V

PLOTINUS'S DOCTRINE OF THE INFINITE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR CHRISTIAN THOUGHT[1]

THE idea of an unbounded, unlimited, indefinite element in the nature of things goes back to the very beginnings of Greek philosophy. Already in Anaximander we meet τὸ ἄπειρον, the unbounded, inexhaustible reservoir of living stuff from which all things come and to which they return: and in the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition the Unlimited is the inseparable correlative of Limit, the formless substrate from which formed, definite things come to be by the imposition of Form. In the later thought of Plato a formless, indefinite element, the Great-and-Small or Indefinite Dyad, appears as one of the ultimate constituents of the World of Forms itself. But the idea that the First Principle of things, the supreme divinity, is itself in some sense infinite, does not seem to appear clearly and unmistakably in the Greek-speaking world before Philo of Alexandria. It is indeed an idea opposed to the normal Greek, and especially to the Platonic-Pythagorean way of thinking, for which the good and the divine is essentially form and definition, light and clarity, opposed to vague formless darkness. Plotinus is the first Greek philosopher to try to work out with any sort of precision the senses in which infinity can be predicated of the Godhead, and to distinguish them from the evil infinity of formlessness and indefinite multiplicity. It is true, as modern scholars are more and more clearly coming to see, that Plotinus's doctrine of the One or Good is at least a legitimate development of, if not, as he himself believed, one and the same as Plato's thought about the mysterious First Principle to which he gave those names[2]; but

[1] A paper read to the Görres-Gesellschaft (Sektion für Altertumskunde) at Münster in October 1953.

[2] Cp. Professor C. J. de Vogel's article *On the Neoplatonic Character of Platonism and the Platonic Character of Neoplatonism* in *Mind*, Vol. LXII, N.S. No. 245, January 1953, pp. 43-64.

there is no clear evidence that Plato ever thought or spoke of the One or Good as in any sense ἄπειρον. Plotinus is therefore the first philosopher, at any rate in the West, to attempt any serious treatment of the question of the Divine Infinity; and the conclusions which he reaches, both about the infinity of God and the infinity of matter, have influenced Christian thought and are not, as I believe, without interest for Christian philosophers and theologians of our own day. How serious and urgent the problem of separating the two infinities was for him we can understand from the first words of the treatise *On Numbers* (VI, vi) 'Is multiplicity a falling away from the One, and unboundedness a complete falling away because it is an uncountable multiplicity, and is unboundedness therefore evil, and are we evil when we are a multiplicity?'

As often happens, Plotinus is dissatisfied with Aristotle's thought on this particular question and spends a good deal of time in criticizing it; the treatise *On Matter* (II, iv) contains an extended critical discussion of the whole Peripatetic conception of ὕλη. He rejects Aristotle's idea of a merely potential and accidental infinity[3] in chapter xv of that treatise (chapter vii, in which he seems to accept it, is merely a summary of Peripatetic doctrine preliminary to criticism). In chapter ii of the treatise *On Numbers* he gives qualified acceptance to the idea of a subjective potential infinity, existing only in our minds. But he makes it clear in the same chapter that this will not satisfy him as a complete account even of numerical infinity. It cannot be applied to number in the intelligible world, which exists prior to any counting mind; and there must be an actually infinite number in the intelligible world because Plato speaks of an ἄπειρος ἀριθμός.[4] The main purpose of the treatise *On Numbers* is to give an acceptable meaning to this expression: we shall see later what explanation Plotinus gives. The principle here invoked of the priority of intelligible objects to our thought about them is a very important one for Plotinus. In chapter vi of this same treatise he vigorously opposes any subjective-idealist interpretation of the Aristotelian 'in immaterial things knowledge is one and the same thing as its object',[5] which is the basis of his own view of the relationship between Intellect and the Intelligibles.

[3] Phys. III, 5, 204a ff.
[4] Parm. 144 A; Plato is developing the consequences of the Second Hypothesis εἰ ἓν ἔστιν — Plotinus identifies this 'existent One' with his own Second Hypostasis, Νοῦς.
[5] Cp. De An. III, 6.

