

RADEK CHLUP

PROCLUS

AN INTRODUCTION



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PROCLUS

Proclus of Lycia (412–485) was one of the greatest philosophers of antiquity, producing the most systematic version of late Neoplatonic thought. He exercised enormous influence on Byzantine, Medieval, Renaissance and German Classical philosophy, ranking among the top five of ancient philosophers in terms of the number of preserved works. Despite this he is rarely studied now, the enormous intricacy of his system making the reading of his treatises difficult for beginners. This book provides the first comprehensive introduction to all the basic areas of Proclus' thought. It carefully guides the reader through his metaphysics, theology, epistemology, and theory of evil, as well as his sophisticated philosophy of religion. It also sets Proclus in the historical, social and religious context of late antiquity, offering a synthetic account that will appeal to historians and students of ancient religion.

RADEK CHLUP is a lecturer at the Institute for Philosophy and Religious Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague. He specializes in Greek philosophy and religion as well as in general methodology for the study of religion.

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It was not until 2006, though, that I actually returned to Proclus and started to write this book. Originally, it was written in Czech as an introduction to my translation of Proclus' essay *On the Objections of Plato against Homer and the Art of Poetry*, published in Prague in 2009. Already in 2007, however, my good old friend Christoph Helmig (one of the original participants in my Dublin Proclus seminar) persuaded me to prepare an expanded English version as well. Christoph supported me throughout: not only did he give me excellent comments on several chapters (particularly on my treatment of Proclus' epistemology), but he also scanned for me numerous articles unavailable in my country.

The preliminary Czech version of the book was read carefully by several of my Prague friends. Particularly helpful were the comments provided by Matyáš Havrda (who was the editor of the Czech book), Vojtěch Hladký (who spent hours discussing various issues with me, and as an expert on Michel Foucault inspired me to write the experimental account that is now in [chapter 9](#)) and Filip Karfík (whose sharp criticism helped me to completely reorganize the book in its English version).

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Editions and abbreviations of ancient works

EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS OF PROCLUS' TEXTS*

- Chal. phil.* *Eclogæ de philosophia Chaldaica*: in *Oracles Chaldaïques: Avec un choix de commentaires anciens*, texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places, troisième tirage revu et corrigé par A. Segonds, Paris: Belles Lettres, 1996³ [I refer to fragment number, page and line].
- De dec. dub.,
De prov., De mal.* *Procli Diadochi tria opuscula (De providentia, libertate, malo)*, latine Guilelmo de Moerbeka vertente et græce ex Isaacii Sebastocratoris aliorumque scriptis collecta, [edidit Helmut Boese], Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1960 [I refer to treatise, chapter and line].
- Proclus: On the Existence of Evils*, trans. by Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel, London: Duckworth, 2003.
- Proclus: On Providence*, trans. by Carlos Steel, London: Duckworth, 2007.
- De sacr.* *Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques grecs*, publié sous la direction de Joseph Bidez . . . [et al.], tome VI, Bruxelles: Lamertin, 1928, s. 148–51 [I refer to page and line].
- 'Proclus: On the Priestly Art According to the Greeks', appendix in Brian Copenhaver, 'Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus, and the Question of a Philosophy of Magic in the Renaissance,' in I. Merkel and A. G. Debus (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library / London: Associated University Presses, 1988, 103–5 [Ficino's Latin translation is reprinted on pp. 106–8, the Greek text of Bidez on pp. 108–10].
- ET* *Proclus: The Elements of Theology*, a revised text, with translation, introduction and commentary by E. R. Dodds,

* I only list those editions and English translations which I have used. A complete list of editions and translations is available at <http://www.hiw.kuleuven.be/dwmc/plato/proclus/proclused.html>.

- Oxford: Clarendon, 1963 (1933¹) [I refer to proposition and line within it].
- Hymni* *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary*, by R. M. van den Berg, Leiden: Brill, 2001 [I refer to the number of hymn and line within it].
- In Alc.* *Proclus: Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato*, critical text and indices by L. G. Westerink, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1954 [I refer to section and line within it].
Proclus: Alcibiades I, trans. by William O'Neill, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965.
- In Crat.* *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, edidit Georgius Pasquali, Leipzig: Teubner, 1908 [I refer to section, followed by page and line].
Proclus: On Plato's 'Cratylus', trans. by Brian Duwick, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007.
- In Eucl.* *Procli Diadochi in primum Euclidis elementorum librum commentarii*, ex recognitione Godofredi Friedlein, Leipzig: Teubner, 1873 [I refer to page and line].
Proclus: A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements, trans. with introduction and notes by Glen Morrow, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.
- In Parm.* *Procli in Platonis Parmenidem commentaria*, Tomus I–III, edidit C. Steel, ultimam partem ex latino in graecum vertit C. Steel, Oxford: Clarendon, 2007–9 [I refer to the page of Cousin's 1820s edition and line number of the edition of Steel; for the end of book VII, which has only been preserved in Moerbeke's Latin translation, I refer to book number (VII), the page of Steel's 1985 Leuven edition and line number of his 2009 Oxford edition, indicating in brackets the page and line of the 1953 London edition of Klíbanky and Labowsky].
Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides, trans. by G. R. Morrow and J. M. Dillon with introduction and notes by J. M. Dillon, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- In Remp.* *Procli Diadochi in Platonis rem publicam commentarii*, edidit Guilelmus Kroll, 2 vols., Leipzig: Teubner, 1899–1901 [I refer to volume, page and line].
- In Tim.* *Procli Diadochi In Platonis Timaeum commentaria*, edidit Ernestus Diehl, vols. I–III, Leipzig: Teubner, 1903–6 [I refer to volume, page and line].
Proclus: Commentary on Plato's Timaeus, vol. 2, Book II: *Proclus on the Causes of the Cosmos and its Creation*, tr. by David Runia and Michael Share, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

- PT* *Théologie platonicienne*, texte établi et traduit par H. D. Saffrey et L. G. Westerink, tome I–VI, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968–97 [I refer to book and chapter, followed by page and line]

EDITIONS OF WORKS BY OTHER ANCIENT PHILOSOPHERS

- Alcinous *Didasc.* – Alcinoos, *Enseignement des doctrines de Platon*, introduction, texte établi et commenté par John Whittaker et traduit par Pierre Louis, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1990 [I refer to section].
- Ammonius *In De int.* – *In Aristotelis librum de interpretatione commentarius*, edidit A. Busse, (Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca 4.5), Berlin: Reimer, 1897 [I refer to page and line].
- Atticus *fr.* – *Fragments*, texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places, Paris: Belles Lettres, 1977 [I refer to fragment numbers].
- Calcidius *In Tim.* – *Timaeus a Calcidio translatus commentarioque instructus*, (Plato Latinus 4), London, Warburg Institute, 1962 [I refer to section].
- Chrysippus *SVF* – *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*, vols. I–III, ed. H. von Arnim, Leipzig: Teubner, 1905–24 [I refer to volume and fragment].
- Corp. Herm.* *Corpus Hermeticum*, texte établi par A. D. Nock et traduit par A.-J. Festugière, Tome I–IV, 7^e tirage revu et corrigé, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1991–2 [I refer to treatise and section].
- Damascius *De princ.* – *Dubitaciones et solutiones de primis principiis*, ed. C. É. Ruelle, vols. 1–2, Paris: Klincksieck, 1889 [I refer to volume, page and line].
In Phaed. – *In Phaedonem*, ed. L.G. Westerink in *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, vol. II, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1977 [I refer to version, section and line].
Hist. phil. – *The Philosophical History*, text with translation and notes by Polymnia Athanassiadi, Athens: Apamea Cultural Association, 1999 [I refer to fragment numbers].
- Dionysius *Ep.* – *Epistulae*, eds. G. Heil and A. M. Ritter, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991 [I refer to epistle number and section].
- Hermias *In Phaedr.* – *In Platonis Phaedrum scholia*, edidit et apparatus critico ornavit P. Couvreur, Paris: Bouillon, 1901 [I refer to page and line].
- Chald. Or.* *Oracles Chaldaïques: Avec un choix de commentaires anciens*, texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places, troisième tirage revu et corrigé par A. Segonds, Paris: Belles Lettres, 1996³ [I refer to fragment numbers].

- Iamblichus *De anima* – Iamblichus, *De anima*, text, translation, and commentary by John F. Finamore and John M. Dillon, Leiden: Brill, 2002 [I refer to fragment numbers].
De com. math. – *Iamblichi de communi mathematica scientia liber*, ed. U. Klein (post N. Festa), Leipzig: Teubner, 1891 [I refer to section and line].
De myst. – *Les mystères d'Égypte*, texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966 [I refer to book and chapter, followed by page of Parthey's old edition and line number of the edition of des Places]. English quotations taken from *De mysteriis*, trans. by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.
- Julian *Ep.* – *Epistuale*, in L'empereur Julien, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. J. Bidez, tome 1.2, *Lettres et fragments*, 2nd edn, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1932 [I refer to letter number and side pagination]
- Marinus *Vita Procli* – *Proclus ou Sur le bonheur*, texte établi, traduit et annoté par H. D. Saffrey et A.-Ph. Segonds, avec la collaboration de Concetta Luna, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001 [I refer to chapter and line]. English quotations taken from 'Proclus, or On Happiness', in *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students*, trans. with an introduction by M. J. Edwards, Liverpool University Press, 2000.
- Nemesius *Nat. hom.* – *Nemesii Emeseni De natura hominis*, ed. Moreno Morani, Leipzig: Teubner, 1987 [I refer to section].
- Numenius fr. – *Fragments*, texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places, Paris: Belles Lettres, 1973 [I refer to fragment numbers].
- Olympiodorus *In Gorg.* – *Olympiodori in Platonis Gorgiam commentaria*, ed. L. G. Westerink, Leipzig: Teubner, 1970 [I refer to section and line].
In Phaed. – *In Platonis Phaedonem commentaria*, ed. L.G. Westerink in *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, vol. 1, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1976 [I refer to chapter, section and line].
- Plotinus *Enn.* – *Plotini opera*, eds. P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, vols. I–III, Leiden: Brill, 1951, 1959, 1953 [I refer to Ennead and treatise, followed by chapter and line within it]. English quotations taken from *The Enneads*, tr. by A. H. Armstrong, vols. I–VII, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966–88.
- Porphyry *De abst.* – *De l'abstinence*, texte établi, traduit et annoté par Jean Bouffartigue (tome I–II) et par Michel Patillon et Alain Ph. Segonds (tome III), tome I–III, Paris: Les Belles Lettres,

- 1977, 1979, 1995 [I refer to book, chapter and paragraph].
English quotations taken from *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, trans. G. Clark, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000.
- De regr.* – *De regressu animae* in Joseph Bidez, *Vie de Porphyre, le philosophe néo-platonicien, avec les fragments des traités Peri agalmaton et De regressu animae*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1913 [I refer to fragment numbers].
- Sent.* – *Sententiae ad intelligibilia ducentes*, ed. E. Lamberz, Leipzig: Teubner, 1975 [I refer to chapter, followed by page and line].
- Vita Plot.* – *Vita Plotini*, in *Plotini opera*, ed. P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, vol. 1, Leiden: Brill, 1951 [I refer to chapter and line within it]. English quotations taken from *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books*, trans. by A. H. Armstrong in *Plotinus*, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Sallustius *De deis* – Saloustios, *Des dieux et du monde*, ed. G. Rochefort, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1960 [I refer to chapter and section].
- Simplicius *In Cat.* – *In Aristotelis categorias commentarium*, edidit K. Kalbfleisch, (Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca 8), Berlin: Reimer, 1907 [I refer to page and line].
- Ps.-Simplicius *In De an.* – *In Aristotelis libros de anima commentaria*, ed. M. Hayduck, (Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca 11), Berlin: Reimer, 1882 [I refer to page and line].
- Syrianus: *In Aristotelis metaphysica commentaria*, edidit W. Kroll, (Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca 6.1), Berlin: Reimer, 1902 [I refer to page and line].

