

THE PLOTINIAN ONE AND ANAXIMANDER'S APEIRON: READING THE APEIRON IN PLOTINUS' FIRST PRINCIPLE

Plotinus (AD 205–270) is the founder of Neoplatonism and his philosophy is mainly influenced by Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism. I propose that the first principle in Plotinus' philosophy, 'The One,' may have been influenced by 6th century BC Anaximander of Miletus' first principle, the *Apeiron*. I provide a brief description of Plotinus' the One and Anaximander's *Apeiron* and suggest that Plotinus may have had access to Anaximander's work. I identify six conceptual similarities between the One and a non-material interpretation of the *Apeiron*. I conclude that there are enough similarities, without the concepts of Plotinus' the One and Anaximander's *Apeiron* being identical, to suggest that Anaximander may have informed Plotinus' first principle philosophy.

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The philosophical work of Plotinus covers a wide range of areas in philosophy, one of which concerns from where everything originates. Much is written on Plotinus' place in the history of philosophy, that is, who he inspired, who he is inspired by, and which schools of thought he belongs to. Plotinus (AD 205–270) is the founder of Neoplatonism and his philosophy is mainly influenced by Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism (Emilsson 2017:i & 9).¹ I propose that Plotinus may also have been influenced by an even more ancient philosopher, namely, Anaximander of Miletus. This would mean that Plotinus was not only influenced by Plato and Aristotle with regards to his philosophy concerning the origin of things. At first glance, Plotinus and Anaximander may not seem to have more in common than the mere fact that they both purported first principles that are responsible for the existence of things. Anaximander, as far as we can tell from the fragment left of his teachings, argued that everything comes from what he called the *Apeiron*, a concept which is still to some degree shrouded in mystery. Plotinus maintained that everything comes from 'The One,' which is the first principle in his philosophy. In this very basic sense, the two philosophers have in common that they believe everything comes from something singular, not plural, and are therefore monists. Not much attention has been paid, however, to the connection (if there is one) between Plotinus' the One and Anaximander's *Apeiron*.

I argue that there may be reason to believe that Plotinus was influenced by Anaximander in regards to the One, despite the lack of many direct references to Anaximander in Plotinus' work. It was, after all, in 6th century Miletus that "the search for unity" emerged into philosophy from the mythical (Sweeney 1972:56) and it would arguably make sense for Plotinus to draw inspiration from the philosophers belonging to that point in time when developing his own philosophical search for unity. At the very least, I posit that there are several similarities between Plotinus' the One and Anaximander's *Apeiron* that warrant a certain amount of attention. First, I shall provide a brief description of Plotinus' the One as provided in chapters 1–3 in *Ennead V* and a brief description of Anaximander's *Apeiron*. Second, I will discuss whether there is reason to believe that Plotinus had access to Anaximander's work, and what kind of access he might have had. Third, I shall give an account of how the two concepts, the One and *Apeiron* are similar. I conclude that despite limited work on this question, there may be grounds to believe that Plotinus was influenced by Anaximander in his notion of the One.

I. 'The One' is Plotinus' first principle. It is also referred to as "The Good," sometimes as "the First,"² "father," and "God."³ It is the first and highest in a system of hyposta-

ses, where the One is the very top of a pyramidal order of being. The bottom of the pyramid is all that is material, which is also seen to be evil – or rather – being in the least perfect state (Emilsson 2017:30 & 63).⁴ The three primary hypostases are the One, Intellect and Soul, respectively. These three hypostases compose what Plotinus calls the "Intelligible realm" (Emilsson 2017:38). They are immaterial, and are more perfect than the material. There is much that can be said on the One in Plotinus' work. In this paper, I shall concentrate on an understanding of the One as Plotinus' first principle.⁵ Plotinus believed that everything originates from the first principle, and as such he can be classified as a monistic philosopher. In this way, every existing thing and all creation can be traced back to the One and originates from it. Plotinus can be classified as a monist because he believes that there is a first principle that is singular, and that the most basic start of existence does not include notions of plurality.

The primary and most obvious similarity between the One and Anaximander's *Apeiron* is that they are both, in a sense, *archés* and first principles that account for the origin of the universe in philosophical and non-mythological terms. It is useful to include some information about the Anaximander fragment, although no comprehensive account will be given by any means. Simplicius says about Anaximander, in his Commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, that:

Of those who declared that the first principle is one, moving and indefinite, Anaximander... said that the indefinite was the first principle and element of things that are, and he was the first to introduce this name for the first principle [i.e., he was the first to call the first principle indefinite]. He says that the first principle is neither water nor any other of the things called elements, but some other nature which is indefinite, out of which come to be all the heavens and the worlds in them. The things that are perish into the things out of which they come to be, according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time, as he says in rather poetical language. (Curd, ed. 1995:12; Curd's brackets)

An extensive interpretation of Anaximander's fragment would be irresponsible to do without extensive knowledge of the Ancient Greek language, so I will rely in part on the scholarship that is done on this fragment in order to understand the different ways one might interpret it.