PLOTINUS'S DOCTRINE OF THE INFINITE

It seems best to consider Plotinus's positive thought about the Unbounded under two heads: (i) the Unbounded as matter, in the sensible and intelligible worlds : (ii) Unboundedness (ἀπειρία) in the intelligible world apart from intelligible matter.

1. As matter the Unbounded is for him simply 'that which is without limit' (πέρας) — the limiting principle which is form. It is the absolute formlessness which form informs and limits. The remark in V, 8, 7, that the matter of the sense-world is εἶδος τι ἔσχατον, 'a last and lowest form' is unparalleled in the *Enneads* and quite inconsistent with his normal thought ; we shall see later that there is what looks like a development, and a very interesting one, of this idea in the Cappadocian Fathers. It should be noted that, in spite of a good many remarks which might suggest it, unboundedness as such is not for Plotinus necessarily evil. He makes this clear in II, 4, 3. πρῶτον οὖν λεκτέον ὡς οὐ πανταχοῦ τὸ ἀόριστον ἀτιμαστέον . . . . . εἰ μέλλοι παρέχειν αὐτὸ τοῖς πρὸ αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῖς ἀρίστοις'

It is found in the intelligible world as well as in the sense-world, on the levels of both Intellect (Νοῦς) and Soul. The lower hypostasis is timelessly produced by the higher as an unformed, unbounded and indefinite potentiality and timelessly turns back to it in contemplation and so, on Aristotle's psychological principle 'becomes what it thinks' and is informed and filled with definite content.[6] The ultimate source of this intelligible ἄπειρον is the infinite power of the One.[7]

The Unbounded or matter of the sense-world is however the principle of evil, because it is not merely without form but opposed to form, negative in the sense of 'minus' rather than 'zero', a *tendency* to formlessness. Plotinus develops this conception of matter as evil at length and with considerable passion in the treatises *On Matter* and *On the Nature and Origin of Evil*.[8] There is however an exception which must be noted here which adds considerably to the confusion in this least coherent and satisfactory part of Plotinus's system. This is that the matter of the heavenly bodies is *not* a principle of resistance to form but is perfectly docile and subdued to it, so that

[6] Cp. besides II, 4, 3, V, 1, 5 (where this intelligible ἄπειρον is identified with Plato's δυάς), V, 3, 11, V, 4, 2.
[7] II, 4, 15.
[8] II, 4 and I, 8.

it can in no way trouble the spiritual life of the celestial intelligences.[9] This conception of the superiority of celestial matter is of course a commonplace of later Hellenistic philosophy and religion, deriving from the thought of Plato and Aristotle : it seems to have influenced the development of Christian thought about the glorified resurrection body; at least the scholastic conceptions of *claritas* and *agilitas* appear to have much in common with the way in which the Neo-Platonists thought about celestial bodies and their relationship to their directing intelligences.

Though Plotinus never fully succeeded in bringing the various traditional and contemporary components of his thought about matter into a satisfactory and consistent order, we can, I think, say generally that he never thinks of the Unbounded as matter (except where he is simply expounding Aristotle in the earlier chapters of II, iv) as a sort of static neutral material, but always as a tendency, a movement either towards or away from form, either to greater unification — to be informed for Plotinus always means to be unified, to participate according to a thing's capacity and degree of being in the One — or to indefinitely increasing multiplicity; and on the direction of that tendency its good or evil depends. We may note that Proclus[10] rejects the idea of matter in the sense-world as evil and makes it simply a neutral indefinite potency, correlative to form and proceeding from God (θεόθεν), like the intelligible matter of Plotinus.

2. As applied to the Hypostases of the intelligible world (the One, the Divine Intellect and Soul) unboundedness does not mean for Plotinus absolute formlessness, complete absence of formative limit (πέρας). Only the One or Good is altogether without form or limit. He is the formless giver of form, the source of all derived and therefore limited beings (for Plotinus ὄν and οὐσία, being and essence or form, are inseparable correlatives; 'being' means always 'being this', particular, defined, limited being, and that which is beyond form is necessarily beyond being.[11] It is important always to bear this in mind in considering the meaning of his statements that the One does not exist.) But Plotinus (as also Proclus[12]) appears to

