employ words which perhaps have not yet received the stamp of true Latinity. The novelty of the subject, and I might almost say necessity, have demanded this license. Do not then expect a style too elegant and chaste. As our Malius<sup>2</sup> says, the subject itself needs no ornament; simple exposition is enough. The following, therefore, if I remember well, were the things about which we had a discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the projected work left unwritten because of Pico's early death.

<sup>2</sup> "Malius" cannot be identified.

## Chapter I. For the Neo-Platonists Unity precedes Being.

In more than one place Aristotle says that unity and being are convertible and reciprocal (the same is true of truth and goodness, but we shall speak of these later). This the followers of the Academy<sup>3</sup> denied, saying that the one is anterior to being; by which they meant that they regarded the former as a concept more simple and universal. Wherefore they would define even God, the Sovereign Simplicity, as the One rather than as Being. Similarly, say they, prime matter, that crude and formless matter which is found in all things, ought to be included under the category of the one, and therefore they would exclude it from the category of being. Then, they say, unity and being have not the same opposites: to being is opposed non-being, to the one, the many. By the same law, therefore, by which their opposites are reckoned as two, being and unity are to be considered non-convertible and non-reciprocal.

## Chapter II. Plato nowhere says that the one is superior to being, but rather that the two are equal.

Such are the reasons they rest upon. Before we refute them, it would not be impertinent to find out what Plato himself thought on this point. I discover that he treats twice of being and unity: namely, in the *Parmenides* and in the *Sophist*. In these two places, therefore, according to the Academy, Plato gives the one priority over being.

I shall say at once, as regards the *Parmenides*, that in this entire dialogue one does not find a single strict affirmation<sup>4</sup>, and that, in any case, even if there were such an affirmation, nothing would allow one to draw such an inference with certitude. Actually there is nothing less dogmatic than this hook, which, taken in its totality, is nothing else than a sort of exercise in dialectic<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, so far are the words of this dialogue from being opposed to my opinion, that all the attempts of critics to read something else into them achieve only arbitrary and willful interpretations. But

let us dismiss all the critics. Let us instead inquire into the argument of the dialogue itself, and examine its beginning and its development, its promises and its performance.

Here, then, is the content of the *Parmenides*: The discussion having started with the question whether all things that exist are one or many<sup>6</sup>, Socrates turned it in the direction of the problem

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<sup>3</sup> Pico means especially the Neo-Platonists Plotinus and Proclus. Cf. L. Robin *La théorie platonicienne des Idées et des Nombres d'après Aristote*, (Paris 1908), *passim*; E. Brehier, *Les idées philosophiques et religieuses de Philon d'Alexandrie*, (Paris, 1908), 71 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dié, ed. *Parmenides*, pp. 46: 'L'argumentation de Parménide est donnée comme un jeu laborieux. Les Neoplatoniciennes, qui prennent 'laborieux' au sens de 'sérieux' . . . ont tiré de ce jeu toute une argumentation.' Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides*, (London, 1939), p. vii, writes: 'The conviction that Plato's purpose was serious and not merely destructive grows, the more clearly the Hypotheses are studied. If it is justified, the theory of the humorous polemic falls to the ground.'

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Cornford, *op. cit.*, 131: 'What Parmenides offered Socrates was a gymnastic exercise, not the disclosure of a supreme divinity.'

<sup>6</sup> *Parmenides*, 127d-130a.

of ideas and overwhelmed Parmenides with questions on that subject<sup>7</sup>, whereupon the latter exclaimed how he admired that transport, that energy of mind, which drove Socrates on to the definition of the highest truths<sup>8</sup>. 'Exercise yourself,' -- these are Parmenides' words -- 'train yourself thoroughly in this gymnastic while you are still young. Many will call it vanity, and accuse you of trifling and prating; yet if ever you cease from it, truth will escape you'<sup>9</sup>. 'Everyone recognizes, -- and what follows makes it plain -- that Parmenides is here referring to dialectic.

Thereupon, *a propos* of a new query of Socrates -- 'But in what, Parmenides, does this gymnastic consist?' -- the sage answered by first referring him to Zeno's argument as his model. Then, passing on to a more particular instruction, he with ingenious subtlety invites his adversary to consider not only what would follow from the existence of an object, but also what would follow from its non-existence; for example, in the case of this thing (the one) of which we posit or deny the existence, one must inquire what would follow both as regards the thing in itself, and in regard to other things, and, as regards other things, both in themselves and in respect to the one<sup>10</sup>. While he is preparing to develop these points, Socrates cries out: "What a difficult task you set me there! I do not completely understand. But why do you not demonstrate this method which you vaunt so highly, by giving me a model on some point? I should then understand it better." Parmenides replies that this would be a great labor for a man of his advanced years. Thereupon Zeno insists that Parmenides ought to speak because the assembly is not numerous; if it were, the case would be different, for it is not becoming that an old man treat of such matters before a large public, since few people understand that it is necessary to consider questions so discursively in order to attain the truth<sup>11</sup>.

These words of Zeno fully confirm what we have said concerning the nature of the subject which Parmenides is going to treat. They do so at any rate if one agrees with Zeno that 'it is not becoming that an old man treat of such matters before a large public.' If, as some pretend<sup>12</sup>, it were a question here of the divine hierarchies, of the first principle of all things, what discourse could we imagine more appropriate to an old man, or less calculated to make him blush? But it is beyond all dispute (unless we *want* to deceive ourselves) that Parmenides' subject is the dialectic method; besides, Socrates had demanded nothing else. Now, it is precisely such a subject which is, to Zeno, appropriate to a young man rather than to an old one. But for those who want other proofs, let us run through this dialogue. We shall nowhere find any dogmatic assertion, but everywhere only this question: 'If this is, what follows, and what if this is not?'

The Academy, however, has taken occasion to defend its doctrine regarding being and unity because, in the first hypothesis<sup>13</sup>, where he attacks the problem: if all things are one, what follows? Parmenides answers that that one of which existence is posited would be without parts,

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 130b-135c. Actually it is Parmenides, not Socrates, who directs the interrogation.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 135d 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 135d 3-5. Pico's translation of Plato's words follows that of Marsilio Ficino pretty closely. Cf. Ficino, *Divini Platonis Opera Omnia*, (Lugd., 1588), 46: 'Caeterum collige te ipsum, diligentiusque te in ea facultate exerce, quae inutilis esse videtur multis, et quaedam garrulitas nuncupatur, dum iuvenis es, alioquin te veritas fugiet.'

<sup>10</sup> Pico is here translating the Greek text, 136a 3, in a somewhat too condensed form.

<sup>11</sup> *Parmenides*, 136c 6-e 1.

<sup>12</sup> i.e. Proclus and the symbolists.