There are conflicting views in the field of philosophy on how to understand Anaximander's *Apeiron*, and whether Anaximander was a natural philosopher⁶ or whether he should be interpreted in a more theological manner. Scholar of Plotinus, Giannis Stamatellos, notes:

Anaximander's *apeiron* marks a different position from the other Milesians on the material principle of the cosmos. Whereas Thales and Anaximenes define the originative substance as water and air respectively, and thus associate it with a particular material element, Anaximander speaks of an unlimited substance, which lacks any materiality and mortality. (Stamatellos 2007:140)

Some maintain that the *Apeiron* was a material substance, others that it was not. Stamatellos interprets the Anaximander fragment to be something immaterial. Finding any similarity between Anaximander's *Apeiron* and Plotinus' the One depends on how one understands not only the latter, but also the former.

One reader of Anaximander, Aryeh Finkelberg, formulates an interpretation of the *Apeiron* that is *both* material *and* this other quality of the "unchangeable whole," and admits that the *Apeiron* may have had some sort of metaphysical property (Finkelberg 1993:253).⁷ The difficulty Finkelberg struggles with is that Anaximander never calls his *Apeiron* air, nor gives it any other material property (Finkelberg 1993:255). Rather, "Anaximander discovered the possibility of envisaging the higher unity of the manifold as a conceptual unity rather than a material one," (Finkelberg 1993:255) meaning that the *Apeiron* must have been, at least in part, something conceptual. If the *Apeiron* had material qualities it is quite different from Plotinus' the One, which is, by virtue of its absolute perfection, not material in the slightest. Elizabeth Asmis, however, argues that the *Apeiron* is not of any material quality at all (Asmis 1981:287), but that Anaximander was a monist who coined a term for the process of generation, that is, the process by which things come to be (Asmis 1981:279). In part, she bases her argument on ancient sources such as Aëtius and Simplicius, who connect Anaximander's *Apeiron* with the reason for the continued perpetuation of generation (Asmis 1981:297) and because the *Apeiron* itself is beyond ends but is instead something "ungenerated" and "undestroyed" (Asmis 1981:289). There is little evidence from Anaximander himself that settles the matter.

One explanation of the difficulty in deciding whether

or not Anaximander's *Apeiron* was supposed to be something material may be answered by Leo Sweeney, who points out that there was no explicit idea of 'spiritual' as distinct from matter in Anaximander's time (Sweeney 1972:56). Sweeney argues that Anaximander was a theistic philosopher, perhaps in part because philosophy was so nascent and that Anaximander's "intellectual milieu" was "open to infiltration from mythological and religious notions," but also that this era was paradoxically marked by an absence of "explicit distinctions" between the theological and the non-theological (Sweeney 1972:56). Similarly, according to H. B. Gottschalk, "the notion of immaterial being was almost certainly unthinkable in the sixth century B.C." (Gottschalk 1965:50). Then again, Asmis writes that "A monotheism of this type, [...] a single all-powerful deity [...], would not be at all surprising for Anaximander's time" (Asmis 1981:297) suggesting that there are divided opinions in the historical investigation of Anaximander to whether he would be capable of conceiving of an *arché* with divine properties. We may have reason neither to interpret the *Apeiron* as something strictly material, nor as strictly immaterial. We can, however, ask whether Plotinus might have been inspired by those facets of the *Apeiron* that are not strictly material.

II.

For my thesis to have any believable grounds at all, there must be adequate reason to believe that Plotinus had access to Anaximander's work. Plotinus references Anaximander many times, particularly in his second *Ennead* and on the creation of matter (Stamatellos 2007:139). Therefore, we can assume that Plotinus was familiar with Anaximander's *Apeiron*. It is Stamatellos' view that allusions and specific references to the Presocratics in the *Enneads*, including Anaximander, have largely been ignored in modern scholarship and that their significance have not been awarded their due (Stamatellos 2007:2). Although we can be certain that Plotinus knew of Anaximander because there are direct references to him in his text, we can only speculate as to what kind of source material Plotinus may have had. Some scholars suggest that Plotinus only had access to handbooks of the time, not original texts, and thereby that he follows the doxographical tradition on Anaximander of his time (Stamatellos 2007:21), such as Aëtius, Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis* (Stamatellos 2007:132), Hippolytus' *Refutatio* (Stamatellos 2007:124) or, even earlier, Theophrastus who informed Simplicius and Hippolytus (Sweeney 1972:3). According to Stamatellos, this suggestion may be difficult to justify

if based on biographical information or anything from the *Enneads* (Stamatellos 2007:21). Stamatellos disputes Eusebius' testimony that Presocratic texts were scarce in Plotinus' day due to the abundance of Presocratic quotations in Neoplatonic work (Stamatellos 2007:21). He argues that it is not so unlikely that Plotinus had direct access to primary texts instead of mere doxographical handbooks, and that he almost certainly had some original Presocratic texts, such as Parmenides' poem (Stamatellos 2007:20). I rely in part on contemporary scholars to grasp Anaximander's *Apeiron* – as well as ancient sources such as Simplicius, who came after Plotinus – because there is reason to believe that the notion of Anaximander's *Apeiron* was a debated issue also in Plotinus' time (Stamatellos 2007:140–141). Therefore, I posit that Simplicius, who relied on earlier sources and must have been informed by earlier debates, is a valuable source in the attempt to understand the *Apeiron* from a Plotinian point of view.