[9] II, 1, 4, II, 9, 8.
[10] In Remp. I, 37, 27 Kroll.
[11] V, 5, 6.
[12] Cp. E. R. Dodds, Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, p. 245, n. 3 (commentary on prop. 86).

shrink from applying ἄπειρος, ἀπειρία, terms traditionally used to express the negative indefiniteness of matter, to the primary and absolute infinity of the One.[13] When he does use the term 'unbounded' of the One it is in one of the restricted senses in which he applies it to the other Hypostases which are not absolutely without limit but in some senses limited. Thus the Divine Intellect, which is very often called 'unbounded' in the restricted senses, is also limited because the Forms or Ideas which are its content are definite realities and their number is finite. This was the normal Platonist doctrine, though Syrianus[14] says that the school of Amelius, Plotinus's chief pupil, believed in an infinity of Forms which could not all be reproduced in the finite cosmos, even in infinite time. Plotinus himself just mentions this idea of an infinite number of Forms[15] in the treatise *On Whether there are Forms of Individuals*, but dismisses it in favour of the idea of a finite number reproduced again and again in an infinite succession of world-periods (the Stoic conception). So we can say that the doctrine that the number of Forms is infinite, which appears later in St Bonaventure,[16] was known in Plotinus's school, though Plotinus himself rejected it. Of these restricted senses the commonest in the *Enneads* is that of infinity of power. Plotinus distinguishes this carefully from potential numerical infinity or infinite divisibility: he says, for instance, of Soul 'Unboundedness applies to its power, its power is unbounded, not as if the soul was divisible to infinity. For God is also not bounded'.[17] This infinity of power is primarily inexhaustibility; it pervades everything and you can never come to the end of it. So, speaking of the World of Forms which is the Divine Intellect, he says 'It is All-power, extending to infinity, and powerful to infinity; and it is so great that its parts, too, are unbounded; for what place can one speak of which it has not reached first?'[18] It is this single infinite power which produces the infinite succession of world-periods. There is an interesting passage in the second treatise on *Problems of the Soul* where he speaks of God's knowledge of this

[13] Cp. again II, 4, 15. He does call the One ἄμορφον and ἀνείδεον in VI, 9, 3.
[14] In Metaph. 147, 1 ff.
[15] V, 7, 1.
[16] In Sent. 35, Quaest. Disp. de Scientia Christi I.
[17] IV, 3, 8, cp. the very clear statement about the One VI, 9, 6.
[18] V, 8, 9, cp. VI, 2, 21, VI, 5, 4.

infinite series. 'He will know that he is a unity, and one life for ever — for this is how he is infinite: and he will know this unity not externally but in his activity, since infinity of this kind is always with him, or rather is his constant attribute, and is contemplated by an act of knowing which has nothing adventitious about it. As he knows his own infinity of life, in the same way he knows that his action on the All is one, but not that it is action on the All.'[19]

This passage illustrates another closely-related sense in which Plotinus uses the term 'unbounded' of the Hypostases; this is the sense of τὸ ἀδιαστάτον, complete and simultaneous unity, the state proper to eternal and non-spatial spiritual being in which there is absence of limit by division in the sense that one part is not *here* and another *there*, one does not exist *now* and another *then*. This sense of course applies to the lower Hypostases, and not to the absolutely partless One. It is applied both to the Divine Intellect[20] and to Soul.[21]

The last sense which I can distinguish in which Plotinus applies the term 'unbounded' to the Hypostases, is that in which it means 'without limit as being all-inclusive and so unincluded, immeasurable as having nothing outside to measure it and as being itself the absolute standard of measurement'. This is the sense which provides the final solution of the problem of the 'infinite number' in the treatise *On Numbers*.[22] Plotinus explains it very clearly in the last two chapters of that treatise and brings out well that it is a *relative* sense. Intelligible number, he says, is limited in one sense and unlimited only in this special sense. But it does not seem to have been devised simply to provide an exegesis for the text from the *Parmenides*, as it is stated clearly in quite a different context elsewhere in the *Enneads*, in the treatise *On the Omnipresence of Being*. 'It [the Divine Intellect] is not like stone, like a great block of stone which lies where it lies and takes as much room as it is large, and cannot go beyond its own bounds because it is measured to a definite size both by its bulk and by the stone-power circumscribed in it; it is the first nature and is not measured and limited to a particular prescribed size; on the contrary, other things are measured by it; it is all power which is nowhere limited to a definite quantity.'[23]

[19] IV, 4, 9. [20] V, 8, 9. [21] VI, 5, 9.
[22] VI, 6, 17-18. [23] VI, 5, 11.