<sup>13</sup> 'if the One is one,' *Parmenides*, 137c-142b.

limitless, and therefore would be nothing<sup>14</sup>; among many conclusions of this kind, he brings up this: 'that sort of one would not be being'<sup>15</sup>. But is this not a mere exercise in dialectic? Is it really a dogmatic discourse on unity and being? There is a great difference between these two assertions: 'the one is above being,' and 'if all things are one, that one is not being.' But enough of the *Parmenides*.

As regards the *Sophist*, Plato there rather indicates the equivalence of unity and being<sup>16</sup> than the priority of the one over being. Nowhere, indeed, do I find him speaking of priority, whereas there is an abundance of texts indicating equivalence. Take for example this passage: 'considering the question thus, you will confess that to say "something" is to say "some one thing;" and soon after: "He who says "not something" necessarily says "not some one thing," that is, he says nothing'<sup>17</sup>."

Thus Plato. Not-one and nothing are therefore for him the same, rather, identical. Then the one and something are equal. After this he proves in the same way that it is impossible to say that not-being is one, and concludes thus: 'Being cannot be coupled with non-being'<sup>18</sup>; therefore unity cannot be coupled with non-being<sup>19</sup>. Now, he is speaking here of the unity which he had already called equal to that which is something. It seems then that he holds the identity of being and unity to be beyond doubt.

Very well. We may agree that Plato arrived at that affirmation, though we do not find it explicitly stated in any of his writings. Let us see, then, in what sense it might have been so stated. And first of all let us discuss in these terms the foundations of the doctrine of Aristotle<sup>20</sup>.

### **Chapter III. From the testimony of Parmenides, of Dionysius, and of Simplicius, we conclude the convertibility of unity and being.**

This word *being*, concerning which there is doubt whether it is equal to the concept *unity*, can be taken in two senses. The first is this: When we say 'being' we may mean anything that is outside of nothing. This is the sense of the word with Aristotle, wherever he makes being equivalent to

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<sup>14</sup> *Parmenides*, 137c-138b 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Parmenides*, 141d 8-142a 8.

<sup>16</sup> "Esse unum et ens aequalia" (Mirandula).

<sup>17</sup> *Sophist*, 237d-e.

<sup>18</sup> *Sophist*, 238a 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Sophist*, 238c 4-7.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Cornford, *op. cit.*, 110-111: "It was from the *Parmenides* and from countless discussions to which it must have given rise that Aristotle learnt the maxim he so often repeats: 'One' and 'being' are used in many senses. But whereas Aristotle as a rule sets out with a systematic enumeration of the meanings of ambiguous terms, Plato makes his point by indirect procedure. . . . As we proceed, we shall find that Plato, in scattered passages, unobtrusively indicates the many ambiguities lurking in the phrase: 'If a One (or the One) is.' . . . Owing to certain peculiarities of Greek grammar, 'the one' (το εν) can mean (1) Unity or Oneness in general; (2) the unity of anything that has unity or is one thing; (3) that which has unity, anything that is one; (4) the one thing we are speaking of as opposed to 'other ones,' and so on. The words for 'being' (το ον, ειναι, ουσια) are even more ambiguous, 'Being' can mean (1) the sort of being that belongs to any entity, whether it exists or not; (2) an entity which has being in this sense, any term that can be the subject of a true statement (3) the essence or nature of a thing; (4) existence; (5) that which has existence, or (collectively) all that exists."

unity. And this meaning is not unreasonable, for, as it is truly said, we ought to think with the few, but talk like the many. We think and judge for ourselves; we speak for the multitude, and we speak so that we may be understood. The vulgar, then, the unsophisticated, so understand being that they call anything 'being' (*ens*) which does not lack existence (*esse*), and which cannot properly be called nothing. But do we not find that those who are considered the wisest among the opposition<sup>21</sup> have not understood being in any other way?

When Parmenides the Pythagorean said that the one is that which is, he meant God, if we credit Simplicius<sup>22</sup> and all the many others who want to defend Parmenides against those who falsely accuse him of saying that all things are one<sup>23</sup>. For they all agree in answering that, in employing the word 'one', Parmenides never believed that division, multiplicity, and plurality do not attach to things, since in other passages of his poems he himself openly affirms the contrary. But, they say, when he said 'one' what he meant is that to which the name of being truly applies, and which is truly the one being (*esse*), which one is God. Thus, for Parmenides and his defenders, even the 'Platonists,' the one cannot be above being unless it be above God. However, far from denying that God is being, it is to God alone that Parmenides accords, as is in truth fitting, the name of being. And so we solve the first difficulty of the 'Platonists.'

As regards Dionysius the Areopagite<sup>24</sup>, whom our opponents invoke in favor of their opinion, he will not deny that God verily said to Moses: 'I am who am,' which reads in Greek: ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν, that is, 'I am being' (*ens*). Of a truth, they themselves, when they say that nothing, or non-being is opposed to being as the many to the one, concede that of necessity that which is not being is nothing or non-being, in just the same way that what is not one is multiple or plurality. However, if they observe the same manner of speaking, they must say either that God is nothing, which appalls the ears, or that He is being. But to understand being in this fashion is to return to that which we have established as the first axiom and universal proposition, namely, that concerning anything it is necessary to say that it is or is not, and that concerning anything it is impossible to say or think both together at the same time. Since, therefore, outside of everything there is nothing but nothingness itself, if *being* understood in this sense excludes nothing but only nothingness, it is evidently necessary that being encompass all that is. Therefore the extension of unity cannot be greater unless it included nothingness itself, a possibility which Plato denies in the *Sophist* when he says that non-being or nothing cannot be called one. Besides, if unity cannot have less extension than being, it follows that being and unity must be convertible concepts.

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<sup>21</sup> I.e. the Neo-Platonists who make unity superior to being.

<sup>22</sup> Simplicius, *In Phys.*, (ed. H. Diels, Berlin, 1882) t. I, p.147, 12.

<sup>23</sup> The universe -- a pantheistic interpretation, the only legitimate one, Cf. Cornford, *op. cit.*, 29: "This One Being is not a mere abstraction; it proves to be a single continuous and homogeneous substance filling the whole of space."

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *The Divine Names*, I, paragraph 6 (*Patrologia Graeca*, vol. III, 596 A-B). A convenient English translation of this work as well as of the *Mystical Theology* may be found in C. E. Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, (Macmillan, 1920).

## Chapter IV. In what sense one can say that something is superior to being.

We have explained one of the senses which we said could be given to being. Understanding it so, -- a perfectly legitimate usage of the word -- one affirms most truly that there is nothing more common than being. It remains to explain the second sense, according to which it will be manifest that one can no less justly say that there is something that surpasses in eminence being itself.