Plotinus read the ancient Greek philosophers independently and ventured his own interpretations of their texts (Emilsson 2017:34 & Stamatellos, 2007:19). This indicates that he may have been inspired by others such as Anaximander, rather than solely Plato and Aristotle, whom he is generally taken to be influenced by. P.A. Meijer claims that Plotinus considered himself interpreter of "Plato's hidden system" and that the One is "obviously based on Plato's *Parmenides*" (Meijer 1992:22–23).⁸ Stamatellos, on the other hand, argues that Plato's *Parmenides* has been mistakenly accredited at points in the *Enneads* where the Presocratic Parmenides should have been accredited and furthermore, that these relate to the Intellect, not the One (Stamatellos 2007:32). Plotinus even veers from the Parmenidean tradition that Being is derived from non-Being (Stamatellos 2007:66).⁹ Although Stamatellos states that Plato was a major influence for Plotinus, he finds that Plotinus credits Presocratic significance as "original authorities and authentic thinkers" (Stamatellos 2007:27). Plotinus does not treat Plato's and Aristotle's preceding philosophical accounts as unquestionable authorities, but rather as earlier attempts at grappling with serious philosophical problems that are worth re-examining (Stamatellos 2007:8). One example of Plotinus' independent thinking is that Aristotle says, referring to Anaximander's *Apeiron*, that "the infinite body cannot be one and simple" (Sweeney 1972:4), which is directly oppositional to Plotinus' notion of the One. Stamatellos even posits that Plotinus' interpretation of the Presocratics show signs of "greater acquaintance" with their texts than Plato or Aristotle, displaying more sympathy toward them

than Plato's sometimes negative or ironic attitude to the Presocratics (Stamatellos 2007:173). He argues, for instance, that Armstrong erroneously attributes Plotinus' reference of the "extremely ancient philosophers" in *Ennead* VI.1.1 to Aristotle's discussion of the Presocratics in the *Metaphysics* (Stamatellos 2007:26–27). Stamatellos states that while the *Metaphysics* is certainly relevant in this passage, it is not the Presocratic *arché* – discussed by Aristotle – that is the subject in this part of Plotinus' text, but rather, the kinds of being, suggesting that Plotinus may have had other sources to rely on (Stamatellos 2007:27). In light of these insights, it may seem to be the case that Plotinus may have read more of Anaximander than we know for certain. It seems he may have had access to the same information as did, for example, Simplicius, who discusses and preserves some original text by Anaximander in *Physica*. That being said, Plotinus typically adopted vocabulary of his own time (Emilsson 2017:25), as well as Aristotelian vocabulary such as "substance" (*ousia*), 'act' ('activity,' 'actuality,' *energeia*) and psychological distinctions such as 'rational,' 'perceptive' and 'vegetative'" (Emilsson 2017:31) instead of those of the earlier Greeks. This means that if there are traces of the *Apeiron* in the One, they will not be expressed in Anaximandean terms.¹⁰ Therefore, there is reason to believe that Plotinus did have access to Anaximander's teachings, that he acknowledged Anaximander's authority as an ancient philosopher, and that he ventured his own independent reading of Anaximander, which may have led to Anaximander's influence on Plotinus' the One.

III.

Plotinus and Anaximander were both monists in that they both claimed that everything comes from one single something. In order to defend my claim that Plotinus may have been somewhat influenced by Anaximander in his notion of the One, it must be shown that there are more similarities than the obvious, very general ones. Stamatellos does not mention Anaximander as someone who could have inspired Plotinus' notion of the One,¹¹ but instead accredits him the Plotinian "concepts of matter" (Stamatellos 2007:2).¹² He does on some occasions, however, include evidence to support my claim that there are elements of Anaximander's *Apeiron* in the Plotinian One.¹³ In this section I will point out some features of Plotinus' conception of the One, and how these features resemble traits similar to that of a conceptual understanding of the *Apeiron*. Undoubtedly there will be more to say about Plotinus' the One than can be expressed in this paper, but I will present a short list of features of the One for purposes of outlining

a basic understanding of it as first principle of existence, and how these resemble the *Apeiron*: Firstly, the One is the origin of all things. Secondly, the One is beyond being. Thirdly, the One is absolutely simple and perfect, which entails production. Fourth, the One is infinite. Fifth, the One is negatively defined because it is prior to and the cause of opposition. Finally, the One is needed and desired by all other beings and they wish to return to it.

(1) Ultimate Origin: Plotinus claims that the One is the ultimate origin of all and seems to take this as a given, established fact. He seems more interested in asking why or how things came into existence. The question of the reality of the One, however, seems for Plotinus to already have been settled in philosophy:

And how did [Intellect] come into existence at all and arise from the One [...]? For the soul now knows that these things must be, but longs to answer the question repeatedly discussed also by the ancient philosophers, how from the One, if it is such as we say it is, anything else, whether a multiplicity or a dyad or a number, came into existence, and why it did not on the contrary remain by itself, but such a great multiplicity flowed from it as that which is seen to exist in beings, but which we think it right to refer back to the One. (*Ennead* V.1.6)

In this passage, Plotinus states, among other things, that we know that everything comes from the one. Furthermore, he states that all these things that exist have multiplicity as a quality of their existence, but by virtue of their existence and their multiplicity they also refer back to the One because the One is simple and because it is their ultimate origin. Although this passage is mostly focused on the question of *how* rather than *that* all existence comes from the One, the premise that everything does come from the One is clearly communicated.