ABBREVIATIONS OF WORKS WITH STANDARD PAGINATION

- Aristotle *De an.* = *De anima*
 Eth. Nic. = *Ethica Nicomachea*
 Met. = *Metaphysica*
 Phys. = *Physica*
 Pol. = *Politica*
- Plato *Alc. I* = *Alcibiades I*
 Apol. = *Apologia Socratis*
 Gorg. = *Gorgias*
 Phd. = *Phaedo*
 Phdr. = *Phaedrus*
 Phlb. = *Philebus*
 Pol. = *Politicus*
 Resp. = *Respublica*

Symp. = *Symposium*

Tht. = *Theaetetus*

Tim. = *Timaeus*

Plutarch

De an. procr. = *De animae procreatione*

De Iside = *De Iside et Osiride*

De defectu = *De defectu oraculorum*

Note on translations used

Not being a native speaker, I have tried to use existing English translations of Neoplatonic works whenever possible. For Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, I have used the translation by E. R. Dodds; for his *Parmenides Commentary* the translation by G. Morrow and J. Dillon (which I have adjusted to the new edition of Steel); for the *Cratylus Commentary* the translation by B. Duvick; for the *Euclid Commentary* the translation by G. Morrow; for *On the Existence of Evils* the translation by J. Opsomer and C. Steel; for *On Providence* the translation by C. Steel; for the *Alcibiades Commentary* the translation by W. O'Neill; for *De sacrificio* the translation by B. Copenhaver. For the *Timaeus Commentary* I have used the new Cambridge University Press translation by D. Runia and M. Share, but only for book II (vol. I 205–458 in the edition of Diehl). Translations from all other Proclus' works are mine. As for other authors, for Marinus' *Life of Proclus* I have used the translation by M. Edwards, for Iamblichus' *On the Mysteries* the translation by E. Clarke, J. Dillon and J. Hershbelle, for Porphyry's *On Abstinence* the translation by G. Clark, and for Plotinus (as well as for Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*) the translation by A. H. Armstrong.

While using these translations, however, I have not hesitated to modify them whenever I have judged this to be necessary for the sake of clarity or precision. In some cases, these modifications are actually quite radical (particularly with Dodds's slightly dated translation of the *Elements*). It follows that the final responsibility for the accuracy and intelligibility of all the translations is mine.

Introduction

Late Neoplatonism is one of the most complex metaphysical systems ever produced in the West. In spite of this, of all the areas of ancient thought it remains possibly the least familiar. While the founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, has already gained his place among the classics of philosophy, and his treatises are studied even by those who do not specialize in ancient thought, late Neoplatonists are still known to just a handful of experts, general philosophical awareness of them being minimal. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of Proclus of Lycia (AD 412–85). While not an entirely original thinker, Proclus produced the most systematic version of late Neoplatonic philosophy, and his position within the Neoplatonic tradition may perhaps be compared to that of Thomas Aquinas within scholasticism. His impact on later thought was considerable: he influenced Byzantine philosophy as well as Western scholasticism, was widely studied in the Renaissance, and left a deep impression on German idealism. In terms of the quantity of preserved works, he ranks among the top five of ancient philosophers. Yet few of these are regularly studied nowadays.

The reasons for this neglect lie in the enormous intricacy of Proclus' system, as well as his predilection for technical terminology, which makes the reading of his treatises extremely difficult for beginners. Most of the works we possess were composed for students already well accustomed to late Neoplatonic philosophy, and are difficult to understand without some preliminary knowledge. In this regard Proclus is strongly handicapped as against Plotinus, many of whose treatises may easily be read by beginners, for he constantly rethinks his conceptions over and over again from scratch, giving the reader enough opportunities to hop into his metaphysical train, so to speak. With Proclus, by contrast, one needs to master the basic outlines of his system first to understand even a single page of text. It is this requirement that creates a barrier only a small number of patient students manage to get through. As a result, Proclus scholars today form a more or

less closed circle. The general philosophical public is left outside, having no easy access to Proclus' thought.

Clearly, what is needed under such circumstances is an introductory book that would lucidly explain the basic principles of Proclean philosophy, making its intricate system accessible for beginners. It is only in this way that the study of Proclus can stop being an esoteric enterprise and be turned into truly public property. Sadly, the existing surveys of Proclus' thought are seriously unsatisfactory in this regard. The studies of Rosán (1949) and Siorvanes (1996) in English are too idiosyncratic and fail to provide an adequate understanding of Proclus' philosophy.¹ Nor has the situation been better in other languages.² The best way of being initiated into the secrets of Proclean Neoplatonism that has existed for beginners so far has been to read the *Elements of Theology* with the excellent commentary of E. R. Dodds. Unfortunately, it is a way that will not be trodden by many, for it requires not only patience but even more importantly a sound knowledge of ancient Greek – for at the time of the first publication of the book (1933) this knowledge was taken for granted and it was not seen as necessary to translate Greek philosophical quotations into English.

It is the task of this book to remedy this state of affairs and provide easier access to the world of late Neoplatonism. My aim is to introduce Proclus to those who are generally interested in philosophy but have no knowledge of Neoplatonism, or indeed of ancient philosophy as such beyond its very basics. I take special care not to just summarize Proclus' ideas, but to bring them to life and show them as sophisticated answers to relevant philosophical problems. While many of Proclus' conceptions must necessarily appear as bizarre today, I still strive to present them as a meaningful way of looking at the universe and finding one's way about it. To what extent I have achieved this is for the critical reader to judge.

* * *

My analysis of Proclus' thought is largely a standard work in the genre of history of philosophy; in some regards, however, I go beyond the boundaries of this genre. I only do so in full openness in [chapter 9](#), but even all the previous chapters are tacitly shaped by certain methodological assumptions

¹ Cf. the critical summary of Siorvanes 1996 by the editors of the annotated Proclus bibliography, Steel *et al.* 2002: 41.

² The detailed study of Beierwaltes (1979), despite its promising title ('Proclus: The Basic Outlines of his Metaphysics') takes good preliminary knowledge of Proclus' thought for granted, and is mainly interesting for those who wish to trace the connections between Neoplatonism and German idealism. The Italian Proclus introduction of Reale (1989), while perhaps the most interesting of all the general surveys so far, is all too brief to convey the complexity of Proclus' thought.

which students of ancient philosophy may not take for granted, and which it will therefore be useful to briefly summarize and explain at the very start.

In my eyes, the history of philosophy is interesting as a specific example of a more general human effort to set one's living experience into meaningful frameworks enabling orientation in the world. I refer to these frameworks as 'worldviews'.³ In the case of the Neoplatonists their worldview finds its expression in their metaphysical system, but is not quite identical with it. Each philosophical system leans on a number of assumptions and preferences which are far from obvious and have no logical justification, being a matter of individual or collective choice and faith. A good example may be Plotinus' decision to see human soul as rooted in Intellect, contrasted with Proclus' rejection of this idea and his insistence on the inability of the soul to leave its proper level (see below, ch. 1.2.2). Both thinkers may list various philosophical arguments for their antagonistic convictions, but ultimately they are rationally unaccountable, depending on the preferences of each philosopher. I understand 'worldview' as a holistic set of all such preferences and basic assumptions that a single thinker has chosen to take for granted. Metaphysical systems are logical conceptualizations of worldviews, and as such they submit to the preferences entailed in them. In this sense they conceal the worldview behind them no less than they reveal it – for in most cases they draw no attention to their own conditional nature.

The concept of 'worldviews' helps to bring out the important fact that even very similar metaphysical systems may lead to widely different ways of orienting oneself in the world. Proclus agrees with Plotinus in most of his metaphysical conceptions, and at first sight it might seem that the differences between them concern minor points only. Once we cease to follow particular doctrines, however, and focus on the general worldview behind them, Proclus' universe will appear as very different from that of Plotinus. The reason lies in the fundamentally holistic nature of worldviews. A worldview functions like a Wittgensteinian language game: it does not amount to a summary of its particular elements, but to the total system of rules regulating their relations. One and the same pack of cards may be used to play entirely different games. This is just what we see between Plotinus and Proclus: their basic principles and conceptions are similar, but each thinker plays a different language game with them. What one game

³ My main inspiration was the concept of 'cosmology', as it has been developed by the British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1996). Cf. the related, though slightly different concept of cosmology in Brague 2003: 4–6. In philosophical contexts the term 'cosmology' has a different meaning, which is why I have opted for the more neutral 'worldview'.

finds as natural, the other considers as unacceptable. In my analyses I will try to take the holistic worldview conditions and limitations constantly into account. My aim will be not just to present Proclus' doctrines, but even more importantly to point out their worldview implications and the impact they have on the way in which people think of themselves and of their place in the world.