Words are either concrete or abstract. Concrete are, for example, hot, bright, white, man; abstract: heat, light, whiteness, humanity. This is their power and diversity: that what is called abstract connotes that which is such by itself (*a se*), not by another (*ab alio*), while concrete signifies that which is what it is not by itself, but by virtue of another. Thus the luminous is such in virtue of light, the white is such through whiteness, and man is man by virtue of his humanity. Moreover, since there is nothing which participates in itself, and since the same thing cannot possess the same quality at the same time by itself (*a se*) and by participation in another thing, it follows that the abstract cannot take its denomination from the concrete. Wherefore it is incongruous to say that whiteness is white, blackness black. Indeed, it is ridiculous to speak thus, not because whiteness is black or heat cold, but because such is the distance of the one from blackness and of the other from coldness, that all that is white is so by participation in the first, and all that is hot is so by participation in the second. When, then, we refuse to attribute such or such qualities to such or such an object, it is either because that object does not possess them, for example in the expression "black is not white," or because we want to signify that it possesses them in a more excellent and more perfect way than we do: as when we deny that whiteness is white, not because it is black, but because it is whiteness itself.

But let us return to the subject. The word 'being' (*ens*) has the aspect of a concrete word. For to say 'being' (*ens*) and to say 'that which is' (*id quod est*) is to say the same thing. The abstract of this would seem to be the word *esse*, in that one calls *ens* that which participates in *esse*, in the same way that one calls luminous that which participates in light<sup>25</sup>. If we look at this meaning of *being* which we have thus defined, we shall have to deny being not only to that which is not, and to that which is nothing, but also to that which is so that it is that being (*esse*) itself which is of itself (*ex se*) and by itself (*a se*), and by participation in which all things are: just as we not only deny that that is hot which lacks heat, but also that which is heat itself. Now, such is God, the plenitude of all being, the sole being *a se*, and from Whom alone, without the intervention of any intermediary, all things have come to be.

We have, therefore, the right to say that God is not being but is above being, and that there is something to being, namely God Himself. If we give to God the name of *the One*, it follows that we avow the one to be above being. However, in calling God *the One*, we do so less to indicate what He is than to show in what manner He is all that is, and how other beings are through Him, 'God is called the One,' says Denys, 'because He is in a unique way all things'<sup>26</sup>, and again: 'God is called the one because He is the principle of all things, just as unity is the principle of all

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<sup>25</sup> The language here is Platonic.

<sup>26</sup> *The Divine Names*, I, paragraph 7. (*P. G.*, III, 596 D).



numbers<sup>27</sup>. Wherefore if (as the Academy pretends) Plato, in the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, affirms that the one is superior to being, that one will be nothing else than God. They (the Academy), indeed, themselves recognize this, since they admit by universal consensus that Plato here treats of the first principle of all things<sup>28</sup>.

But, some will say, on this point at least Aristotle differs from Plato, for Aristotle never understands being as subordinate to the one and as not including God in its extension. Those who speak in this way have not read Aristotle, for he does this very thing, and much more plainly than Plato.

In the sixth book of his *Metaphysics*<sup>29</sup> he divides being into being-by-itself (*per se*) and being-by-accident (*per accidens*). When being-by-itself (*per se*) is divided into ten categories, there is no doubt on the part of good interpreters of the philosopher that God is not included under this being, since He is neither being-by-accident nor is He contained under any one of the ten classes into which being *per se* is divided. Nothing is more of a commonplace among the Peripatetics than that division of being into substance and accident. Since this is so, we understand *being* so that God is above being and not below it, as St. Thomas himself teaches in the first book of his *Commentaries on the Theological Sentences*<sup>30</sup>. I shall add that certain Platonists do wrong in vaunting themselves as if they possessed a secret unknown to Aristotle, when they say that God has two proper appellations, namely, the One and the Good, as if the good and the one were superior to being. Just as we have demonstrated that it did not escape the Peripatetics in what sense God can be understood as superior to being, so we are able to show that it was particularly these two names, the Good and the One, that Aristotle gave to God.

In the second book of the *Metaphysics*<sup>31</sup>, after having treated of being in its totality and of separate minds<sup>32</sup>, he asks finally (as if, after all the rest, he wanted to turn to the investigation of the attributes of God alone), if, besides the good which is in the universality of things as in an army, there were some separate good like the person of the chief of this army, and he answers that this good exists, and that it is God. Of this God, in the same chapter, he demonstrates the unity, citing in testimony of this, after strong arguments, the phrase of Homer; εἰς κοῖρανός εἰστώ, εἰς βασιλευς<sup>33</sup>. Where then is his error? Where is Aristotle at odds with Plato? Wherein is he profane? Wherein does he fail to give God the honors which are due to Him?

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, II, paragraphs 4 and 11; V, paragraph 6.

<sup>28</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead* V, I, 8. The *Parmenides* of Plato distinguishes the First One, or the one in the proper sense of the word; the second, which he calls the One-Many; and the third, or 'One-and-Many.' The First One is for the Neo-Platonists God Himself.

<sup>29</sup> *Metaphysics*, E, 2, 1026 ff.

<sup>30</sup> *Commentum in libros IV. Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi* I, dist. xix, q. 4, ad 2 and esp. dist. xxiv, q. I, a. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Metaphysics*, A.

<sup>32</sup> This book of the *Metaphysics* first studies sensible substance in its elements and its structure (ch. 1 to 5), then incorporeal immobile substance (ch. 6 to 10). The complex problem of the different first movers is touched on in ch. 8. The comparison with the army occurs in ch. 10, 1075 a 11 ff.

<sup>33</sup> 10, 1076 a 4. Cf. *Iliad* II, 204. Pico misquotes Aristotle, who quotes Homer correctly: οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοῖρανι: εἰς κοῖρανός εἰστώ.

## **Chapter V. In which is shown why the Peripatetics attribute to God many qualities which the Platonists deny Him, and how one may ascend through four degrees even to the cloud which God inhabits<sup>34</sup>.**

Let us respond now to the arguments which the Platonists invoke to sustain against Aristotle -- not in the sense with which we agree, but absolutely speaking -- the superiority of the one over being. We have, I think, already answered adequately the first of these arguments by which God is considered one and nevertheless is not being, but it is worth the labor to pursue the discussion in order to show that not only with the Platonists and Peripatetics, who disagree with one another, but often in the same single writer, there can be, with respect to the divine attributes, many affirmations and many negations equally just. God is everything, and he is everything in the most eminent and perfect way. Now, He would not be this unless He included in Himself all perfections in such a manner that He rejected all that has to do with imperfection in things. However, one must distinguish two kinds of imperfection. On the one hand, that is imperfect which in its class does not attain the perfection of that class or type. On the other, that is imperfect which, although perfect of its kind, is not absolutely perfect, because it has only the perfections of its kind, and there exist outside of it a number of kinds of things enriched with perfections that are proper to them and which, on its part, it does not include. As an example of the first case consider sense-knowledge, the imperfection of which comes not only from the fact that it is merely knowledge, and not appetite, but also from the fact that it is an imperfect kind of knowledge, both because of the organs which it must use, and which are brute and corporeal, and because it attains only to the superficial aspects of things and does not penetrate to the innermost reality, namely, the substance. So likewise is that human knowledge which one calls rational an imperfect knowledge, being vague, uncertain, mobile, and laborious. Even the intellectual knowledge<sup>35</sup> of those divine intelligences called angels by the theologians, is nothing but an imperfect knowledge, if only because of the obligation it is under to seek without that which it does not possess within, at least in plenitude, namely, the light of truth which it needs for its actuation.