This premise that everything comes from the One is simply logical for Plotinus. Because everything must have an origin, it must be that something is nothing but the originator.¹⁴ Much like the One is the generator and ultimate origin of all things for Plotinus, the *Apeiron* is for Anaximander that "out of which come to be all the heavens and the worlds in them" (Curd, ed. 1995:12). Scholars of Anaximander often remark that things that exist come to be in terms of opposition to one another (Sweeney 1972:5 & 7). This is because beings are beings in terms of opposition, particularity and distinguishability. This is also the reason why they may perish, "according to necessity"

in Anaximander's words, when they cease to be opposite to each other and lose their independence and distinguishability; for without opposition they are the same, and without opposition to anything they are absolutely simple and the same as the first principle. The opposites, viz., the things that are, are "multiple and in conflict" (Sweeney 1972:61). The opposites, however, do not exist in the *Apeiron*, but are rather produced by it, the *Apeiron* being "simply other than them all because it is their origin" (Sweeney 1972:58). As such, the *Apeiron* contains no opposites or particularities but is simple despite being generator of all multiplicity. For Plotinus, "What comes from him [i.e. the One] cannot be the same as himself" (*Ennead* V.3.15) the simple principle must also be the first, not already containing plurality. This is the case also for Anaximander. The *Apeiron* "...does not have a first principle, but this seems to be the first principle of the rest [...] and this is divine" (Curd, ed. 1995:12).¹⁵ The *Apeiron*, like the One, is the origin of all things and cannot really be grasped as "something." Plotinus writes, "It is because there is nothing in [the One] that all things come from it: in order that being may exist, the One is not being, but the generator of being" (*Ennead* V.2.1). Here, Plotinus explains the necessity of the One as generator. The first principle must necessarily also have some special feature in order to be generator of everything, namely, that there is nothing in it as Plotinus states. For if there were something in it, that something would also need a maker or a cause. It is because the One is the origin of all things that it cannot really be anything in the strict sense.

(2) Beyond Being: The idea of not being anything, while also being the origin of all things, seems paradoxical. This problem does not seem lost on Plotinus, who writes, "The One is all things and not a single one of them." (*Ennead* V.2.1) In order to provide an answer to this paradox, Plotinus explains that it is not a being, but a principle of being. (*Ennead* V.2.1) While Stamatellos holds that Plotinus was the first to articulate a transcendent being (Stamatellos 2007:24), Emilsson in a sense similarly claims that the radical simplicity of the One is a "crucial step beyond his predecessors" (Emilsson 2017:75). According to Emilsson, the One is beyond being because it is simple: "The One is beyond being in the sense that there is nothing we can say that it is: if we said it was just or brave or whatever, we would, Plotinus thinks, be presuming distinctions [plurality] within it" (Emilsson 2017:63). Because being implies multiplicity, and because the One

is the utmost simplicity, it cannot be a being in this sense. That is not to say that it does not exist, however.¹⁶ Rather, the One is beyond being. It is, in the words of Stamatellos, something that "transcends being" (Stamatellos 2007:24). As such, we must understand the One as a transcendental principle of being; something that is so simple that it cannot be *per se*, but nonetheless exists as a first principle.

It is certainly one possible interpretation of the *Apeiron* that it could be something beyond the material sphere, since it is very carefully not attributed any material quality (Finkelberg 1993:255). Furthermore, if one thinks like Plotinus that the first principle is the cause of all things, it cannot also be one of those things of which it is the cause. The properties of the first being necessitates some transcendent feature and sort of 'being beyond being.' In other words, if the *Apeiron* is the cause of everything, it cannot itself be part of that 'everything.' Apparently, this would also not be inconsistent with Anaximander's thought. Anaximander "accepted as an unquestioned fact that one thing could arise out of another [without being contained by the other], as day arises out of night and spring out of winter" (Sweeney 1972:58; Sweeney's brackets). In other words, Anaximander thought that things could be generated from something that was not like it, or that being came from 'beyond being.' In fact, Sweeney actually finds that Plotinus' the One is similar to Anaximander's *Apeiron* in this way, namely, that the One is the cause of all things but does not itself contain them (Sweeney 1972:58). Because Anaximander had no easy way of saying that his *Apeiron* was transcendental during his time (Sweeney 1972:56), I can only suggest that not attributing any definite characteristics to it meant that it was not something that existed physically, like the things it produced. Instead, it was supposed to be some sort of divinity or 'beyondness,' similar to Plotinus' first principle as the cause of everything.

(3) Production and Perfection: Two necessitating factors of the One's existence "beyond being" is (A) that it produces being, and (B) that it is perfect. Sometimes, it seems that for Plotinus these two things, production and perfection, are more or less the same thing (Emilsson 2017:73). According to Emilsson, "the principle invoked to explain anything is more unified than that of which it is the principle" (Emilsson 2017:45). This means that whatever the One produces, i.e., being, these products are less unified than its producer. It also follows that on top of the production chain, the first principle is also most unitary.

It is because the One is the origin of all things that it cannot really be anything in the strict sense.

In this way, it may be helpful to think of the concept of the One, or the singular, as something that does not really exist in our world, because everything in the lower realms is multiple. The concept of the One exists as opposing to all multiplicities. The idea of being nothing but one, "being beyond being," is foreign to us. In order to understand the multiplicities in our world, however, we must think of singularity. That is how all multiplicity ultimately refers to singularity. In order for multiplicity to exist, so must necessarily singularity exist. The One is the absolute origin because it produces, and everything has to be less perfect than its maker, so the One must be the most perfect, which also necessitates its existence "beyond being" (Emilsson 2017:387).¹⁷ Because the One is beyond being, Plotinus finds that the effects, or products of the One may be called "the first act of generation." This generation is also a symptom of the One's perfection.¹⁸ For Plotinus, "the One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself" (*Ennead* V.2.1). The One is independent and needs nothing to sustain itself, which is in contrast to every other being, which can all trace their existence back to the One and depend on it to exist (*Ennead* V.3.15). In this sense, perfection and production go hand in hand.