The doctrine that the primal nature is measure which cannot be measured is in fact a cardinal one of Plotinus. It is applied to the One;[24] though it is worth noting that the One as absolute unmeasured measure (μέτρον γὰρ αὐτὸ καὶ οὐ μετρούμενον) is not spoken of as 'unbounded'.

Before going on to consider the significance for Christian thought of Plotinus's analysis of the Unbounded, it will be as well to try and sum up and draw a few general conclusions. First, it appears that ἄπειρος for Plotinus means simply 'in some sense without limit (πέρας)', and that when he applies it to real being, to the intelligible world, he uses it most often in a relative, not an absolute sense, of things which are unbounded in one way but limited in another. Proclus's proposition 'All infinitude in things which have Being is infinite neither to the superior orders nor to itself,[25] though it is very different from anything in Plotinus, provides confirmation that it was natural for a Neo-Platonist to use ἄπειρον in a relative rather than an absolute sense. In the thought of Plotinus only the One or Good is infinite in the absolute sense in which we speak of the infinity of God and, as we have seen, he is rather reluctant to speak of the One as unbounded. He will say that his power is unbounded, or that he is the Source of infinity; but he prefers to express the infinity of the One in terms of the 'negative theology', by denying that any of our names or concepts (including 'One' and 'Good'), which necessarily involve limitation, can strictly be applied to him ; and in particular by refusing to apply to him the predicate of existence; for it seems clear to me that when Plotinus says the One 'does not exist' he means what we mean when we say that God is Infinite Being.[26]

Another conclusion which I should like to draw is that Plotinus, by his careful discrimination of the different kinds of unboundedness and the senses in which the term can be used went further than perhaps he himself realized to break down the traditional Greek connexion of unboundedness and evil. His doctrine of the unbounded as principle of evil in the material world already looks like an anomaly in his own system. Here, as in many other ways, he and

[24] V, 5, 4.
[25] El. Th. prop. 93.
[26] Cp. the very important passage V, 5, 6, already referred to.

the little group of conscious and determined anti-Christians of whom he was the central and greatest figure unconsciously did good service to the cause of Christ by bringing Greek philosophical thought into a form more usable by Christians than any before it.

Like all great philosophical works the *Enneads* have the power of stimulating original thought in each succeeding generation of their readers: and contact, direct or indirect, with the philosophy of Plotinus has always had a fertilizing effect on the minds of Christian philosophers and theologians, from the fourth century to our own times. I therefore propose to end this paper by suggesting, as shortly as possible and without making any attempt to cover the whole field of Plotinus's influence on Christian thought, a few ways in which his analysis of the Unbounded has influenced Christian thinkers and may still provoke us ourselves to further speculation.

The idea of the Unbounded as the principle of evil in the material world is one which has been unhesitatingly rejected by most Christian thinkers; as I have suggested, it already seems something of an anomaly in Plotinus's own system. On the other hand the Aristotelian doctrine of ὕλη in the form which it takes in Plotinus's thought about the Unbounded as material principle in the intelligible world has always held an important place in Christian thinking. The idea of a formless substrate and potential tendency to form, deriving its quasi-existence, like created form itself, from God, and of creation in two stages, distinguishable in thought if not successive in time, the creation of unbounded matter and its information to produce definite, particular finite beings, has been the normal one for traditional Christian thinkers. St Augustine expounds it magisterially in Book XII of the *Confessions* and applies it both to the sensible and spiritual creations; the West in general has followed St Augustine and, though St Thomas rejected the Augustinian conception of 'spiritual matter', as far as the sense-world is concerned the normal scholastic doctrine remains very much the same as that of Proclus. This doctrine has provided an exegesis of Genesis i, 2, *terra autem erat inanis et vacua, et tenebrae erant super faciem abyssi*, acceptable to minds trained in Greek philosophy and making possible an apparent harmony of *Genesis* and the *Timaeus*, of Revelation and the greatest of pagan philosophers — though surely very remote from the original meaning of the Hebrew text;

and this has probably been responsible for a great deal of its influence and attractiveness.