Take another example: life. The life which resides in plants, indeed that which moves every body, is imperfect not only because it is life and not appetite, but because it is not pure life, but rather an influx of life derived from the soul in the body, constantly flowing, constantly mixed with death, fitter indeed to be called death than life. Are you unaware of it? We begin to die as soon as we begin to live, and death extends along with life, so that we stop dying only at that instant when corporeal death delivers us from the body of this death<sup>36</sup>. But even the life of the angels is not perfect: unless the unifying ray of the Divine light incessantly vitalized it, it would slip completely into nothingness. So for all the rest. When therefore you make God knowing and

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<sup>34</sup> This entire chapter is inspired by the *Mystical Theology* of the Pseudo-Denys.

<sup>35</sup> 'Intellectual cognitionem,' (Mirandola) This is the classical distinction between discursive thought, λογος διανοια, and intuitive thought, νομσις According to the *Mystical Theology*, ch. 3, It is necessary to pass beyond both before attaining God.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. I *Corinthians* XV, 31; Romans VII, 24.

living, attend first to this, that the life and knowledge which you ascribe to Him be understood as free from all these detriments.

But this is not enough. There remains the second kind of imperfection, of which the following is an example<sup>37</sup>. Imagine the most perfect kind of life possible, a life completely or perfectly alive, having in it nothing mortal, nothing mixed with death, a life which needs nothing outside or itself by means of which to remain stable and permanent. Imagine likewise a kind of knowledge which perceives everything at once and perfectly. Add this: that he who thus knows all things, knows them in himself and need not search outside himself the truth to be known, but be himself the very truth. Nay, to whatever high degree of perfection this life and this knowledge have attained in their proper natures, and though one could find them nowhere except in God, if, even in this degree of perfection one divides the one from the other, they are unworthy of God.

For God, in short, is perfection in all its modes and in an infinite manner, but He is not such perfection merely because He comprehends in Himself all particular perfections and those in infinite number. For in that case, neither would He Himself be perfectly simple, nor would the perfections which are in Him be infinite; but He would be nothing more than a unique infinite, composed of many things infinite in number but finite in perfection<sup>38</sup>. Now, to think or speak so of God is blasphemous. However, if the most perfect life possible is nonetheless only life, and not knowledge, and the same for all other similar perfections which are assembled in God, there will manifestly ensue a divine life of finite perfection, since it will have the perfection which pertains to life and not that which pertains to knowledge or to appetite. Let us then take from life not only that which makes life imperfect, but also that which makes it life merely, and do the same as regards knowledge and the other qualities which we have ascribed to God. Then what remains of all this will necessarily correspond to the idea which we want to have of God, namely, a Being one, absolutely perfect, infinite, altogether simple. And since life is a certain particular being, and wisdom likewise, and justice, if we remove from them this condition of particularity and limitation, that which remains will not be this or that being, but being itself, simple being, being universal, not with the universality of attribution but with the universality of perfection<sup>39</sup>. Similarly wisdom is a particular good, because it is that good which is wisdom, and not that other which is justice. Take away, says St. Augustine<sup>40</sup>, this, and take away that, that is to say, this limitation of particularity by which wisdom is that good called wisdom, and not that good called justice, and by which, similarly, justice has the particular goodness of justice and not that of wisdom; then only will you see in an obscure way<sup>41</sup> the face of God, i.e. all good in itself, simple good, the good of all good. So also as life is a particular thing, it is *one* particular thing. For it is a certain perfection; and similarly wisdom is a certain perfection. Cast off the particularity, and there remains, not this or that unity, but the one itself, the absolute One. Since

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<sup>37</sup> On this point cf. the *Mystical Theology*, chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>38</sup> On this distinction between the quantitative infinite and the infinite of perfection, cf. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 7, a. 1 to 4.

<sup>39</sup> That is to say, not abstract analogous being, but this concrete infinite being which is God.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, (Migne *Patrologia Latina* vols. XXXVI-XXXVII, 1490, 1741) in Ps. cxxxiv: "Dixit (Deus) Ego sum qui sum . . . non dixit Dominus Deus ille omnipotens, misericors, justus . . . Sublatis de medio omnibus quibus appellari posset et dici Deus, ipsum esse se vocari respondit et tamquam non esset ei nomen, *hoc dices eis, inquit, qui est misit me.*"

<sup>41</sup> 'In enigmate' (Mirandola). Cf. the *Mystical Theology* on this matter of the Divine darkness.

therefore God is that being which, as we said in the beginning, when the imperfections of all things are removed, *is* all things, certainly that which remains when you have rejected from all things both that imperfection which each one possesses in its kind, and that particularity which reduces each to one kind, will assuredly be God. God is, then, Being itself, the one Himself, the Good, and the True.

In thus purifying the Divine names of all the stains that come from the imperfection of the things signified by them, we have already moved two steps in the ascent to the cloud which God inhabits. There remain two more, one of which indicates the deficiency of language, the other the weakness of our intelligence.

These terms: *being (ens)*, *true*, *one*, *good*, signify something concrete and as it were participated; wherefore we say again of God that He is being (*esse*) itself, truth itself, goodness itself, unity itself. Thus far indeed we are in the light, but God has placed His dwelling in the shadows<sup>42</sup>. We have then not yet come to God himself. So long, in short, as that which we say of God is fully understood and entirely comprehended, we are in the light. But all that we say and perceive thus is a mere trifle, considering the infinite distance which separates Divinity from the capacity of our minds. In climbing to the fourth step we enter into the light of ignorance<sup>43</sup>, and, blinded by the cloud of the Divine splendor, we cry out with the Prophet: 'I have fainted in Thy halls, O Lord<sup>44</sup>', finally declaring this one thing about God, that He is incomprehensibly and ineffably above all that we can speak or think of most perfect, placing Him pre-eminently above that unity and that goodness and that truth which we had conceived, and above being (*esse*) itself. Thus Denys the Areopagite, when he had written his *Symbolic Theology*, his *Theological Institutes*<sup>45</sup>, the treatise on the *Divine Names*, and the *Mystical Theology*, and come to the end of the last-mentioned work, like a man already, so to speak, standing in the darkness and trying to find words most adequate to God, after some essays exclaimed: 'He is neither truth nor kingdom, nor unity, nor divinity<sup>46</sup>, nor goodness, nor spirit, as we know it; one cannot apply to Him the names of son or of father or of any other things in the world known to us or to any other being. He is nothing of that which is not, nothing of that which is. Things which are do not know Him as He is, nor does He know things as they are<sup>47</sup> of Him there is no definition, neither is there a name nor a science of Him. He is neither darkness nor light, neither error nor truth<sup>48</sup>, in short, every affirmation and every negation in regard to Him is equally impossible.' This is how that divine man expresses it.