The emphasis on worldview differences in the history of philosophy is slightly unusual in that these only stand out clearly from a bird's-eye view, being largely invisible from the perspective of the studied authors themselves. Proclus was well aware, of course, that in a number of points he diverged from Plotinus, but he only focused on the particular points of contention, not attributing them to any fundamental disagreement in worldview. In effect, he attempted to contest Plotinus' views by means of rational arguments, presenting his own solutions as logically superior. For a philosopher firmly rooted in his worldview such an approach is natural, but to a neutral observer it must appear as limited. All logical 'proofs' are only valid within the language game they belong to, but are unconvincing from the perspective of one's opponents. It is not likely that Plotinus would submit to Proclus' criticism; he would much rather try to show his own solutions as more logically coherent in turn. The task of the historian of philosophy, as I understand it in my book, is to relate such insoluble debates to the worldviews they are embedded in, and show why an argument may make good sense in one worldview but appear as untenable in another one.

An important implication of this approach is that the quality of a philosophical system is not necessarily proportional to its logical sophistication. A good illustration of this is the contrast between Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic systems. As we shall see in ch. I.I, the former are generally far vaguer and less logically coherent than the latter, and we might be tempted to see this as a sign of their inferiority. Historically, however, such a verdict would be unjust. If we regard each worldview as an instance of a Wittgensteinian language game, the criterion of its success will lie in its functionality rather than its logical coherence. The game is good if playing it seems meaningful enough, i.e. if it provides a convincing framework for orienting oneself in the world. Philosophical games certainly do try to present this framework as logically coherent, yet every such coherence has its limits. How far they extend, depends on the nature of the game in question. If one worldview (e.g. the Neoplatonic one) shifts its limits far beyond that of their predecessors, it attests to its different preferences, not necessarily to its philosophical superiority.

This is not to say, of course, that philosophical approaches should be immune to rational criticism. From the perspective of history of philosophy, however, we need to distinguish between two types of criticism. (1) We may point out within one and the same discourse that some thinkers play the game less well than others, and are out of harmony with their own premises. In this sense we may ask, for instance, whether Alcinous is a good Middle Platonic philosopher, or a second-rate compiler who takes most of his conceptions over from his more important contemporaries without fully understanding all their implications. (2) Alternatively, a philosopher may come to see as unsatisfactory the very rules of the game. An example is Plotinus' contention that to identify the highest principle with Intellect, as most Middle Platonists did, is logically inconsequent, for Intellect contains a duality between the thinking subject and the object of thought, and as such may not represent the most perfect type of unity there is. While at first sight this might appear as a discovery of a logical fault in the Middle Platonic systems, it is really a redefinition of the rules of the game. The Middle Platonists apparently placed the focus of their game elsewhere, seeing Intellect as perfect enough to qualify for the first cause.⁴

For the development of philosophical thought both types of criticism are important, creating by their alternation that peculiar mixture of continuity and discontinuity which is typical of the history of philosophy. Each school pursues internal critical debates, attempting to cultivate its current discourse and find the best possible expression of it. Sooner or later, however, these debates reach their limits, and an unsatisfied student ventures to make a more fundamental intellectual move, rearranging the rules of the game. In this manner Plotinus reformed the game of the Middle Platonists, while two generations later Iamblichus in turn reorganized the game of Plotinus. Neither of these thinkers considered that he was changing the rules of discourse and introducing a substantially new version of Platonism. Both were convinced that they were simply correcting the mistakes of their predecessors and restoring the true meaning of Plato's philosophy. It is only the historian of philosophy who as an external observer is capable of drawing the crucial distinction between the two types of criticism, and identifying the occasional quantum leaps that move the history of thought forward by founding new types of discourse. In my study I shall

⁴ The situation is analogous to Wittgenstein's example of a game concealing the possibility to win by a trick: as long as no one is aware of this, the game is fully functional; when finally someone takes notice, the game stops being playable and the critic teaches us a different game in place of our own (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* II 77). Cf. the interesting use made of this by Winch 1971: 92–3.

pay constant attention to these processes, examining the way these shifts in worldview transform human understanding of the world and of the meaning of life.

Closely tied to my worldview perspective is another methodological point, which also deserves some comment. On several occasions in my study I will not remain content with outlining the worldview implications of various philosophical positions, but will further attempt to relate them to their historical socio-political background. In some readers this may cause the impression that I postulate social determinism, regarding intellectual conceptions as a 'superstructure' secondarily derived from the social 'base'. In fact, my approach implies no such thing. If I suggest, for instance, that the hierarchically structured universe of the late Neoplatonists is remarkably parallel to the hierarchical administration of the late Roman empire (p. 16), I certainly do not see either of these phenomena as being caused by the other one. My sole aim is to draw attention to their meaningful correlation. The causality in such cases is likely to be reciprocal: human spirit reacts to a socio-political situation, which in turn expresses the human spirit. The question whether the new model of administration was primary, or was caused by a general change in worldview, is but a version of the old hen-and-egg problem, which modern cybernetics has elegantly solved by the theory of 'circular causation' (Pfohl 1997).

What is it that makes philosophical conceptions relate to social reality? In my view, the reason lies in the implicit existential dimension of all worldview models. Worldviews are created so that humans may set their everyday experience into a meaningful framework enabling orientation in the universe. As a result, they are never just abstract theoretical constructs, but are closely tied to human experience. For ancient philosophical schools this is especially true, for, as Pierre Hadot has convincingly shown, these amounted not just to conceptual and theoretical discourses, but even more importantly to particular ways of life implying a fundamental existential choice.⁵ This makes their connection to social reality understandable: if philosophy was a way of life, it had to react to the socio-political order, which exerts a considerable influence on human life. On the one hand it reflected this order, on the other hand by this very reflection it attempted to change it. An impressive late ancient example are the political reforms of

⁵ Hadot 2002. It needs to be said that Hadot presents the opposition between philosophy as a way of life and as theoretical discourse as needlessly sharp, tending to disparage the latter in favour of the former. It seems more adequate to understand both aspects as two sides of the same coin (cf. the review of Sellars 2004).

Julian the Apostate, which strove to reverse the socio-political development by means of Iamblichean Neoplatonism.⁶

The aim of my occasional speculations on the socio-political background of Neoplatonic metaphysics is thus certainly not to dispute the originality of the Neoplatonists and to force the human spirit into the fetters of social relations, but rather to show Neoplatonic thought as a holistic existential framework, which despite its enormous stress on abstract metaphysical problems never loses its close link to human life in its bodily and social embeddedness. At the same time, my approach allows me to demonstrate why Neoplatonism played a crucial part on the late ancient cultural scene, and why it managed to appeal to politicians, lawyers, and other members of the educated elite, who otherwise had no penchant for metaphysical speculation whatsoever.⁷

This view is linked to the last methodological point worth mentioning, namely my persistent effort to read Neoplatonism as a religious phenomenon no less than a philosophical one. Once again, this is implied in my concept of worldviews, which transcend the conventional distinction between philosophy and religion, referring to frameworks for orienting oneself in the world in the most general sense. These frameworks may be reflected philosophically, resulting in an elaborate metaphysical system, but they may equally well find their expression on the level of religion, leaning on images and symbols more than on rational concepts. The difference between these two approaches is considerable, yet from a broader perspective they may both be seen as alternative elaborations of one and the same basic manner of understanding the universe and one's place within it. This allows us to consider philosophy in the context of more general worldview debates in each historical period. Fortunately, historians of late antiquity are already well acquainted with this approach thanks to the Irish historian Peter Brown.⁸ It was he who first started to look at Plotinus or Iamblichus in the wider context of late ancient worldview shifts, finding a

⁶ See below, pp. 33 and 263. The same example shows, however, that the power of human spirit is limited, and in some cases it is powerless against the flow of history.

⁷ The political implications of Neoplatonic philosophy are mapped in a groundbreaking manner by O'Meara 2003. The only weakness of the book is O'Meara's generalizing approach, which sees Neoplatonism as a unified school, taking little account of the differences between Plotinus and the late Neoplatonists. I attempt to correct this simplified picture below in ch. 9.

⁸ See esp. Brown 1978. Brown was himself influenced by the anthropologist Mary Douglas mentioned above, as well as by the Greco-Roman studies by Michel Foucault (cf. his autobiographical reflections in Brown 2003).

unified way of understanding phenomena that had previously been studied in isolation with no meaningful connection with one another. In my study I take up a number of Brown's insights, hoping that my knowledge of various subtle details of Neoplatonic thought will allow me to further elaborate on his approach and make it more precise in some points (see esp. ch. 9 below).

CHAPTER I

Historical background

When in 1949 Laurence J. Rosán published his Proclean monograph, he gave it a pregnant subtitle ‘The final phase of ancient thought’. Proclus does indeed stand at the close of a more than a thousand-year-long intellectual tradition, and is only intelligible against its background. For this reason we will have to start our journey into the complex world of Proclus’ thought from the beginning and consider it from the bird’s-eye view of the general history of ancient Platonism. In this way we will be able to sketch the basic contours of Proclus’ philosophical approach in contrast to that of his predecessors, thus preparing the ground for the more detailed expositions to be given in subsequent chapters.

I.1 NEOPLATONISM AND THE PLATONIC TRADITION

A. N. Whitehead famously characterized Western philosophy as a ‘a series of footnotes to Plato’. While in absolute terms this might be a somewhat exaggerated claim, it does apply to a large degree to Greek philosophical thought, whose different varieties may indeed from one perspective be read as reactions to the problems posed in Platonic dialogues. Plato may be seen as the greatest philosopher of antiquity not just on account of his intellectual originality but even more importantly due to the fact that he refused to weave his conceptions into a clear-cut dogmatic system, providing incentives for thought rather than ready made answers. In view of this it is not surprising that already his immediate followers were able to develop his philosophical approach in widely differing ways. Not only did his most important pupil Aristotle set up an entirely independent school. Even his more faithful disciples, Speusippus and Xenocrates, the first two scholars of the Academy, interpreted the teaching of their master (including his ‘unwritten doctrines’) in a greatly discordant manner.¹

¹ Cf. Dillon 2003, chs. 2–3. Dillon’s book is openly speculative and particularly in the chapter on Speusippus is influenced by the author’s interest in Neoplatonism (cf. the review of Steel 2005b). Despite this, it is still the best comprehensive starting point for the study of the Old Academy.

Speusippus (410–339 BC) developed the conception of the One (*to hen*) and the Indefinite Dyad (*dias ahoristos*), seen as two basic metaphysical principles whose interaction gives rise to all things. Insofar as we may judge from the mocking remarks of Aristotle, Speusippus emphasized the transcendence of the One, placing it above being and thought, as well as beyond the polarity of good and evil. In this regard, he anticipated some basic thoughts of Neoplatonism in a remarkable manner. The conception of two primary principles was also pursued by Xenocrates (396–313 BC), who unlike Speusippus identified the One with Intellect (*nous*), possibly in reaction to Aristotle's criticism. This identification proved immensely fruitful, dominating Platonist thought until the third century AD, when the Neoplatonists stressed the ultimate transcendence of the One once again.