Anaximander's *Apeiron* is similarly perfect in the sense that it is not composite or containing its opposites or multiplicity (Sweeney 1972:57). Sweeney's interpretation of Anaximander's *Apeiron* finds that it must have been simple and that the likelihood of Anaximander conceiving of the "opposites" present inside the *Apeiron* is low (Sweeney 1972:58). Anaximander, like Plotinus, links the *Apeiron* with perfection and godliness (Sweeney 1972:65). If the *Apeiron* were limited, "it could not perform its unique causal function" (Sweeney 1972:57). In other words, it is as necessary for the *Apeiron* to be perfect – in order to produce everything that is – as it is necessarily so for the One. Anaximander's *Apeiron* is perfect because it is "by nature the Infinite," as well as being self-moving, intelligent, divine, and – according to Sweeney – physical (Sweeney 1972:65). While the material question has already been discussed, the idea that the *Apeiron* is in motion may differ from the Plotinian notion of first principle. Admittedly, the two concepts are not identical, and nor should they be, each having been conceived centuries apart. The sta-

tic notion of the One is not, however, the whole story. Indeed, Emilsson quotes Plotinus as saying that the activity is "entirely" the One because there is no distinction between the agent and the activity (Emilsson 2017:84). In fact, Stamatellos claims that in this regard Plotinus differs from Parmenides' "immobile non-plural unity of Being" (Stamatellos 2007:65).

Another production similarity is that the One does not directly produce being, but rather, its emanation does. Its emanation is indefinite and can be understood as potential intellect (Emilsson 2017:94). Similarly, in the *Stromateis*, Anaximander's *Apeiron* is described as producing "that which is productive [...] of hot and cold was separated off" from the *Apeiron* (Sweeney 1972:4). One argument in support of the simplicity of the *Apeiron* is that the opposites are not separated directly from the *Apeiron*, but from the *gonimon* as an intermediary step similar to emanation from the One. This productive thing that first separates off from the *Apeiron*, viz., the *gonimon*, can be understood as potential opposition or "generating power," and has been interpreted by some scholars¹⁹ to mean that being does not come from the first

principle itself, but from that which is separated off from it (Sweeney 1972:32).²⁰ If so, this *gonimon* is reminiscent of the One's emanation, allowing the *Apeiron* to be a simple, non-composite entity. The One's emanation corresponds to its external activity, which can be understood as the first Other to the One (Emilsson 2017:94).²¹ Understood as such, Anaximander's *Apeiron* is – much like Plotinus' One – conceived of as a condition rather than a direct cause of being (Emilsson 2017:77), whose first Other is where being-as-plurality begins.

(4) Eternality: The One and Anaximander's *Apeiron* are both infinite principles. Plotinus directly links perfection to infinity: "The One is always perfect and therefore produces everlastingly" (*Ennead* V.1.6). He conceives of the One as something eternal and infinite, despite often referring to it in terms that are used to describe the passing of time. In the following passage he addresses this apparent contradiction:

When we are discussing eternal realities we must not let coming into being in time be an obstacle to our thought; in the discussion we apply the word "becoming" to them in attributing to them causal connection and order, and must therefore state that what

comes into being from the One does so without the One being moved: for if anything came into being as a result of the One's being moved, it would be the third starting from the One, not the second, since it would come after the movement. (*Ennead* V.1.6)

In this passage Plotinus admits that he refers to that which is timeless, or rather, beyond time in ways that might sound like the One is subject to time. He refers specifically to the use of the term “becoming” when something is produced by the One. The One, in light of the brief discussion on activity in the One above, does not move or change, because that would then be a quality of the One that would come into being before its emanation, or rather, “potential intellect” (Emilsson 2017:94). It might help to think of the One as being infinite in the sense that it is beyond being, and therefore also beyond such things as time and space. For Plotinus, the One “since it is the cause of existence and self-sufficiency, is not itself existence but beyond it and beyond self-sufficiency” (*Ennead* V.3.17). If time is something that can be said to exist, that too must owe its existence to the first principle. One cannot let the temporal conception of coming into being disturb the notion of ‘eternal realities’ such as the One. The other hypostases of the intelligible realm, Soul and Intellect, are also “true beings” beyond time and space (Emilsson 2017:173), and so the term “becoming” is in this context a sign of causality and order, not of time.