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<sup>42</sup> Psal. XVII, 12: 'Et posuit tenebras latibulum suum, in circuitu ejus tabernaculum; tenebrosa aqua nubibus aeris.'

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the 'superessential light of the Divine darkness' in the *Mystical Theology*, ch. I, paragraph 1, and the *De Docta Ignorantia* of Nicholas Cusanus. The latter work is available in a new critical edition by E. Hoffmann and R. Klibansky (Leipzig, 1932).

<sup>44</sup> Psal. LXXXIII. 3: 'Deficit anima mea in atria Domini.'

<sup>45</sup> I.e. the *Hypotyposes theologicae*. Cf. the *Mystical Theology*, ch. 3, where all these works are named.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. C. E. Rolt's note (*Dionysius the Areopagite*, N.Y., 1920, p. 200, No. 2): "Godhead (divinity) is regarded as the property of deified men, and so belongs to relativity."

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Rolt (*ibid.*, 200, No. 3): "It (God) knows only Itself, and there knows all things in their Super-Essence-*sub specie aeternitatis*."

<sup>48</sup> Rolt (200, No. 4): "Truth is an object of thought. Therefore, being beyond objectivity, the ultimate Reality is not Truth. But still less is it Error." I should rather say that truth is a relation or quality, and that since God transcends all relationship and all quality, He is not truth but THE TRUE.

Let us gather up our conclusions. We learn, then, in the first degree, that God is not body, as the Epicureans say, nor the form of a body, as those say who affirm that God is the soul of the sky and of the universe -- the opinion of the Egyptians, according to the testimony of Plutarch<sup>49</sup> and Varro the Roman theologian<sup>50</sup>, whence they draw great nourishment for idolatry. Yet there are some even among the Peripatetics<sup>51</sup> so stupid as to hold this the true doctrine and moreover as the teaching of Aristotle. How far they are from knowing God truly! They rest in the starting-place as if they had already reached the goal, and believe themselves already come to the heights of the Divinity while in fact they are lying on the ground and have not even begun to move a foot towards Him. For from this point of view God could be neither perfect life nor perfect being nor even perfect intelligence. But we have elaborately confuted these profane opinions in the fifth section of our *Concordia*<sup>52</sup>.

We learn, in the second degree, a truth which few men understand correctly, and in regard to which we risk deceiving ourselves the more however little we deviate from true intelligence, namely, that God is neither life nor intelligence nor intelligible, but something better and more excellent than all these. For all these names state one particular perfection, and there is nothing of the sort in God. Mindful of this, Denys<sup>53</sup> and the Platonists have denied God life, intellect, wisdom, and the like. But since God unites and gathers up in Himself by His unique perfection which is His infinitude, in short, Himself, the totality of perfection which is found is these divided and multiplied, and because He does this not as a unity composed of these multiple perfections, but as a unity anterior to them, certain philosophers, especially the Peripatetics<sup>54</sup>, imitated insofar as is permissible on almost all these points by the theologians of Paris<sup>55</sup>, concede that all these perfections are in God. We agree with them, and we believe that in so doing we are not only thinking justly but that we are at the same time in agreement with those who deny these same perfections, on condition that we never lose sight of what St. Augustine says<sup>56</sup>, namely, that God's wisdom is not more wisdom than justice, His justice not more justice than wisdom, nor His knowledge more knowledge than life. For all these things are in God one, not by confusion of mixture, or mutual penetration of distinct entities, but by a simple, sovereign, ineffable, and fundamental unity in which actuality, all form, all perfection, hidden as if in the supreme and pre-eminent jewel in the treasury of the Divine Infinity, are enclosed so excellently above and beyond all things that it is not only intimate to all things, but rather united with all things more closely than they are with themselves. Assuredly words fail us, altogether unable to express this concept.

But see, my dear Angelo, what folly possesses us! While we are in the body we are able to love God better than we can know or describe Him. In loving there is for us more profit, and less

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<sup>49</sup> *De Iside et Osiride*, 49. Osiris is the *νοῦς* of the world-soul, Typhon its *παθητικόν*, seat of the passions.

<sup>50</sup> *De lingua latina*, V, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Allusion to the Averroist school at Padua.

<sup>52</sup> I.e. the *Symphonia Platonis et Aristotelis* described in my Introduction, p. 4, above.

<sup>53</sup> *Mystical Theology*, chapter 5.

<sup>54</sup> Pico is no doubt referring here to the *authentic* Aristotelian tradition of Alexander and Thimistitis (the latter lately edited by Ermolao Barbaro) which found itself opposed, in the 15th century, to the Arabianizing tradition and to the Averroism of Padua.

<sup>55</sup> Especially St. Albert and St. Thomas.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Sermo CCCXL, I, ch. 5 (*P. L.* 38, 1482); ch. 7 (*ibid.*, 39, 1498).

labor, the more we obey this tendency. Nevertheless, we prefer constantly to seek through knowledge, never finding what we seek, rather than to possess through love that which without love would be found in vain. But let us return to our subject. You already see plainly by what convention one can call God spirit, intelligence, life, wisdom, and on the other hand place Him above all these determinations, both having good proofs to witness to their truth and their accord. Nor does Plato dissent from Aristotle, because when, in the sixth book of the *Republic*<sup>57</sup>, he calls God "the idea of the Good" which surpasses intelligibles, he shows Him giving to Intelligence the power of intellection, and to intelligibles their intelligibility<sup>58</sup>, while the latter of them (Aristotle) defines God as the being who is at once intelligence, intellect, and intelligible<sup>59</sup>. Denys the Areopagite, also, though he talks like Plato, is nevertheless obliged to affirm with Aristotle that God is ignorant neither of Himself nor of other beings; wherefore, if He knows Himself, it is because He is both intelligence and intelligible; for he who knows himself is necessarily both knower and known. And yet, if we consider these perfections as particular perfections, as I have said, or if, when we say intelligence, we mean to signify that nature which tends to the intelligible as to something exterior to itself, there is no doubt that Aristotle, like the Platonists, would firmly deny that God is intelligence or intelligible.

In the third degree, the more we approach the darkness, the more light we have to see that not only is God not (impious to say!) something imperfect or a mutilated being, as He would be if we called Him a body, or the soul of a body, or an animated being composed of soul and body, nor some particular *genus* however perfect, which human wisdom can fashion<sup>60</sup>, like life, or spirit, or reason, but that we ought to conceive of Him as superior to all that these universal terms which include in their extension all things, i.e., the one, the true, the good, and being, signify.