Despite all their differences, Speusippus and Xenocrates agreed on one fundamental point, viz. that Platonism should be understood as a metaphysical system. Yet, not even this was an unquestioned presumption. Around 265 BC, some eighty years after Plato's death, the Academy was taken over by Arcesilaus, who refused metaphysical speculations, pursuing epistemological scepticism instead – an approach to which Plato's inconclusive dialogues certainly gave a number of impulses. The sceptical approach caught on in the Academy (from now on designated as New) and for several centuries metaphysical Platonism almost disappeared. It was only in the first century BC that Antiochus of Ascalon attempted to revive the spirit of the Old Academy, partly under the influence of Stoicism. Shortly after that, other philosophers appear throughout the Mediterranean, establishing Platonism once again as an independent metaphysical school. In Alexandria we find Eudorus (first century BC), in Athens Ammonius (first century AD), in Chaeronea his pupil Plutarch. In the second century there appear many others: Taurus, Atticus, Apuleius, Albinus, Numenius, to name but the most important ones. The doctrines of these 'Middle Platonic' thinkers varied, but in general they tended to be relatively simple and frequently focused on practical ethics. Unfortunately, most of them are only known fragmentarily; entire treatises have only been preserved from Plutarch, Apuleius and the otherwise unknown Alcinoüs.²

From the perspective of modern scholarship, a groundbreaking figure in the history of Platonism is Plotinus, who lectured in Rome in the middle of the third century AD. His philosophical style is so original that he was conventionally seen by modern historians as a founder of a new philosophical school, Neoplatonism, differing distinctly from both Middle Platonism

² For the Middle Platonists see the detailed survey of Dillon 1996a.

and the Old Academy. In actuality, the break between Middle and Neoplatonism was far from sharp. Ancient Neoplatonists saw no fundamental difference between their teaching and that of their predecessors, regarding themselves simply as members of a long chain of Platonists who attempted to interpret and systematically develop Plato's conceptions. If they ever saw themselves as a special class of thinkers, it was only on account of the greater rigour and inspired clarity of their expositions compared to that of previous Platonic scholars (cf. Proclus, *PT* I 6.16–7.8).

It is in this light that we should look at Plotinus and his 'founding' of Neoplatonism. His pupil Porphyry does indeed emphasize the exceptional qualities of his teacher's thought in the *Life of Plotinus* (chs. 17–20), but he mainly sees them in his greater philosophical sophistication, not in the introduction of new doctrines. The point is well expressed by Longinus, whom Porphyry quotes in this connection (*Vita Plot.* 20.71–6): 'Plotinus, it would seem, has expounded the principles of Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy more clearly than anyone before him. The works of Numenius and Cronius and Moderatus and Thrasyllus come nowhere near the accuracy of Plotinus' treatises on the same subjects.' Longinus has no doubts that the famous Middle Platonists and Neopythagoreans named by him shared with Plotinus the same conception of reality; yet they could not match him in his ability to formalize this conception and turn it into a coherent system of thought.³

Modern scholars have been able to find older parallels for many of Plotinus' doctrines.⁴ As we know from Porphyry, his contemporaries found Plotinus' teaching similar to that of Numenius (second half of the second century AD), so that Plotinus' pupil Amelius actually had to write a special treatise 'On the Difference Between the Doctrines of Plotinus and Numenius' (*Vita Plot.* 17). The fragments of Numenius that we have do indeed confirm a certain resemblance,⁵ though there is little doubt that Plotinus' system is far more sophisticated and elaborate. It is this, rather than any particular doctrine, that makes the Neoplatonists so obviously different from their predecessors. Plotinus and his followers will strive to pursue all their thoughts to their ultimate conclusions. In Plotinus this is already apparent in the form of his treatises, which often start from the very basics, reconstructing and deducing the metaphysical system 'live' in front

³ For Plotinus' position in the Platonic tradition in general see Gatti 1996.

⁴ See e.g. the papers in Dodds *et al.* 1960.

⁵ Thus famously Dodds 1960. Against this, recent scholarship has tended to point out some fundamental differences between Plotinus and Numenius (e.g. Holzhausen 1992), but even so the importance of Numenius for the Neoplatonists is indisputable.

of the reader. Quite frequently Plotinus conducts an internal dialogue, experimenting with ever new alternatives and raising his own stimulating objections that help him to arrive at ever greater degrees of precision.

The uncompromising conceptual rigour and consistency of Plotinus and his followers meant that their picture of reality was far more holistic and internally connected than that of any previous Platonist. The doctrines of the Middle Platonists could often still be conventionally divided into various philosophical disciplines (metaphysics, physics, ethics etc.) which were complementary, and yet to a certain extent independent. In authors such as Plutarch, Apuleius or Alcinous we certainly do not have the impression that e.g. their conception of logic would necessarily follow from their metaphysics, and that a change in one area would inevitably cause a reorganization of all the others. The Neoplatonists tolerate no such laxity. They take it for granted that the universe is based on a limited number of metaphysical principles from which the answers to all further philosophical questions may be logically deduced. To think of logic as a practical tool created *ad hoc* in order to achieve greater conceptual clarity would seem unacceptable to them. When Plotinus in *Ennead* VI 1–3 deals with Aristotle's categories, he does so strictly from a metaphysical perspective. Ethics, too, for him is always something that logically follows from metaphysics. The Neoplatonic universe resembles a hologram: each sphere of knowledge mirrors all the others and is convertible to them.

Hand in hand with this approach goes the greater 'closedness' of the Neoplatonic universe. The Middle Platonists usually worked with a relatively simple metaphysical model that remained open and indefinite at many of its ends. In Neoplatonism, on the other hand, every single detail is meticulously determined, contributing to a well-contrived hierarchical whole in which the room for improvisation is minimal. A good example of this is the different ways in which our philosophers think of fate. The standard Middle Platonic conception, found in several authors,⁶ sees fate as a kind of law that only institutes general rules for the development of things, never specifying in detail what is to befall each individual. A good summary of the matter is given by Alcinous (*Didasc.* 26.1):

According to Plato all things take place within fate, but this does not mean that they would all be determined by fate. For fate has the status of a law: it does not say that this man will do this and that man suffer that. For all such specifications

⁶ Calcidius, *In Tim.* 142–90; Ps.-Plutarch, *De fato*; Nemesius, *Nat. hom.* 38; Alcinous, *Didasc.* 26. Unfortunately, all these texts are no more than secondary reiterations of one and the same original conception whose author eludes us (cf. Theiler 1946).

would run to infinity, since the number of begotten individuals is unlimited and the events that befall them are equally without limit. Moreover, that which is in our power would vanish, and it would no longer make sense to do such things as praise or blame anyone. No, fate says, rather, that whenever any soul chooses a certain type of life and does certain kinds of actions, such and such consequences will follow.

Unfortunately, no Middle Platonist ever convincingly explains what these abstract fated laws consist in.⁷ What remains clear, however, is that the course of cosmic events is open and unpredictable in many regards. Not even god knows how things turn out; he only has foreknowledge of all the possible alternatives, having no clue which of them will actually take place.⁸

The Neoplatonists are unsatisfied with such a vague conception of fate, seeing it as too inconsequential and tainted with randomness. In their view the order of things needs to be specified in a much more precise way. For Plotinus there is nothing in our world that would not follow a firmly given plan. This ‘plan’ is coded into each thing or being as its *logos* – an immanent formative reason-principle. In his treatise *On Providence* (*Enn.* III 2–3) he describes all the *logoi* as parts of one cosmic Logos, which functions as a universal ‘script’ by which all things are governed. Logos is itself an expression of the universal divine plan of reality which arises automatically as the best possible ordering of things, and as such is unchangeable.⁹ The Neoplatonists are not utter determinists and they too leave some room for human effort and choice (see ch. 7.4). Nonetheless, this room is considerably smaller than it was with the Middle Platonists. It basically corresponds to the difference there might be between two distinct stagings of a theatre play, not allowing for any substantial alteration of one’s given life-script. This is explicitly emphasized by Plotinus, who in his analysis of Logos as the divine scenario of cosmic events resolutely refuses the possibility of our changing of the predetermined universal plan (*Enn.* III 2, 18.7–11):

We ought certainly not to introduce actors of a kind who say something else besides the words of the author, as if the play was incomplete in itself and they filled in what was wanting, and the writer had left blank spaces in the middle.

⁷ Most of them give Apollo’s oracle to Laius, the father of Oedipus, as an example: ‘if you beget a son, the son will murder you’ (Euripides, *Phoenissae* 19); in fact, however, this is hardly a fitting illustration of their conception, for it does not involve a general rule (sons do not normally kill their fathers) but describes a unique fatal problem of a specific individual.

⁸ Calcidius, *In Tim.* 162–3, 169; cf. a similar idea in the Aristotelian thinker Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De fato* 30–1.

⁹ See esp. Plotinus, *Enn.* III 2, 17–18; II 3, 13; Proclus, *De dec. dub.* 60. For the spontaneous emergence of the best ordering of things possible cf. see below, ch. 2.2.2 (esp. p. 69).

All an actor can do is to embellish the drama by his performance, or spoil it – by doing so, however, he does not ‘make the play other than it was, but merely makes a grotesque exhibition of himself, and the author of the play sends him off in deserved disgrace’, transposing him to some worse position in the cosmic drama (*Enn.* III 2, 17.41–9).

The Neoplatonic world is thus far more precisely delimited, each detail fitting in with all the others in a sophisticated way. Late Neoplatonists will carry this view even further, subordinating to divine control even the already tiny element of human improvisation that was tolerated in the perfect whole of the universe by Plotinus. Proclus will thus insist that while human choices are indeed unpredictable from our perspective, god is nevertheless always able to foreknow their outcome. If the god of the Middle Platonists knew each thing ‘according to its nature’, necessary things as firmly given, contingent things as not yet decided (Calcidius, *In Tim.* 162), for Proclus ‘every god has an undivided knowledge of things divided and a timeless knowledge of things temporal; he knows the contingent without contingency, the mutable immutably, and in general all things in a higher mode than belongs to their station’.¹⁰ Ultimately, not even the contingent and undetermined factors are bereft of divine supervision.