Anaximander's *Apeiron* is also perfect and infinite. This similarity is not lost on Sweeney, who writes that the *Apeiron* “is a god whose very reality is infinite,” dissimilar from first principles in Pythagoras, Plato or Aristotle, but similar to Plotinus', despite the “allowances made” for differences between the two notions (Sweeney 1972:65). Plotinus rejects the idea that something material can be infinite or limitless (Stamatellos 2007:139). Aristotle said about Anaximander's *Apeiron* in his *Physics* that it had no starting point, “since in that case it would have a limit” (Sweeney 1972:3). We can think that if Plotinus finds Anaximander's *Apeiron* to be infinite, he also finds that it could not have been material. Nevertheless, in *Ennead* II Plotinus seems to interpret the *Apeiron* more as indefinite than limitlessness or infinite deity, which for Plotinus means that the *Apeiron* is something more like an “indefinite substratum of beings,” namely, the essence of matter (Stamatellos 2007:142). This is quite the opposite to Plotinus' the One. Granted, if the only way Plotinus read Anaximander was in the context of the sensible realm and the creation of matter, the thesis that Anaximander's

Apeiron is a forerunner to the Plotinian One is dubitable.

Perhaps, then, it is more appropriate to say that Anaximander's *Apeiron* might have a connection to the becoming of matter from the Intelligible realm, not to the One. This would certainly seem to go together with Stamatellos' treatment of Plotinus' discussion of matter and Anaximander in *Ennead* II. As such, the *Apeiron* is “that unqualified immaterial and immortal substance that is the source of qualified, material, and mortal things in the cosmos” (Stamatellos 2007:140). This sounds more like a distinction between the intelligible and the sensible realm, rather than that between being and origin. Despite this concession, I hold that the similarities between the One and Anaximander's *Apeiron* are worth accounting for. One may note, for instance, that Plotinus uses the same name of the *Apeiron* (ἄπειρον) in his description of the One, which means “without limits” (Stamatellos 2007:34). There is still value in noting that both of the first principles share this trait of being beyond time and space.

(5): Apophatism: Plotinus' difficulty in trying to express or explain what the One is has been remarked by several scholars, as well as Anaximander's evasive description of the *Apeiron*. It is common to refer to this way of speaking of the One, which cannot really be spoken of – it cannot really *be* anything that is because it *is* the origin of all that *is* – as “negative theology.”²² Plotinus is acutely aware of this issue:

[The One] is, therefore, truly ineffable: for whatever you say about it, you will always be speaking of a “something”. But “beyond all things and beyond the supreme majesty of Intellect” is the only one of all the ways of speaking of it which is true; it is not its name, but says that it is not one of all things and “has no name,” because we can say nothing of it: we only try, as far as possible, to make signs to ourselves about it. (*Ennead* V.3.13)

Plotinus concedes that we cannot know the One (*Ennead* V.3.12) and therefore the One is ineffable. Plotinus here establishes a limit to knowledge, and claims that the One is beyond that limit. The One is not included in “all things” and cannot be reduced to any name or signifier of knowledge. He therefore concedes that all we can do is attempt, as far as might be possible, to grasp such a concept and “make signs to ourselves about it.” In other words, to understand the One is an impossible task because we cannot say what it is. What we can know, however, are the

effects of the One, which are apparent to us according to Plotinus. He writes that, “we say what [the One] is not, but we do not say what it is: so that we speak about it from what comes after it” (*Ennead* V.3.14). When attempting to define the One, Plotinus instead states that we have to turn what the One produces or is the cause of, in order to try to grasp it.

Part of this difficulty of understanding the One is due to the fact that it is the first principle and cannot be understood on the basis of understanding anything else. Other things may perhaps be compared or contrasted to *it*, but the One itself, being beyond everything, cannot be understood by means of how we normally understand things. This is because the One is, of course, the originating cause of difference. Only from the beginning of difference, opposition, multiplicity and Other can we begin, albeit paradoxically, to discuss the notion of the One. According to Stamatellos, the following excerpt exemplifies this:

For since the nature of the One is generative of all things it is not any one of them. It is not therefore something or qualified or quantitative or intellect or soul; it is not in movement or at rest; not in place, not in time, but “itself by itself” of single, or rather formless, being, before all form, before movement and before rest; for these pertain to being and are what make it many. (*Ennead* VI.9.3)

Stamatellos notes that Plotinus is describing the One in terms of negation, often even negating the negation, i.e., by being neither in movement nor rest in order to explain its radical singularity. While Emilsson connects this apophatism to Plato's *Parmenides* (Emilsson 2017:80), Stamatellos connects this negating of concepts to the “negative apprehension” of Anaximander's *Apeiron* as separate from the cosmos, without temporal, spatial, qualitative or quantitative limits, unborn, indestructible, inexhaustible, and unidentifiable (Stamatellos 2007:35–36). Aëtius even accuses Anaximander of having “failed” in his account of the *Apeiron* on the basis of not having really said what it is (Couprie & Kocandrle 2013:63–64). Understood as such, the *Apeiron* nearly looks like the Plotinian notion of perfection.

Because of this difficulty in grasping the first principles, due to their radical singularity, the two philosophers resort also to metaphors, imagery and poetical language. Plotinus is accused of using words “metaphorically as a hint and cannot be taken at face value” (Emilsson 2017:66), while Anaximander is accused of resorting to

“poetical language” by Simplicius. Armstrong notes:

It is interesting that Plotinus finds the poetic possession (for Plato a state far inferior to the clear knowledge of the philosopher) a suitable analogy for our highest awareness, that of the One, and that it is for him a kind of knowledge (though not knowledge of the One) which it certainly is not for Plato. (Armstrong in Henderson (ed.) 1984:120–121 fn. 3)

This particular choice is obviously at a cost of clarity, but nevertheless a clarity that cannot be reached, precisely because of the ineffability of the principles. In this way, both Plotinus and Anaximander implicitly state that there might be a limit to human knowledge, and that to know the first principle clearly is impossible for such beings as plural and complex as us. They both find that they must do so “poetically,” which one might not be equally able to say about Plato's work on first principles.