In the fourth degree, finally, we know Him as superior not only to these four transcendentals, but also to every idea which we could form, to every essence which we could conceive Him to be. Then only, with this total ignorance, does true knowledge commence. From all this we conclude that God is not only the being than which, according to St. Anselm<sup>61</sup>, nothing higher can be conceived, but the being who infinitely transcends all that can be imagined, as David the prophet put it in the Hebrew: "Silence alone is Thy, praise"<sup>62</sup>.

So much for the solution of the first difficulty. The window is now wide open for a true understanding of the books composed by Denys the Areopagite on *Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*. Here we must avoid two mistakes: either to make too little of works whose value is great, or, seeing that we understand them so ill, to fashion for ourselves idle fancies and inextricable commentaries.

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<sup>57</sup> *Republic* VI, 509 b, where God is called, not an essence, but something far above essence in dignity and in power.

<sup>58</sup> "Et intelligibilia statuatur dantem illis quidem ut intelligant, his autem ut intelligantur." (Mirandola.)

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *Meta.*, A, 7, 1072 b 20.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. I *Corinthians* II, 13: "Quae et loquimur non in doctis humanae sapientiae verbis sed in doctrina Spiritus, spiritualibus spiritualia comparantes."

<sup>61</sup> *Proslogion*, ch. xv (*P. L.*, 158, 235): "Domine, non solum es quo majus cogitari nequit; sed es quiddam majus quam cogitari possit."

<sup>62</sup> *Psal.* LXIV, 2: "Tibi silentium laus" (St. Jerome's translation).

## Chapter VI. In which is solved the second difficulty of the Platonists, namely that with respect to prime matter.

As regards their objection on the subject of prime matter, this is frivolous. For insofar as this matter is being, it has unity. Indeed, those who wish to follow Plato's words to the letter, must concede that it has less unity than it has being. For Plato it is not nothing, but a sort of receptacle of forms, a kind of nurse, a special kind of nature and similar things, as he establishes in the *Timaeus*<sup>63</sup>. It is therefore not nothing; it is not altogether outside of being, if we credit Plato, who even calls it, in his *Philebus*<sup>64</sup>, not merely multiplicity -- opposed to the one as nothing is opposed to being -- but infinity. Now multiplicity, if it is finite, is not entirely outside the confines of unity, since insofar as it is finite it is one. On the other hand, an infinite multiplicity escapes equally the nature of the one and that of limit. Prime matter is then for Plato rather being than one.

However, those who have argued to prove the superiority of unity over being, have said that prime matter is not being, though it is a unity. Thus the Platonist Iamblichus, in his book *On the Pythagorean Sect*<sup>65</sup>, designates prime matter as duality because duality is the first multiple and the root, as it were, of all other multiplicity. According, then, to him who is so great among the Platonists that he is called "divine," prime matter is not only not one, but a multitude, and the root of all multiplicity in things. Their own arguments condemn them. Still, prime matter does not entirely escape any more from the category of unity than from that of being. The same form that imprints being on it, also imposes unity. I pass over all the arguments *pro* or *con* the unity of prime matter since they are so well-known to all those who have gone any distance at all with Aristotle.

## Chapter VII. In which is solved the third difficulty of the Platonists, on the subject of multiplicity, and in which it is demonstrated that it is not possible to say that unity is more common than being, without coming to a conclusion which Plato rejects.

The third objection is their worst error. For the opposition between multiplicity and unity is not of the same sort as the opposition between non-being and being. Here it is a case of

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<sup>63</sup> On the χωρα τιθηνη cf. *Timaeus* 49a, 51a, 32d, and Robin, *op. cit.*, 573-574.

<sup>64</sup> *Philebus* 16 c ff., and the long discussion on the περας and the απειρον 23c-27e. On that discussion, cf. Rodier, "Remarques sur le Philebe," *Etudes de Philosophie Grecque*, (Paris, 1926), 79-93; E. Poste, *The Philebus of Plato*, (Oxford, 1860), Appendices A and B.

<sup>65</sup> In the fifth book of his συναγωγή των Πυθαγορειων δογματων. This opposition of the dyad, multiplicity, matter, and evil, and the monad, Unity, Form, and Good, is one of the classic themes of the Pythagorean doctrine. Cf. Robin, *op. cit.*, 564-566, 641 f.; Cornford, *op. cit.* 4 f.

contradiction; there, of privation or contrariety. Aristotle discusses this distinction at length in the tenth book of his *Metaphysics*<sup>66</sup>.

But see into what disaster those philosophers fall who call themselves Platonists and yet wish to say that unity is superior to being. It is certain that, when two *genera* are reciprocally in a relation of dependence such that one is more common than the other, an object can escape from the extension of the inferior without being excluded from the superior. That is because the latter is more common. An example off-hand --- animal is more common than man: it can happen, therefore, that a being may not be man, and yet be animal. By the same token, if unity were more common than being, it could happen that something might be non-being or nothing, which would notwithstanding be one, and thus unity might be predicated of non-being, a possibility which Plato expressly rejects in the *Sophist*<sup>67</sup>.

### **Chapter VIII. In which is shown in what manner these four attributes: being, unity, truth, and goodness, are present in all that exists beneath God.**

Most true, indeed, is the statement that there are four attributes which embrace all that exists, namely, being, unity, truth, and goodness, provided that they are taken in the sense that their negations be: nothing, division, falsity, evil. Two others, something (*aliquid*) and thing (*res*), have been added to these by the late disciples of Avicenna, who interpolated the philosophy of Averroes in more than one place, wherefore Averroes attacked them vigorously<sup>68</sup>. But, to tell the truth, on this point there is little reason for discord. For they merely divide what is subsumed under 'one' into 'one' and 'something,' a procedure that is not contrary to Plato who, in the *Sophist*<sup>69</sup>, enumerates unity among the most extense *genera*; and that which is contained under 'being' they divide into being and thing. But of this later. To return to our subject, -- these four attributes exist in one way in God, and in another way in beings created by God, since God has them from Himself, other beings from Him.

Let us see first how they pertain to created things. All things that are beneath God have an efficient, an exemplary, and a final cause. For from Him, and through Him, and for Him, are all things. If then we consider things as constituted by the efficient causality of God, we call them *beings* (*entia*), since it is because of this efficiency that they participate in being (*esse*). If we consider them as conforming to and according with the Divine exemplars which we call Ideas, and according to which God has created them, namely, being, unity, truth, goodness, something, thing -- the two last due to the disciples of Avicenna --, we call them *true*. The true picture of Hercules is, for example, said to be that which conforms to the true Hercules himself. If, again, we consider things as tending to God as their last end, we call them *good*. And finally, if each

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<sup>66</sup> *Meta.* I, 3 (different kinds of opposition, αἱ ἀντιθεσεις τετραχως, 1054 a 23), 4 (contrariety and its different modes), 6 (opposition of the one and the many). The kinds of opposition are: contradiction, privation, contrariety, relation. On the distinction between negation and contrariety in Plato, cf. *Soph.* 257 b-c.