But there is another line of Christian thought about the problem of matter which perhaps merits more attention than it has received. This is the idea which we find in the Cappadocian Fathers, St Basil of Caesarea and St Gregory of Nyssa, that material beings are produced by a meeting of purely spiritual and intelligible qualities and that there is no material substratum apart from these qualities.[27] That some approximation to this idea may have existed among some pagan Platonists, is suggested by the passing remark of Plotinus in *Enneads* V, viii, 7 (already referred to) that matter is 'a last and lowest form'; but it is not the normal doctrine of Plotinus or of any Greek philosopher known to us (there is evidence for the existence of a great deal of philosophical activity in the early third century of which we know almost nothing). If it is accepted, of course, the idea of the Unbounded as matter simply disappears from philosophy. The reason why I suggest that it needs serious consideration at the present time is that I am inclined to accept the view recently put forward[28] by Dom Illtyd Trethowan of Downside Abbey, that the whole conception of potency as a metaphysical component of things really belongs to an imperfectly theistic system like that of Aristotle, in which God is the First Mover but not the Creator, the source of being. As Dom Illtyd says 'From the theist's point of view, if a thing changes what follows is that there is a cause capable of producing the change. It is true that the cause can only produce such changes as are compatible with the natures of the things in which the changes are enacted. But this of itself does not seem to warrant us in saying that things have a metaphysical component, an element of "potentiality" out of which fresh "forms" are "educed". All it seems to show is that God builds things (as it were) in layers; if you add X to Y the result is XY, not ZY, but that does not show that X is capable of Y in any sense which involves us in mysterious metaphysical entities.' If this is accepted, something

[27] St Basil *In Hexaemeron* I, 21A-21B. S. Gregory *De hom. opificio* 213C, cp. the very clear exposition by Fr von Balthasar in *Présence et Pensée*, pp. 20-23.

[28] Cp. *The Meaning of Existence* by Dom Mark Pontifex and Dom Illtyd Trethowan, monks of Downside Abbey (Longmans 1953) pp. 118-9. The whole book is a most impressive and valuable contribution to the movement to bring back traditional metaphysics to a greater simplicity and closeness to experience which is apparent in so many places in the Catholic philosophical world.

like the Cappadocian way of looking at the universe as a structure of created forms rather than of form and matter seems to follow. We should notice that this way of regarding creation involves if anything a more radical assertion of the absolute dependence of all created things on God their source than the traditional statements of created dependence in terms of some sort of metaphysical 'composition'; and it therefore enables us to keep what seems to me particularly good and valuable in Plotinus's doctrine of spiritual matter, the idea that derived, dependent intelligence receives its whole existence in submitting itself as 'matter' to its source as 'form', from which a Christian can go on to see the whole of creation as essentially feminine, receptive or rather a reception in its very nature and the proper life of the created intelligence as nothing but a loving turning and opening itself to the Light who is its source.

Plotinus's doctrine of divine infinity, with its hesitations and qualifications, must seem to us chiefly of historical interest; its historical interest is certainly very great, for it is the first bringing together of the ideas of infinity and the divine in a serious and mature Greek philosophy, and did much to bridge the gap between that philosophy and Christianity. But in Jewish and Christian thought, from Philo onwards, it was natural to believe that God was infinite, and his infinity is stated without hesitations or reservations. It was a doctrine which the Fathers had no need to learn from Plotinus, though in its expression, from the fourth century onwards, they took much from his 'negative theology'. Further, there is no room in Christian thought about God for the conception of relative unboundedness which Plotinus elaborated with such care, because there is no room for dependent and subordinate divinities like the Divine Intellect and Soul in Plotinus's system.