The sustained effort of the Neoplatonists to bring all thoughts to their ultimate conclusions has also fundamentally altered their basic metaphysical scheme. The Middle Platonists located the highest metaphysical principle in God, which they usually identified with the Good, with Intellect (*nous*), as well as with the realm of true Being and ideal Forms. Some of them did indeed toy with the idea of regarding the highest God as even more transcendent than Intellect or Being, but none of them ever pursued this line of thought in a systematic way.¹¹ For the Neoplatonists, it is precisely this distinction that seemed essential. If the highest principle is to be entirely perfect, it needs to be wholly unified, excluding all duality. Yet, duality is necessarily present in Intellect, for all thinking needs to distinguish between the thinking subject and the object of thought. Although divine Intellect does not think anything else than itself, even so it needs to take a minimal distance from itself,¹² producing within itself the first

¹⁰ Proclus, *ET* 124; see in detail below, pp. 226–7.

¹¹ The distinction between the highest principle and Intellect as the first hypostasis derived from it originally appeared in Speusippus, re-surfacing in Platonism around the first century AD possibly under the influence of Neopythagorean speculations (cf. Whittaker 1969 and 1973). Extensive, though thoroughly unsystematic use of this idea was made by the platonizing Hermetic treatises (e.g. *Corp. Herm.* II 14; XI 4; XII 1; XII 14), most of which probably originated in the second century AD.

¹² This idea is taken over by Platonists from Aristotle, *Met.* XII 1072b, 1074b.

duality. It follows that the first principle must stand above thinking. It must even be beyond being, for being by its nature is limiting: to say that something *is* means to oppose it to what *is not*. Above both Intellect and Being there must therefore stand the One (*to hen*), which is identical to the absolute Good as the highest aim that all things long for. The One is so supremely perfect that we cannot say anything positive about it – for each positive statement inevitably delimits its object, making it incomplete in this way. Not even being may thus be predicated of the One, and Proclus will speak of it as ‘non-Being which is superior to Being’ (*ET* 138.13).

The distinction between the One and Intellect sounds logical, and older Platonic conceptions which did without it may easily appear as second rate in comparison with Neoplatonism. Still, it would be rash to accuse the Middle Platonists of philosophical amateurism. The true difference between the two groups of thinkers seems to lie in their different priorities. The Middle Platonists were much closer to this world, were greatly interested in ethics, and metaphysics often functioned for them rather as a background they might lean upon in their moral reflections.¹³ The Neoplatonists shift their focal point to the higher spheres, feeling the need to meticulously analyse the structure of the intelligible world. They are very much concerned to follow their metaphysical postulates to their conclusions, weaving a coherent rational system out of them. Not even they avoid practical moral questions, but they never make them the starting point of their speculations. Metaphysics is primary for them, ethics being its particular application.

Were we to evaluate philosophy solely in view of the timeless logical coherence of various systems of thought, we would have to see the Neoplatonists as much philosophically superior to any of their immediate predecessors. Yet, philosophy does not consist merely in deducing conclusions from the premises that a given school of thinkers has chosen to take for granted. From a historical perspective, philosophy is perhaps far more interesting as a manner of formulating, and arguing for, worldviews – implicit meaningful frameworks for understanding the world and finding one’s way around it. Seen from this perspective, the difference between

¹³ Ethical concerns predominate in all the Middle Platonic authors whose writings have been preserved: in Plutarch, Apuleius, and the Platonic rhetorician Maximus of Tyre (second century AD). To what extent other Middle Platonists were ethically inclined is unclear, but there are certain signs pointing in this direction. Several of them, for instance, see the indefinite Dyad, which is the source of disorderliness in our world, as an independent principle not fully subordinated to either the One or Intellect (thus Plutarch in *De an. procr.*, Atticus in fr. 10–11, and Numenius in fr. 52); this testifies to their sustained effort to deal with the problem of evil and treat it as a serious force not to be explained away by higher metaphysics; see my analysis of this problem in Plutarch in Chlup 2000.

the Middle and the Neoplatonists lies not in that the former would be less philosophically competent than the latter, but in that either of these groups of thinkers found a different way of putting together one and the same basic set of Platonic principles, achieving a different worldview effect. The Middle Platonists offer a rather loosely connected set of thoughts to guide us in our lives, one that is open and does not provide exhaustive answers, leaving space for improvisation. The Neoplatonists, on the other hand, construe a worldview which is entirely integrated and coherent, assigning to every single thing a clearly defined place in the hierarchic structure of the universe. Their metaphysics is designed to offer to each individual reliable support and a feeling of safety, though one that is paid for by a greater degree of determinism.¹⁴

1.2 PLOTINUS VERSUS LATE NEOPLATONISM

Until now we have treated Neoplatonism as one type of philosophical approach standing in contrast to previous versions of ancient Platonism. Yet, this is not to say that the Neoplatonists would form a unified school, agreeing with one another in all substantial points. Today, Neoplatonism is mostly associated with Plotinus, its founder. After a long period of relative neglect this brilliant thinker has finally started to attract scholarly attention in the last couple of decades, and has deservedly come to be seen by the academic public as one of the greatest figures in the history of philosophy. At the same time, however, this has sometimes made the later Neoplatonists appear as no more than second-rate representatives of the same school.¹⁵ This distorted picture used to be greatly aided by the fact that – as we shall see soon – starting with Iamblichus Neoplatonism turns strongly religious. It is easy, therefore, to dismiss its representatives as superstitious freaks incapable of competing with the intellectual rigour of Plotinus – an

¹⁴ It is tempting to see this worldview difference as related to the socio-political transformation of the Greco-Roman world in late antiquity (cf. Brown 1978: 27–53, and below, ch. 9.). In the second century AD the basic administrative units were still the largely autonomous cities governed by traditional local elites, with the emperor appearing as a supreme, and yet relatively accessible principle unifying the empire. The Middle Platonic worldview seems well adapted to this situation, stressing the autonomy of the individual, who makes his own decisions and only secondarily relates to the universal rules of fate to which he must conform. The systems of the Neoplatonists, on the other hand, resemble the hierarchic multilevel administration of the late Empire, when ‘soft’ government was replaced by a ‘hard’ one, and imperial supervision increasingly tended to stretch down to local particularities. Similes borrowed from the hierarchic imperial administration do appear occasionally in Neoplatonic works, e.g. in Plotinus, *Enn.* v 5, 12.26–30; v 5, 3 (cf. Siorvanes 1996: 11).

¹⁵ Cf. the assessment of Rist 1967: 193, and Gatti 1996: 19.

approach that was widespread well into the second half of the twentieth century.

In actuality, the historical development of Neoplatonism was more complicated. Plotinus was certainly a crucial figure, and by the time of his death in 270 he had a number of followers. The most important one was Porphyry, author of Plotinus' biography and editor of his *Enneads*. In most of his preserved treatises Porphyry mainly developed the teachings of his master, and while he did introduce a couple of original conceptions of his own,¹⁶ he still generally followed the Plotinian approach, searching for ways to improve it in details and think it through more systematically. Importantly for us, both Plotinus and Porphyry were mainly influential in the Latin West, whether in the ranks of pagans (Macrobius), or even more significantly among the Christians (Marius Victorinus, Augustine). In the Greek East their impact was much smaller.¹⁷

Among the Greek-speaking thinkers, a much more substantial role was played by Iamblichus of Chalcis, who flourished at the turn of the third century.¹⁸ Originally, he seems to have been a pupil of Porphyry in Italy, but he soon started to disagree with his teacher, eventually becoming his chief philosophical opponent. Since Iamblichus' metaphysical writings have unfortunately been lost, it took some time for modern scholars to acknowledge his importance. His reputation was hardly enhanced by the best known of his preserved treatises, *On the Egyptian Mysteries*,¹⁹ a manifesto of theurgy whose strong religious fervour used to breed distrust among rationalist academics, making Iamblichus appear as a charlatan who led Platonism astray. Only a thorough analysis of historical references in the writings of late Neoplatonists – and Proclus in particular – has revealed that a large part of the metaphysical repertoire of late Neoplatonism does in fact stem from Iamblichus.²⁰ Contemporary scholars agree that it was

¹⁶ The first scholar to call attention to them was Hadot 1968.

¹⁷ Porphyry's influence on later authors is mapped by Smith 1987: 764–73. On the Greek side one can only find vague traces of Porphyrian thought in the Christian philosopher Synesius of Cyrene (cf. Bregman 1982: 22–3, 182–3) and his pagan teacher Hypatia (Watts 2006: 192–5). Christians were generally more receptive to Plotinian Platonism, and some of its echoes may be traced e.g. in the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century; still, in comparison with the West Plotinus' impact was much weaker here (cf. Rist 1996: 397–401).

¹⁸ For Iamblichus' uncertain chronology, as well as for an outline of his thought see Dillon 1987a.

¹⁹ The title comes from Ficino's 1497 Latin translation, the original appellation seems to have been *Reply of Abammon the Teacher to The Letter of Porphyry to Anebo together with Solutions of the Questions Therein Contained*. Iamblichus dons here the mask of an Egyptian priest replying to religious questions raised by Porphyry.

²⁰ This was already demonstrated by Dodds's historical analyses in his commentary to Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. The final confirmation of Iamblichus' importance was brought by the commented edition of fragments of his Plato commentaries, prepared by Dillon 1973.

precisely the ‘divine’ (as Proclus frequently calls him) Iamblichus who gave Neoplatonism a new direction, and that Proclus and his followers valued him much more than Plotinus, from whom they diverged in many substantial points.²¹ Since Iamblichus established his school in Syria, and all his followers worked in the eastern, Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire, we may perhaps speak here of ‘eastern’ Neoplatonism, as opposed to the Plotinus-inspired Neoplatonism of the Latin West.

The difference between the Plotinian ‘western’ and the Iamblichean ‘eastern’ Neoplatonism is in a way no less fundamental than that between Plotinus and the Middle Platonists, and in our study we will constantly keep it in mind. In the rest of chapter 1.2, I shall try to explain what the specific essence of eastern Neoplatonism consists in and wherein it diverges from Plotinus. Since Proclus is the most important member of the eastern Iamblichean tradition, and one who turned it into a perfectly conceived system, the sketch that follows will serve as the most general historical introduction into the intellectual approach of our philosopher.

1.2.1 *Penchant for subtle classifications*

At first sight, Iamblichean Neoplatonism differs from Plotinus in three major points (covered by chapters 1.2.1–3). First of all, it introduces an extremely subtle and almost ‘scholastic’ classification of reality. While Plotinus may generally be said to focus more on the overall outlines of his metaphysical model, Iamblichus shifts his attention onto the details. The difference might best be described metaphorically. Let us imagine reality as a three-dimensional construction which due to its enormous size and complexity can never be seen and understood all at once. When describing this construction, late Neoplatonists proceed as today’s architects do: they try to resolve the three-dimensional object into a number of detailed two-dimensional projections drawn from various angles, which together allow us to recreate the entire construction. The problem with this approach is the same as the one with architectural drawings: it is very difficult for a layman to visualize the entire building and comprehend how all the parts fit together. On the positive side, for those skilled at reading them the drawings are able to convey all the construction details with great precision.