<sup>67</sup> *Sophist*, 238a-d.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Averroes, *Phys.* I, c.

<sup>69</sup> On the community of genera in *The Sophist*, cf. 251a-253b, 254b-256d. On the inclusion of unity among the supreme genera, cf. 253d.



thing is considered absolutely, according to itself, we call it *one*. Now, the order is such that each thing must first be conceived under the idea of being, since every thing, whatever it be, must be produced by an efficient agent before being anything particular in itself, lest that which it is do not depend in its totality from the efficient cause. Thus it happens that a thing which comes after God cannot be conceived without being immediately thought of as a dependent being: finite being is being by participation. To being succeeds unity. Third comes truth, since it is only when a thing exists as such that one can inquire if it corresponds to the exemplar according to which it has been formed. If it resembles that exemplar, it has only to turn towards it by its attribute of goodness, in virtue of a sort of affinity or relationship.

Who does not see, however that all these attributes have equal extension? Give me any being; it is certain that it will be *one*. For to say 'not one' is to say 'nothing,' according to Plato's expression in the *Sophist*<sup>70</sup>. For whatever is, is undivided in itself and divided from other things which are not it. When we say this we mean 'one,' or, to use Plato's words, identical with itself, different from others'; and this he declares, in the same dialogue, attributable to each thing<sup>71</sup>.

Necessarily, also, this being is *true*. For if it is a man, it is certainly a true man. It is the same thing to say: 'This is not true gold' and 'This is not gold,' for, when you say: 'This is not true gold,' you mean: 'This appears to be gold, it resembles gold, but it is not gold.' Therefore St. Augustine gives the following definition of truth in his *Soliloquies*<sup>72</sup>: "Truth is that which is." One ought not to understand this to indicate that being and truth are the same, for though they are identical in a thing, they are diverse in principle and definition; wherefore one ought not to define the one by the other. What Augustine wanted to say is that a thing is true when it is really what it is called and said to be, as for example, that gold is true when it is really gold and not something other than gold. This is the sense of the words: "Truth is that which is." Those who do not perceive this, falsely attack Augustine's definition.

Similarly, this being is *good*. For whatever is, insofar as it is, is good. And Olympiodorus seems to me to make a great mistake in believing that being and good are different because we desire the good absolutely and in itself<sup>73</sup>. However, it is not being pure and simple, but well-being that he means; thus, it can happen that if we are suffering we desire not to be. Passing over the point whether, when one is suffering from misery one can, by a right and natural appetite, desire not to be, Olympiodorus did not see that good is as multiple as being.

There is first of all the natural being of things, as, for example, of a man his humanity, of a lion his lioninity, of a stone its stoniness. To this natural being corresponds, for each individual thing, a natural goodness.

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<sup>70</sup> *Soph.*, 237e.

<sup>71</sup> *Soph.*, 252c, and, on the inclusion of *the same* and *the other* among the five supreme genera, 254e-256d.

<sup>72</sup> *Soliloquia*, II, 5 (*P. L.* XXXI, 889): 'Nam verum mihi videtur esse id quod est.'

<sup>73</sup> Olympiodorus in *Phaed.*, 188, 29 Norvin. Cf. Dionysius, *Divine Names*, chs. 3 and 5. Manuscripts of Olympiodorus were numerous in Italy in the sixteenth century. Cf. Festugiere, *op. cit.*, p. 246, note I. For St. Thomas' criticism of this sophism, cf. *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 5, a. 2: "Utrum bonum secundum rationem sit prius quam ens."

But there are other modes of being, which may be called adventitious, as, for man, to be wise, to be handsome, to be sane. Now, just as wisdom and beauty are different, as regards being, from humanity, so it is with goodness. The quality of humanity by which man is man is a different good from the quality of wisdom by which he becomes, not a man merely, but a wise man. All the same, there are here two different modes of being, and one is justified in speaking of them so.

Just as, therefore, all things desire being, so all desire the good, and first of all they desire that good which corresponds to their natural being, since that is the foundation of all other goods, which come to it in such a way that they are unable to stand without it. For how will he be happy who is altogether without being? That good, however, which they acquire with their being, does not suffice them; they desire to attain also all the other goods which complete and adorn this primary good. Just as, then, we rightly say that besides the first good we desire other goods, so we can rightly say that besides the first being we desire other modes of being, for it is one thing to be happy, another thing to be man. And if any one grants that it might happen that one preferred not to be if one could not be happy, it does not follow, as Olympiodorus thinks, that goodness of man is one thing, and happiness another, so that one does not desire the one (being man), except on condition that one possess also the other (happiness).

I omit the consideration whether there is an exact correspondence between the *good* taken absolutely and *being* taken absolutely, or whether *being* taken absolutely is called a certain good, or the good taken absolutely is called a certain being. For this is not the place to discuss all things.

Truly, therefore, did we say that whatever is, is good in the measure that it is. "God saw all the beings He had made, and behold, they were very good<sup>74</sup>." And why not? They are the work of a good artificer Who engraves His image on all things that are from His hand. In the entity of things therefore, we can admire the power of the Maker, in their truth we can adore the wisdom of the Artist, in their goodness we can return love to the liberality of the Lover, in their unity, finally, we can grasp the idea of the unifying simplicity, so to speak, of the Creator, which unites all things among themselves and to Himself, calling them all to love themselves, their neighbors, and ultimately God.

Let us examine now if the opposed terms have likewise the same extension. That the false and the non-existing are identical, we have shown above. And if we say that evil and non-being are different, philosophers and theologians will again object: to make something evil is to make nothing; therefore is one wont to say that the principle of evil is not an efficient but a deficient cause. Thus is refuted the folly of those who have posited two principles, one for good, the other for evil, as if there could exist an efficient cause of evil. But to divide a thing is the same as destroying it, nor can we take away from any thing its natural unity without at the same time robbing it of its integrity of being. For a whole is not its parts, but that unity which springs out of the sum of its parts, as Aristotle demonstrates in the eighth book of his *Metaphysics*<sup>75</sup>. Wherefore if one divides a whole into its parts, these parts remain something although the whole which is divided does not remain, but ceases to exist actually, and is only potentially, just as its parts,

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<sup>74</sup> *Gen.* I, i, 12; XVIII, xxi, 25.

<sup>75</sup> *Meta.*, H 3, 1044 a 2 ff., and H 6, 1045 a 7 ff.

which earlier were in potency, now commence to exist in actuality. Before, when these parts were in the whole, they had no real unity in actuality; this they first acquire when they subsist by themselves, apart from the whole.