(6) Morality: Things that are and that exist ultimately depend on their maker, and need their cause in order to exist. Sometimes in Plotinus' texts, it seems as if everything that exists desires to return somehow to their maker, or origin: “Everything longs for its parent and loves it, especially when parent and offspring are alone; but when the parent is the highest good, the offspring is necessarily with him and separate from him only in otherness” (*Ennead* V.1.6).²³ Plotinus invokes the bonds of family, and the notion of some innate desire to return to childhood or to return to the parent altogether and relinquish any form of independent existence. He also addresses the “first relationship,” the one between the One and the Intellect, as some sort of very special relationship, namely, that the only thing separating Intellect from the One – and that beside from this factor they are together – is that there is otherness. We must infer from this that otherness is what makes Intellect a being of its own, and furthermore, that this otherness is what allows for separation from the One. Plurality and otherness are obstacles for unity with the One. This otherness might also, however, be something that the offspring resents because it keeps it away from perfection and goodness in the highest degree. Perhaps the children long to return to the parent because it is the most perfect and the most Good. When Plotinus mentions this longing, he employs value-laden language, metaphors and imagery.

This value-laden way of expression is present in descriptions of Anaximander's *Apeiron* as well. Whereas One is also the Good, there is a notion of justice in the *Apeiron*.

According to Simplicius, there is this idea that opposites may return to the *Apeiron* and cease to be because their very independent existence is unjust.²⁴ It is interesting to note that in both cases, multiplicity and existence have some immoral connections; imperfect and evil in Plotinus (at least for lower levels of generation), and unjust in Anaximander. The Intellect and Soul are, after all, eternal too. This notion of justice, however, is what brings scholars to think that Anaximander believed in cyclical generation and destruction, and that things “perish” into the *Apeiron* as well as are generated by it (Asmis 1981:282). If one does not think that this cyclicity could be another type of eternality, this differs from the Plotinian notion that the sensible world is eternal with no beginning and no end (Emilsson 2017:40). It does not seem to be so for Plotinus as it is for Anaximander, that beings can return to their maker. According to Stamatellos, however, there is reason to believe that Plotinus links the motion of the cosmos or “heavenly bodies” to Anaximander according to the testimony of Aëtius, as well as to Plato (Stamatellos 2007:132).

In terms of generation, Plotinus makes it clear that it is not possible to ascend, but only to regress further toward multiplicity (*Ennead* V.3.16). This is not in conflict with generation in the *Apeiron*, where of course, things cease to be if they reunite with the *Apeiron*. Nevertheless, Plotinus still somewhat strangely expresses this longing to reunite (*Ennead* V.1.6). If this reunion with the One is at all possible for Plotinus, plurality must become so simple that they become somehow at one with the One. For Anaximander, it is this very otherness that eventually must be relinquished in destruction that I find to be expressed in that very “retribution” to one another for “injustice” that is expressed in poetical language. There is not really much on reuniting with the One and relinquishing independent existence in Plotinus.²⁵ Some passages in the *Enneads* nevertheless suggest a longing to return, and relinquishing of independence, of which there also can be found traces in Anaximander’s philosophy.

IV.

To conclude, I have presented a brief account of Plotinus’ One and Anaximander’s *Apeiron*, and suggest that Plotinus may have had enough information and source material on Anaximander to be so well acquainted with his work that he might have had his own interpretation of Anaximander’s *Apeiron*. They both argue that there is a beginning without a beginning, i.e. a first principle or cause that is the cause of everything, which is fixed, is pri-

mary, and necessary for all other things. Admittedly, these kinds of similarities can be true of many monists. I argue that there are enough similarities, however – without the concepts of Plotinus’ the One and Anaximander’s *Apeiron* being identical – to suggest that there might be some sort of link between the two concepts. In light of the six similarities I have presented in this paper, between the monisms of Anaximander and Plotinus, I have suggested that Anaximander may even have been a source of inspiration in Plotinus’ articulation of the One. Perhaps one may even cautiously suggest that further research should be done to inquire into whether Plotinus’ One was – at least in part – inspired by Anaximander’s *Apeiron*. Of course, a source of inspiration is never entirely the same as what it has come to be inspired by and there will always remain differences that must be accounted for.

I maintain that there are grounds to believe that Plotinus may have been more than merely indirectly influenced by Anaximander, specifically in the part of his work that deals with the One. I believe that further investigation on the topic would be worthwhile, and grant that my position may need to be modified in order to accommodate similarities between Anaximander’s *Apeiron* and Plotinus’ Intelligible realm as a whole. Perhaps the Intelligible realm is closer to a Plotinian understanding of the *Apeiron* than the One, and there may be even more evidence to support this. In either case, when studying the notion of generation and origin in Plotinus, a close reading of Anaximander’s *Apeiron* seems appropriate.