Plotinus’ strategy is entirely different, resembling a 3D computer visualization rather than traditional hand-made ink drawings. Unlike conventional 3D visualizations, however, he does not just strive to attain a

²¹ Cf. Blumenthal 1981; Wallis 1972: 100.

holistic external vision of his object, but even more importantly attempts to reconstruct reality from within by capturing the internal principles of its construction. The advantage of this approach is obvious: while Proclus' meticulous partial descriptions done from various angles may easily appear as an impenetrable labyrinth, Plotinus never loses sight of the entire building in its basic outlines, making orientation in it much easier. It is significant that most of the time he manages to do with a fairly simple four-storey model of reality. He was well aware, of course, that each level of reality has a number of different aspects and could in fact easily be divided into several other sublevels, but he hardly ever pursued this line of thinking. Late Neoplatonists, on the other hand, undertake precisely this, introducing further and further subdivisions which make their system extremely sophisticated. As a result, they do not offer one simple image conceivable at one glance in its entirety, but rather a network of detailed sketches which can never be visualized all together.

A typical example is the way eastern Neoplatonists speak of the level of Intellect (see below, ch. 2.3.2). Plotinus already was aware that within Intellect there are two rather different aspects that might be distinguished: being and thinking. Plotinus does draw a clear distinction between them, but he still sees Intellect as a unity of both. To late Neoplatonists this seems too vague; they prefer to hypostatize being and thinking, treating them as two independent levels of Being and Intellect. At the same time, however, they too are trying to be economical, only having recourse to this distinction when it helps them in their philosophical analyses. Whenever the simpler Plotinian model seems sufficient, Proclus is content to speak of Intellect as one complex level comprising both being and thinking. Consequently, in Proclus' treatises 'Intellect' may mean two very different things, sometimes referring to the general Plotinian Intellect, sometimes to a sublevel clearly distinguished from Being. Both descriptions amount to two different two-dimensional projections differing in scale and perspective.

The contrast between these two approaches corresponds to the different ways in which our philosophers view the role of language and of rational thought in general (both being comprised in the Greek noun *logos*). The Neoplatonists are certain that the nature of reality is too complex to be expressed in words. Language is all too limiting, and besides works discursively, introducing temporal sequence into all our propositions (this is why the Neoplatonists associate language with the level of soul, at which time comes into being – see below, ch. 4.1). There are several ways to overcome this language handicap. If we simplify things a bit, we may say that Plotinus tries to use language so as to grasp the complexity of reality despite having

limited means of expression at his disposal. To achieve this, he attempts to employ language in ways that allow him to ‘blunt its edges’, so to speak.²² On the one hand, he often has recourse to metaphors, attempting to capture the complexity of the intelligible world by means of impressive images. As Plotinus explains, images are appropriate for grasping intelligible reality for the simple reason that each of them captures its referent all at once, directly and in a concentrated manner (*Enn.* v 8, 6.1–9):

The wise men of Egypt, I think, also understood this, either by scientific or innate knowledge, and when they wished to signify something wisely, they did not use the forms of letters out of which they would discursively put together words and propositions, nor did they imitate sounds [i.e. they did not use phonetic script] or enunciate philosophical statements; instead, they were drawing images, and by inscribing in their temples one particular ideogram of one particular thing they manifested the non-discursiveness of the intelligible world, that is, that every knowledge and every wise insight is a kind of basic and concentrated ideogram, and not discursive thought or deliberation.

On the other hand, Plotinus tries to use language in ways that partially relativize its discursive nature. By its very nature language is limiting, forcing us into propositions of the ‘either–or’ type: either a thing is such and such, or it is not. Plotinus, however, deals with levels of reality at which there are ‘all things together in one’.²³ Accordingly, he tries to squeeze into his expressions several aspects at the same time. Thus he describes Intellect, for instance, as appearing ‘with all the gods within him, he who is one and all, and each god is all the gods coming together into one; they are different in their powers, but by that one manifold power they are all one; or rather, the one god is all; for he does not fail if all become what he is; they are all together and each one again apart in a position without separation’.²⁴ When Plotinus cannot avoid discursive statements, he often likes to downplay them in the next step, attempting to reunite all the distinctions he has just made. Thus in *Enn.* v 9, 8 he claims that thinking must logically follow after being, coming to actuality in something that already exists, yet he immediately attacks this distinction, stressing that as far as their active actuality is concerned, being and thinking are identical: ‘But they are thought of by us as one before the other because they are

²² For a good analysis of Plotinus’ use of language in relation to the One as well as the higher levels in general see Schroeder 1996. On the role of metaphors in this connection see Rappe 2000: 91–114.

²³ The Anaxagorean phrase *homou panta* is typically used by Plotinus in descriptions of Intellect; cf. e.g. *Enn.* I 1, 8.8; III 6, 6.23; IV 2, 2.44; VI 6, 7.4 etc.

²⁴ Plotinus, *Enn.* v 8, 9.16–20. Other chapters of *Enn.* v 8 (as well as of v 9) illustrate equally well the effort that Plotinus makes to overcome the discursivity of language.

divided by our thinking. For the dividing intellect is a different one, but the undivided Intellect which does not divide is being and all things' (v 9, 8.19–22).

Eastern Neoplatonism takes a completely different track, attempting not to capture things all at once in their complexity, but rather to analyse this complexity into a network of exactly defined relations. Where Plotinus says that a thing both is and is not such and such, late Neoplatonists wish to show precisely in what regard it is such and such and in what regard it is not. This of course leads them to introduce subtler and subtler distinctions and sublevels that allow them to describe accurately all the tiny nuances, but whose intricate multiplicity makes one easily feel a bit dizzy.

Contemporary readers will probably often find the scholastic complexity of late Neoplatonism discouraging, preferring the elegant simplicity of Plotinus' system. In defence of late Neoplatonists one should stress that their passion for seemingly endless conceptual distinctions is never an end in itself. A good example is the *Elements of Theology*. In this work Proclus works with a four-storey Plotinian model whenever he finds this sufficient for dealing with whatever problem he is discussing. It is only when this simple model no longer allows him to describe all metaphysical relations precisely that Proclus has recourse to more detailed 'zoom shots', introducing further distinctions. All of these have a clear purpose, however, and once they fulfil their task, they are discarded and the basic simple model returns. Thanks to this switching of perspectives Proclus is able to analyse a number of metaphysical details that in Plotinus' system are only outlined rather vaguely and indecisively. What is even more important, analyses of this kind are much easier to hand down, and it is for this reason that eastern Neoplatonism formed a very compact tradition whose members only differed in details. Plotinus, on the other hand, founded no real tradition, for his approach expected the ability to keep in mind a number of distinct aspects all at once and to see them as united and distinct at the same time – an achievement requiring supreme intellectual talent that few possessed.

1.2.2 *Impenetrable boundaries between levels of reality*

So far it might appear that the difference between Plotinus and eastern Neoplatonists is technical only. In many cases it is undoubtedly true that Plotinus and Proclus share a similar conception of reality, only differing in ways of speaking about it. There are significant cases, however, when the difference in means of description mirrors a more fundamental difference

in understanding reality. This is especially true whenever Plotinus' holistic description starts to blur the boundaries between the basic hypostases.

To illustrate this, we may compare Neoplatonic discussions of participation. The basic problem was formulated already by Plato in the *Parmenides* (131a8–9): if something participates in a Form, it should participate in the Form as a whole, and in each of the many particulars there should be the Form as a whole, while still remaining one. This calls forth the question how one and the same Form can be present in a multiplicity of separated things. Will it not on this account be separate from itself (131b2)? The same problem concerns the relation of any level of reality to another level superior to it – of body to soul, soul to intellect etc. Here too we may rightly ask how the higher level, being participated in, may remain transcendent and untouched by participation, and yet be somehow present in the subordinate level.

Late Neoplatonists offer a systematic answer to this problem, one that perfectly illustrates their approach: they draw subtle distinctions between various aspects of the participation process, treating them as discrete entities. Proclus lists not less than three of them: (1) On the one hand there is the participating entity, receiving a kind of influx of the higher level. (2) On the other hand there is the higher level as such, which keeps on emitting the influx, yet itself remains transcendent and altogether unspoiled by participation; for this reason, Proclus designates it as 'unparticipated'. (3) The mean term between the two extremes is the 'participated' influx itself which comes out of the higher level and is immanent in the lower one. At first sight, such a solution might appear as all too intricate, yet it serves Proclus extremely well, allowing him to describe tiny nuances of the problem with great precision (see below, ch. 2.4).

Plotinus' approach is entirely different. He discusses the matter thoroughly in his treatise *On the Presence of Being, One and the Same, Everywhere as a Whole* (*Enn.* vi 4–5), where in his characteristic way he attempts to reconstruct the Platonic model of participation in front of our eyes from the very basics. He stresses that each higher form of being is incorporeal, and therefore non-spatial (for space only arises at the level of matter) and indivisible (for divisibility only arises in space). Owing to this it is misleading to describe participation by means of any spatial metaphors. Strictly speaking each higher level of reality is *everywhere* (for it is non-spatial), and it is everywhere *as a whole* (for it is indivisible, each of its aspects containing all the others). Accordingly, Plotinus reverses the imagery: if a lower level participates in a higher one, we should not speak of the higher one as being present in the lower one, but rather of the lower one as being present in

the higher one, the latter remaining in itself. 'It remains, then, to say that it is itself in nothing, but the other things participate in it, all those which are able to be present to it and insofar as they are able to be present to it' (*Enn.* VI 5, 3.13–15).

As an example Plotinus discusses the participation of body in soul. If we say that soul enters the body, it may give the impression that soul is divisible, one part of it entering in each body. In actuality soul is everywhere present as a whole, and rather than of soul entering the body we should therefore speak of the body coming to soul (*Enn.* VI 4, 16.7–13):

Since, then, participation in that nature was not its coming to this world and abandoning itself, but this our nature's coming to be in that and participating in it, it is clear that the 'coming' those ancient philosophers speak of must mean that the nature of body comes to be there and participates in life and soul, and in general is not meant spatially, but indicates whatever the manner of this kind of communion is.