## Chapter IX. In which it is indicated how these four attributes pertain to God.

Let us examine once more how these four attributes find themselves in God. They do not pertain to Him in the relation of a cause, since there is no question of cause with God. He himself being the cause of all things, and caused by nothing. They can be considered in God in two ways, (1) either as He is taken absolutely in Himself, or (2) as He is the cause of other beings, a distinction inapplicable to created things, since God can exist without being cause, whereas other beings cannot exist unless caused by Him.

We conceive God, then, first of all as the perfect totality of act, the plenitude of being itself. It follows from this concept that He is one, that a term opposite to Him cannot be imagined. See then how much they err who fashion many first principles, many gods! At once it is clear that God is truth itself. For, what can He have which appears to be and is not, He who is being itself? It follows with certainty that he is truth itself. But He is likewise goodness itself. Three conditions are required for the good, as Plato writes in his *Philebus*<sup>76</sup>: perfection, sufficiency, and desirability. Now the good which we conceive will be perfect, since nothing can be lacking to that which is everything; it will be sufficient, since nothing can be lacking to those who possess that in which they will find all; it will be desirable, since from Him and in Him are all things which can possibly be desired. God is therefore the fullest plenitude of being, undivided unity, the most solid truth, the most perfect good. This, if I am not mistaken, is that τετρακτυς or quaternity<sup>77</sup>, by which Pythagoras swore and which he called the principle of ever-flowing nature. Indeed, in this quaternity, which is One God, we have demonstrated the principle of all things. But we also swear by that which is holy, true, divine; now, what more true, more holy, more divine than these four characters? If we attribute them to God as the cause of things, the entire order is inverted. First He will be one, because He is conceived in Himself before He is conceived as cause. Then He will be good, true, and finally being (*ens*). For since the final cause has priority over the exemplary cause, and that over the efficient (we first desire to have something to protect us from the weather, then we conceive the idea of a house, and finally we construct one by making it materially), if, as has been described in Chapter VIII above, the good pertains to the final cause, the true to the exemplary, being to the efficient, God as cause will have first of all the attribute of good, then of true, and finally of being. We shall here terminate these brief remarks on a subject teeming with many important problems.

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<sup>76</sup> *Phil.*, 20 c-d.

<sup>77</sup> On τετρακτυς, cf. the formula οὐ μὰ τὸν ἀμετέρα γενεὰ παραδόντα τετρακτυν, by which the Pythagoreans were wont to swear. Cornford (*op. cit.*, 2): 'These four numbers are the tetractys of the decad: 1 2 3 4 10 . . . The *tetractys* was a symbol of great significance and, like other such symbols, capable of many interpretations.'

## Chapter X. In which the whole discussion is related to the conduct of life and the reform of morals.

Let us, lest we speak more of other things than of ourselves, take care that, while we scrutinize the heights, we do not live too basely in a manner unworthy of beings to whom has been given the divine power of inquiring into things divine. We ought, then, to consider assiduously that our mind, with its divine privileges, cannot have a mortal origin nor can find happiness otherwise than in the possession of things divine, and that the more it elevates and inflames itself with the contemplation of the Divine by renouncing earthly preoccupations while yet a traveler on this pilgrimage here below, the more it will approach felicity. The best precept, then, which this discussion can give us, seems to be that, if we wish to be happy, we ought to imitate the most happy and blessed of all beings, God, by establishing in ourselves unity, truth, and goodness.

What disturbs the peace of unity is ambition, the vice that steals away from itself the soul which abandons itself to it, tearing it, as it were, in pieces, and dispersing it. The resplendent light of truth, who will not lose it in the mud, in the darkness of lust? Avarice and cupidity steal from us goodness, for it is the peculiar property of goodness to communicate to others the goods which it possesses. Thus, when Plato asked himself why God had created the world, he answered: "because he was good"<sup>78</sup>. These are the three vices: pride of life, concupiscence of the flesh, concupiscence of the eyes, which, as St. John says<sup>79</sup>, are of the world and not of the Father who is unity, goodness, and truth indeed.

Let us therefore fly from the world, which is confirmed in evil<sup>80</sup>; let us soar to the Father in whom are the peace that unifies, the true light, and the greatest happiness. But what will give us wings to soar?<sup>81</sup> The love of the things that are above<sup>82</sup>. What will take them from us? The lust for the things below, to follow which is to lose unity, truth, and goodness. For we are not one and integrated if we do not link together with a bond of virtue our senses, which incline to earth, and our reason, which tends to heavenly things; this is rather to have two principles ruling in us in turn, so that, while today we follow God by the law of the spirit, and tomorrow Baal by the law of the flesh, our inner realm is divided and as it were laid waste. And if our unity is purchased by the enslavement of a reason submitted to the rule of the law of the members, that will be a false unity, since thus we shall not be true. For we are called and appear to be men, that is, animate beings living by reason; and yet we will be brutes, having for law only sensual appetite. We will be performing a juggling trick to those who see us, and among whom we live. The image will not conform to its exemplar. For we are made in the likeness of God, and God is spirit<sup>83</sup> but we are

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<sup>78</sup> *Timaeus* 29e, 44c, d, 45c-e, 68c 69a-c, 87a-d.

<sup>79</sup> I *John* II:16: 'Quoniam omne quod est in mundo concuposcentia carnis est, et concupiscentia oculorum, et superbia vitae, quia non est ex Patre, sed ex mundo est.'

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, V:19: 'Mundus totus in maligno positus est.'

<sup>81</sup> *Psal.* LIV:7: 'Quis dabit mihi pennas sicut columbae, et volabo, et requiescam?'

<sup>82</sup> *Colossians* III:162: 'Igitur, si consurrexistis cum Christo, quae sursum sunt quaeris . . . Quae sursum sunt sapite, non quae super terram.'

<sup>83</sup> *John* IV:24: 'Spiritus est Deus: et eos, qui adorant eum, in spiritu et veritate oportet adorare.'

not yet spirits, to use St. Paul's words<sup>84</sup>, but animals. If, on the contrary, by grace of truth, we do not fall beneath our model, we have only to move towards Him who is our model, through goodness, in order to be united with Him in the afterworld.

Since, finally, these three attributes: unity, truth, and goodness, are united to being by a bond which is eternal, it follows that, if we do not possess them, we no longer exist, even though we may seem to do so; and although others may believe we exist, we are in fact in a state of continuous death rather than of life.

## **Finis**

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<sup>84</sup> I *Corinthians* II:14; XV:46: 'Animalis autem homo non percipit ea quae sunt Spiritus Dei; stultitia enim est illi, et non potest intelligere: quia spiritualiter examinatur.'; 'Sed non prius quod spiritalis est, sed quod animale, deinde quod spiritale.'