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NOTES

- ¹Plotinus has been the greatest contributor to Platonism aside from Plato himself (Emilsson 2017:9).
- ²*Ennead* VI.9.3.14–22, credit to Meijer 1992:124.
- ³As found in *Ennead* V.1 (trans. Armstrong).
- ⁴Because the notion of evil is a complicated one in the history of philosophy, I shall refrain from a discussion of what evil is in this short paper. Rather, I will refer to Plotinus’ conception of the material as imperfection, which often believed to be how Plotinus conceives of the material sphere when referring to it as evil. It is evil because it is as far removed from ‘the One’/‘the Good’ as possible.
- ⁵Although I refer to several works that examine Plotinus’ the One as it is presented in the entirety of Plotinus’ work, I primarily base my own reading of Plotinus’ the One from the first three chapters of *Ennead* V; 1. On the Three Primary Hypostases; 2. On the Origin and Order of the Beings Which Come After the First; 3. On the Knowing Hypostases and That Which Is Beyond.
- ⁶See for instance “Anaximander’s ‘Apeiron’” by H. B. Gottschalk for an account of the debate on the nature of the *Apeiron* and a defense for the view that the *Apeiron* is something material.
- ⁷Aryeh Finkelberg discusses three possible interpretations of the *Apeiron*, (1) *Apeiron* as an airy *arché* similar to that of Anaximenes (Finkelberg 1993:241); (2) *Apeiron* as an eternal generator and unchangeable ‘whole’ (Finkelberg 1993:250) and; (3) she concludes that the *Apeiron* must have been both airy and an unchangeable ‘whole,’ in order to reconcile two somewhat irreconcilable claims (Finkelberg 1993:254).
- ⁸One objection to my argument is that, despite the similarities I will present in section III between Anaximander’s *Apeiron* and the One, Plotinus may have had similar inspiration from others. Plato’s *Parmenides* is generally believed to be Plotinus’ main inspiration for the One. The scope of this paper does not permit an extensive study of Plato’s *Parmenides* and whether there is something that Plotinus could have inherited from Anaximander that he did not from Plato. Such a discovery would, of course, be of great asset to my thesis. Nonetheless, I maintain that evidence will be presented to show that such a study may be warranted.
- ⁹Stamatellos does, however, believe that Plotinus derives the One from Plato’s Good, which is “beyond being” (Stamatellos 2007:70).
- ¹⁰Other examples given by Emilsson are: ‘attribute’ (‘accident,’ *kata symbebēkōs*); ‘forms’ (*eidē*) (of bodies and in the soul); ‘power’ (‘potentia,’ ‘potency,’ ‘faculty,’ *dynamis*) (Emilsson 2017:31).
- ¹¹Stamatellos claims that the Presocratics who “foreshadowed” the

concept of the One include Heraclitus, Empedocles, Pythagoras and Anaxagoras (Stamatellos 2007:2).

¹²Stamatellos argues that Anaxagoras has been greatly influential for Plotinus in his notion of the One (Stamatellos 2007:57). I will not attempt to argue that Anaxagoras hasn’t been influential, but rather, that Anaximander also was influential for Plotinus in this regard.

¹³According to Stamatellos, “Plotinus sets out his own interpretation of Anaximander’s principle and to some extent appears to agree with it” (Stamatellos 2007:140), in contrast to how he is quite critical of theories of other Presocratics such as Empedocles, Anaxagoras and the Atomists (Stamatellos 2007:142). This agreement is rooted, however, according to Stamatellos, and at least in part, in Plotinus’ idea of material indefiniteness. Stamatellos takes issue with Armstrong, who claims that Plotinus’ criticism of Anaximander shows how closely he is following the Peripatetic tradition (Stamatellos 2007:140).

¹⁴Emilsson writes something similar, “[Plotinus] rather assumes that since there is plurality in Intellect it needs a further principle, and argues that this principle must be of a different kind” (Emilsson 2017:71).

¹⁵This passage is from Aristotle’s *Physics* 3.4 203b10–15.

¹⁶It has been noted that Plotinus did not have the vocabulary to express a distinction between “being” and “existing” (Emilsson 2017:76).

¹⁷For Aristotle, to be is to be unified, but the One is exempt from this, as it is beyond being, being instead “sheer unity,” not merely unified (Emilsson 2017:387).

¹⁸Therefore only the “next greatest” can come from the One. This production needs that which it comes from, and because it comes directly from the One it can also see it. The One, by contrast, does not need its product. It is, after all, already perfect by itself. The superabundance of the One that leads to production from it is, actually, not the purpose of the One, but rather some side-effect of its perfection (*Ennead* V.2).

¹⁹Sweeney mentions Paul Seligman in this context (Sweeney 1972:32).

²⁰This can be supported by ancient descriptions of Anaximander’s *Apeiron*; pseudo-Plutarch, *Miscellanies* 179.2: “He declares that what arose from the eternal and is productive of [or, capable of giving birth to] hot and cold was separated off at the coming to be of this cosmos...” (Curd, ed. 1995:12).

²¹According to Emilsson, the distinction between internal and external activity runs through every Plotinian principle down to soul and is crucial for an understanding of causation in the Plotinian system” (Emilsson 2017:51).

²²Emilsson refers to this apophatism as “negative theology” (Emilsson 2017:80).

²³This passage reminds us of the initial words of the fifth *Ennead*, namely, of the image of the father and the child that has forgotten him (*Ennead* V.1.6).

²⁴See my introductory remarks on the Anaximander fragment.

²⁵Meijer finds that Plotinus seems to “allude to a periodical(?) return to the One” (Meijer 1992:39 footnote 139). There are in Plotinus notions of “returning” to the one for souls to become virtuous (Meijer 1992:39).