If from our point of view each body participates in a different soul, this does not mean that soul would divide itself in bodies, giving one part to this body and another part to that. Rather, it means that each body has a different kind of capacity or fitness (*epitēdeiotēs*) for participating in soul (*Enn.* VI 4, 11.3–14):

Now one must suppose that what is present is present for the capacity of what is going to receive it, and that being is everywhere where there is something and does not fall short of itself, but that is present to it which is able to be present, and is present to it to the extent of its ability, not spatially . . . And certainly things are first and second and third in rank and power and difference, not by their positions. For nothing prevents different things from being all together, like soul and intellect and all kinds of knowledge, major and subordinate. For the eye perceives the colour, the smell the fragrance, and other different senses different things, coming from the same body, which exist all together, but not separately.

As another example Plotinus gives speech (chs. 12 and 15). If we speak to a group of people, sound is present in the air for everyone in an indivisible manner. It depends solely on the capacity of the audience what each of them receives from it. One person is deaf, not hearing anything; another does hear the speech but does not understand it, not knowing the language; yet another does know the language but does not understand the subject matter. In a similar way each higher level of reality is present everywhere as a whole, but each being and thing is only able to receive from it what it has capacity for.

This way of looking at participation is undoubtedly philosophically deep and stimulating, yet it also has its disadvantages. In the first place, it is difficult to visualize this model clearly and to work with it consistently. It is telling that not even Plotinus himself is capable of maintaining it in his other essays, and in most cases he prefers straightforward emanationist imagery, which despite its imprecision has the crucial advantage of being clear and intuitively comprehensible.

Much more fundamental is another consequence of this manner of speaking, to wit that it helps to relativize the boundaries between levels of reality. If we order all the hypostases hierarchically, with the One at the top and matter at the bottom, we have an unambiguous image of their different ranks and mutual relations, and may thus see, for instance, what huge distance separates the One from our corporeal world. Plotinus' analysis of participation in *Enn.* vi 4–5 helps to disturb this hierarchical image, showing the One, Intellect and Soul as present everywhere in their entirety, the boundaries between them being only the result of different capacity in each participant. Strictly speaking, this is nothing but a different way of metaphorically describing the same philosophical insight: different vertical ranks in the first model correspond to different receptive capacities in the second. Yet, metaphors are never quite neutral and they may easily change the course of our thoughts. In this way, the second model is more than likely to make us think that the boundary lines between levels of reality are not really as sharp as the alternative description suggests.

With Plotinus, this train of thought is just one among many, but it becomes much more prominent with his pupil Porphyry. For him, boundaries between hypostases are increasingly less important, and he tends to indulge in what modern scholars have pregnantly characterized as 'telescoping of hypostases'.²⁵ Plotinus himself never goes this far, but for him too the boundaries between hypostases are surprisingly simple to pass through. Crucial in this connection is a fundamental aspect of Plotinus' thought, viz. his willingness to identify metaphysical levels of reality with *states of consciousness*.²⁶ Platonic tradition has always taken for granted an analogy between the structure of reality and that of a human being – this is why the metaphysical levels bear the same names as human constituents. Normally, however, this correlation is strictly seen as parallel. A classic statement of this is Plato's *Timaeus* (41d), where the Demiurge creates human soul in

²⁵ The term was coined by Lloyd 1967: 288. The metaphor here is that of a telescopic antenna, whose segments may easily be collapsed into one.

²⁶ See Wallis 1972: 5–6. Plotinus is strikingly similar in this regard to some schools of Indian philosophy, particularly to Kashmir non-dualist Shaivism.

the same manner as the world soul, but does so independently by using second-rate components that had been left in the mixing-bowl after the creation of the world soul. Plotinus does acknowledge that human soul as an independent entity cannot compete in quality with the world soul, but he adds that soul in this sense only constitutes a small fragment of human personality, representing our 'lower self'. Our true self is the higher soul, which is eternally established in Intellect, indulging in blessed contemplation and paying no attention to what goes on at the lower levels.²⁷ In Plotinus' view, philosophers are capable of ascending to this highest layer of their own soul and of entering the intelligible realm (*Enn.* III 4, 3.21–7):

For the soul is many things, and all things, both the things above and the things below down to the limits of all life, and we are each one of us an intelligible universe, making contact with this lower world by the powers of soul below, but with the intelligible world by its powers above and the powers of the universe; and we remain with all the rest of our intelligible part above, but by its ultimate fringe we are tied to the world below, giving a kind of outflow from it to what is below, or rather an activity, by which that intelligible part is not itself lessened.

Ordinary people are not aware of the existence of their higher 'selves', for the level of their consciousness is generally low. In a simplified fashion, we may perhaps imagine 'consciousness' (in the sense of one's actual self-awareness) as a mercury column capable of moving up and down on the hierarchy of reality according to the capacity of each individual.²⁸ Whereas common folks are only aware of the corporeal level of their personality, philosophers are able to raise their consciousness column much higher, entering the intelligible realm. Obviously, this way of looking at things is just an application of the speech metaphor of participation mentioned above: a philosopher is someone who learns to receive much more from that 'speech' (i.e. from true reality in which all the levels are present together as a whole) than others. Ultimately, he can even 'receive' the One as such and unify with it – a feat that Plotinus himself managed to achieve four times during his sojourn with Porphyry.²⁹ Thanks to this, the One too may be regarded as an aspect of our being. The One is 'gentle and kindly and gracious, and present to anyone when he wishes' (*Enn.* v 5, 12.33–4). Normally, however, we are not aware of our identity with it: the One 'is present even to those asleep . . . but people do not see it, because it is present

²⁷ For a good summary of Plotinus' conception see Armstrong 1967b: 223–7.

²⁸ Plotinus' concept of consciousness is actually rather more complicated, but the details are not important for our present purpose. Cf. in detail Warren 1964 (the rising and sinking of consciousness is discussed on pp. 93–7).

²⁹ Porphyry, *Vita Plot.* 23.15–17. For Plotinus' own descriptions see *Enn.* I 6, 9; v 3, 17; VI 8, 15; VI 9, 11.

to them in their sleep' (v 5, 12.12–14). Only the philosopher in the highest accomplishment of his thought is able to transcend all duality, pushing up the column of his consciousness to the very top and experiencing the One as the deepest core of his personality. All of this makes the identity of psychology with metaphysics in Plotinus' thought very strong indeed.

Plotinus realized himself that his conception of 'undescended soul' is an anomaly in the Platonic tradition, 'contradicting the opinion of other' Platonists (*Enn.* iv 8, 8.1). His approach was breaking the boundary between the human and the divine, elevating man to the level of god. In this regard, Plotinus followed the Stoics, who also saw the sage as an equal partner of the gods.³⁰ Plato himself, on the other hand, saw a clear dividing line between the human and the divine, seeing the aim of one's life in 'assimilating oneself to god as far as possible' (*Tht.* 176b), not in identifying with him. Late Neoplatonists, starting with Iamblichus, revert to this Platonic position, insisting that human soul may never leave its proper level.³¹ Plotinus' approach seems altogether unrealistic to them. As Proclus puts it (*In Tim.* III 334.10–14):

If the best part of our being is perfect, then the whole of our being must be well-off. But in that case, why are we humans at this very moment not all of us well-off, if the summit of ourselves indulges in perpetual intellection and is constantly in the presence of the gods?

The basis of Proclus' argument is the classic Platonic tenet that the task of the best part of soul is to govern the lower parts. If the soul performed this task faultlessly, it would have to have the lower parts all the time under its control – otherwise it would fail in its ruling job, and would thus be imperfect. We know from our experience, however, that the lower parts of soul do indeed frequently get out of control. It follows, Proclus believes, that no perfect higher soul exists: 'Every particular soul, when it descends into the realm of generation, descends completely; it is not the case that there is a part of it that remains above and a part that descends' (*ET* 211.1–2).

Proclus summarizes his stance in the *Parmenides Commentary* (948.12–30):

Knowledge in us, then, is different from the divine sort, but through this knowledge we ascend to that; and neither do we need to situate the intelligible realm within us, as some assert, in order for us to know the intelligible objects as present within us (for they transcend us and are causes of our essence); nor should we

³⁰ See e.g. *SVF* III 54, 246 and 526.

³¹ For the rejection of Plotinus' psychology by Iamblichus and his followers see Steel 1978, esp. ch. 2.

say that some part of the soul remains above, in order that through it we should have contact with the intelligible realm (for that which remains always above could never become linked to that which has departed from its proper state of intellection, nor would it ever make up the same substance as it); nor should we postulate that it is consubstantial with the gods – for the Father who created us produced our substance at the first from secondary and tertiary materials (Plato, *Tim.* 41d). Some thinkers have been driven to propose such doctrines as this, through seeking to understand how we who are fallen into this realm can have knowledge of real Beings, when the knowledge of them is proper not to fallen entities, but to those who have been roused and sobered up from the Fall. But we must rather say that it is while remaining at our own rank, and possessing images of the essences of all Beings,³² that we turn to them by means of these images, and cognize the realm of Being from the tokens of it that we possess, not coordinately, but on a secondary level and in a manner corresponding to our own worth, while with what is in our own realm we are coordinate, comprehending as a unity both knowledge and its objects.

Proclus does not specify who those criticized predecessors are, but there is little doubt that he mainly has Plotinus in mind.

Eastern Neoplatonists do not just reject the existence of a higher, blessed part of soul, but even more importantly the very possibility of our soul leaving its given ontological level. In their view, the boundaries between levels of reality are firmly set and are not to be transgressed. As Proclus stresses, ‘we must guard the due limits of the soul, and neither transfer to it accounts of perfection derived from corporeal things nor drag down to its level those derived from divine entities’ (*In Alc.* 227.19–21). As for the rival Plotinian attitude, it is described by Iamblichus in his treatise *On the Soul* as follows:

There are some who maintain that incorporeal substance as a whole is homogeneous and one and the same, such that all of it may be found in any part of it; and they place even in the individual soul the intelligible world, and gods and daemons and the Good and all the beings superior to it, and declare everything to be in each thing in the same way but in a manner appropriate to its essence. Numenius is unambiguously of this opinion, Plotinus not completely consistently, while Amelius is unstable in his allegiance to the opinion; as for Porphyry, he is in two minds on the subject, now dissociating himself violently from this view, now adopting it as a doctrine handed down from above.³³

³² By ‘images of the essences of all Beings’ (*eikonas ousiōdeis tōn holōn*) Proclus probably means the ‘reason-principles’ or *logoi* that make up the internal structure of the soul, being a psychic image of the Forms; thus Steel 1997a: 307, van den Berg 2000: 246. More on the *logoi* see below, ch. 4.