Because the Fathers have no hesitation in speaking of God as ἄπειρος they can bring out more clearly than Plotinus the close relationship between his infinity and his incomprehensibility; in their thought and language the two are very closely and frequently conjoined. St John Chrysostom in his sermons *On the Incomprehensibility of God*, brings out the connexion very clearly.[29] We may

[29] Cp. especially I, 705B, 706B where he speaks of the *ἄπειρον καὶ ἄχανες πέλαγος* of the Divine Wisdom and the *ἰλιγγιά* which it produces in the inspired writers who contemplate it.

say that for Plotinus God is ἀκατάληπτος primarily in the sense of 'metaphysically unbounded', without anything outside or beyond him which can limit or contain him, and secondarily only in the sense of 'incomprehensible to the human mind'; for the Fathers, in this following the Scriptures, ἀκατάληπτος means primarily 'incomprehensible to all created minds'. The Scholastic emphasis, however, is much more like that of Plotinus, metaphysical infinity being primary and incomprehensibility secondary; and the difference seems to be not one between pagan and Christian ways of thinking but between the approach of a preacher expounding the Scriptures and that of a professional philosopher or philosophical theologian. There is however another difference which is worth noting. The Fathers when they speak of the infinity and incomprehensibility of God never forget and never allow us to forget that they are speaking of an infinite and incomprehensible Person, however much his infinite personality may transcend the limited personalities of our experience; for they are always speaking of God as he is revealed in the Scriptures. I agree with Professor Paul Henry that Plotinus too thinks of the One or Good as a personal God, possessed of something analogous to what we know as intellect and will in a manner proper to his transcendent unity; but it must be admitted that he very often and quite naturally falls into an impersonal way of speaking and thinking about him, especially when he is considering his relationship to the beings which derive their existence from him. It would, I think, be an entirely misleading generalization to say that the Greek philosophical conception of God is impersonal; rather, there is a continual tension and interplay between personal and impersonal ways of thinking about God which appears as crude, if rather likeable, inconsistency in the Stoics but is also present in subtler forms in the thought of Plato and Aristotle.

The close connexion between the infinity and the incomprehensibility of God in the thought of the Fathers may remind us of a service which Plotinus's 'negative theology' can still do for our Catholic thinking. This is to remind us that when we speak of God as Infinite Being, Infinite Goodness, and so on, the prefixed 'Infinite' is not just an empty and formal compliment to His Divine Majesty. It is to remind us that we are speaking of that which utterly transcends our words and thoughts. Catholic philosophers

and theologians are still perhaps too much inclined to try to catch God in their net of concepts, to think that they can express him well enough for all practical purposes in a tidily arranged set of clear and distinct ideas. So it is good that we should sometimes confront ourselves with even Plotinus's most extreme negations, his statements that the One 'does not think' or 'does not exist', and should realize that they have a genuine and important meaning, that the Mystery before which the angels veil their faces shatters our concepts of being and thought and cannot be contained within them, and that the doctrine of analogy, true and valuable though it is when rightly interpreted, must never be taken to mean that we can comprehend God or are justified in pushing his incomprehensibility into the back of our minds and never adverting to it in practice.

The study of the care which Plotinus takes to distinguish the two different kinds of unboundedness, the '*schlechte Unendlichkeit*' of indefinite, vague material multiplicity, and the divine infinity, is also a useful reminder to us that we are sometimes still inclined to confuse the two. At least, some progressive Catholic humanists seem inclined to argue that because man is *capax infiniti* in one sense, made for the infinity of God, it is therefore, right for him, collectively if not individually to pursue an indefinite multiplicity of pieces of knowledge and of material goods, to accept and even welcome as in some sense truly Christian the Danaid insatiability which is the distinguishing mark of modern technical civilization. This seems to me a confusion of the two infinities, that which is God and that which, not some imaginary material principle of evil, but the concupiscence of our fallen nature introduces into the created universe. And I therefore believe that there is still room and need, not only for asceticism and the warnings of the Fathers about the vice of *curiositas*, but also, especially in the life of the ordinary Christian and in our thinking about the well-being of the community, for the old Greek doctrine of μηδὲν ἄγαν, 'nothing too much', for the cheerful indifference of Socrates and the rigorous moderation of Aristotle. And I believe that we Christians who study and value the ancient literature and thought of the Greeks and Romans have a special responsibility to do our best to see that the teaching of their great moralists and political philosophers in this matter is not altogether forgotten and disregarded.