³³ Iamblichus, *De anima* 1 6 = Stobaeus 1 49.32.63–73, trans. by J. Finamore and J. Dillon. It needs to be said that Iamblichus is simplifying things a little here: Plotinus does in fact know that intellect transcends the soul; he believes, however, that the soul is capable of connecting to it and appropriating it (Steel 1978: 44–5).

Iamblichus' own opinion is the very opposite of this:

The doctrine opposed to this, however, separates the Soul off, inasmuch as it has come about as following upon Intellect, representing a distinct level of being, and that aspect of it which is endowed with intellect is explained as being connected with the intellect certainly, but also as subsisting independently on its own, and it separates the soul also from all the superior classes of being, and assigns to it a particular definition of its essence.³⁴

Instead of identifying levels of reality with states of human consciousness, late Neoplatonists return to the traditional model which sees the two as merely analogous. They too acknowledge, of course, that humans may raise their consciousness towards intellective contemplation – all such achievements, however, are but psychic imitations of true intellection, which only belongs to Intellect (for details see ch. 4.5). Nor do Iamblichus and Proclus deny the Plotinian experience of unifying with the One. They strive for it no less than he did, but they interpret it differently, insisting that the 'one' in question is not the true One with capital 'O', but solely its derived correlate within ourselves – the 'one in soul' which only emulates true unity (see ch. 5.1). 'For in us too there lies a hidden trace of the one,' claims Proclus (*De dec. dub.* 64.10–12), 'which is even more divine than the intellect within us; when the soul attains it and establishes herself in it, she becomes divinely inspired and lives the divine life, insofar as this is possible for her'. If Plotinus in his most glorious moments managed to ascend to the summit of reality, eastern Neoplatonists in principle could not have risen higher than the summit of their own soul.

At first sight, the late Neoplatonic approach may appear rather pessimistic. While Plotinus had the entire universe at his feet, so to speak, and was able to pass through its various levels freely, starting with Iamblichus philosophers were 'imprisoned' on the psychic level, having no access to the higher ones. In fact, however, their position implies no pessimism whatsoever, and in some regards it is actually quite optimistic. Above all, eastern Neoplatonists have a much more positive relation towards the corporeal world. Plotinus' identification with his 'higher self' established in the intelligible world caused our philosopher to show little concern for what goes on at the corporeal level. It is symptomatic that Plotinus has a very negative conception of matter, regarding it as the ultimate source of all evil (see ch. 7.1). Late Neoplatonists cannot afford such a view for the simple reason that they have nowhere to escape from bodily reality. According

³⁴ Iamblichus, *De anima* 1 7 = Stobaeus 1 49.32.78–84, trans. by J. Finamore and J. Dillon.

to them, humans are mediators between the intelligible and the sensible world, and they have no choice but to take seriously both of them. This stance is particularly marked in Iamblichus, who laid great emphasis on the mediating nature of the soul.³⁵ For him, the soul has as if two distinct essences at once, one intelligible, another tending towards the body, and it must cultivate both, though this is difficult to do simultaneously:

Wherefore our soul simultaneously abides and changes because it is a mean between what is permanently abiding and in every way changing, and yet it shares somehow in each of the extremes, just as it is somehow both divided and as it were undivided, and simultaneously comes into existence but is ungenerated, and is destroyed in some way yet is preserved indestructible. Therefore we will not agree with Plotinus that any of it remains always the same and pure or that it proceeds completely in its declination toward generation. Rather, it proceeds as a whole and remains pure in its declination toward what is secondary to it.³⁶

Clearly, a soul of this kind has great cosmic responsibility. Its task is to mediate between the higher and the lower, and it is not appropriate for it to seek escape in the heights of intellect. Rather, it should combine its contemplative activity with active providential care for things in this world (see below, pp. 243–7).

To Proclus the ‘Heraclitean’ position of Iamblichus seemed too radical, and he softened it in one point: while also assigning to soul the role of a mediator between being and generation, he sees it as ‘eternal in its essence, though temporal in its activity’ (*ET* 191.3; cf. Steel 1978: 52–69). Whereas for Iamblichus the two sides of soul manage to coexist in a mysterious way, Proclus in his passion for formal precision separates them clearly. Despite this concession, he still insists that both aspects are fundamental to human soul’s existence: ‘Every participated soul is of the order of things which perpetually are, and is also the first of things subject to generation’ (*ET* 192.1–2). Moreover, since it descends into the corporeal realm completely (*ET* 211.1), it cannot but play its mediating part responsibly, trying to bring body and soul into harmony. In view of this it will come as no surprise that Proclus’ view of matter is entirely positive: the cause of evil in his view is the twisted *relation* between matter and soul, never matter as such (see below, ch. 7).

³⁵ See in detail Steel 1978: 52–69.

³⁶ Summary of Iamblichus’ position in Ps.-Simplicius, *In De an.* 6.8–15, trans. by J. Finamore and J. Dillon.

1.2.3 *Turn towards religion*

The fact that the late Neoplatonists are unable to ascend higher than the psychic level might easily give the impression that their vision of reality must of necessity be much poorer than that of Plotinus. Yet this is certainly not the case. First, as we have seen, Iamblichus and Proclus do in fact have access to intellectual insights and experiences of unity – only they interpret these states of consciousness in a more modest manner, believing them to take place within the soul in its more divine parts. Second, though late Neoplatonists do not see the boundaries between levels of reality as penetrable from below upward, they do see them as permeable in the opposite direction. In other words, while we certainly cannot climb upward, higher beings may easily send their irradiation downward. If we cannot ascend to them directly, we may at least open up and tune in to the beneficent power that they constantly keep on sending down towards us.

What this amounts to in practice is that eastern Neoplatonists are able to attain no less mystical states of consciousness than those described by Plotinus, but they have to use different methods for reaching them. Plotinus in his ascent could very much rely on his own powers, for he saw the higher levels as constituting the summit of his own being. He was aware, of course, that the universal powers must cooperate with one's human effort, and that even an experienced mystic must at certain stages of his journey pray to the divine to appear to him.³⁷ Still, the crucial stress for him lay on his own spiritual exercise and concentration. Eastern Neoplatonists strive to achieve a balance between these two aspects, seeing our dependence on the free will of higher beings as no less important than philosophical practice. In Neoplatonism, though, 'free will' has nothing to do with arbitrary capriciousness. While the gods only illuminate us when they want to, their will is strictly regular, being in accord with the unchangeable order of reality. It follows that if humans learn the divine rules of this order and act in harmony with them, their chance of having the gods at their side is fairly high.

Late Neoplatonists are not as self-confident as to believe that they might be able to uncover the rules of divine behaviour by philosophical analysis. For them, the gods are grounded in the One, and thus share its essential characteristics of being rationally unknowable. Luckily, the gods are unselfish and they sometimes reveal their true nature by means of inspired symbols – such as those that traditional Hellenic myths and cults consisted

³⁷ See e.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* v 5, 8.1–5 (quoted below, p. 174), and v 8, 9.13–17 (quoted below, p. 161).

of. As a result, eastern Neoplatonists take great interest in religion. They are convinced that mythical images and ritual acts revealed long ago to divinely inspired poets and religious specialists might even now help the philosopher evoke the proper divine powers and connect up with them. Yet, the civic cults of Greek cities that Hellenic religion chiefly consisted in were actually quite remote from the world of late Neoplatonism, and adapting them to mystical purposes was far from easy. It is for this reason that Iamblichus searched for alternative ways of divine revelation that might be easier to integrate with his philosophical system. To this end, he turned towards one of the more recent pagan religious forms – to theurgy.

Theurgy was a ritual technique which combined procedures of magic and traditional religion with the aim of evoking the gods.³⁸ It had emerged on the late antique religious scene before the advent of Neoplatonism, being created in the second half of second century AD by Julian the Theurgist and his father Julian the Chaldean (due to his interest in Platonism also called Julian the Philosopher). Iamblichus regarded it as an ideal technique for the salvation of the soul, and turned it into an integral part of late Neoplatonism. The aim of theurgy was to attune the soul to the gods, allowing them to enter it and fill it with divine power. The ritual techniques were supplemented by a sacred text, the *Chaldean Oracles*, written again by both Julians (allegedly on the basis of inspired utterances pronounced by the son in divinatory trance during seances conducted by his father).³⁹ The *Chaldean Oracles*, which unfortunately are only preserved in fragments, were meant to provide a ‘map’ of the spiritual world. They were heavily influenced by Middle Platonic thought, and it is for this reason that the eastern Neoplatonists found it particularly simple to integrate them in their universe, regarding them as a theological manual of utmost importance. In one of his weaker moments Proclus went as far as to claim that if he had the power, out of all the ancient writings he would only keep in circulation the *Chaldean Oracles* and Plato’s *Timaeus*, for all the other texts could easily turn harmful when studied superficially and unsystematically (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 38.15–20).

We shall have a closer look at the religious side of Neoplatonism in chapters 3, 5, 6 and 9. For the moment it will be enough to remark that the turn of our philosophers towards religion was not just a mark of their

³⁸ Concerning the history of theurgy, Dodds 1951: 283–311 still remains useful, despite the author’s negative bias. On Neoplatonic theurgy see in detail below, ch. 5.2.

³⁹ For an interesting attempt to set the *Oracles* into their historical and cultural context see Athanassiadi 1999 and 2005; cf. Saffrey 1981. A good overview of their theology is given by Brisson 2002; Majercik 1989: 1–46. Still useful is also the classic monumental study of Lewy 1978.

diminished confidence in the intellectual powers of man, but was also tied to their effort at safeguarding the Hellenic cultural tradition, which had always been closely interrelated with religion. As we shall see in ch. 9.1, traditional Hellenic religion was going through a crisis by the end of the third century already, even before the Empire turned officially Christian. Unlike Porphyry, Iamblichus realized all too well that the end of Hellenic religion would also be the end of Hellenic culture as such, and in effect would endanger the very existence of the Platonic tradition, whose ties to the general cultural substrate were stronger than it might seem at first sight. As a result, Iamblichus designed his philosophy as a larger framework capable of defending pagan religious traditions. As Christian persecution of paganism progressed, this aspect became increasingly important. By the end of the fourth century most public cults were banned and Hellenic religion was forced out into the private sphere. The Neoplatonists reacted by taking the debris of pagan religion under their wing. The philosopher became a priest and a theologian at the same time. Proclus' Athenian school is a good example: it was on its premises that fragments of the formerly public rituals took place.⁴⁰ If in the sixth to fifth centuries BC philosophy emerged out of religion as an independent cultural phenomenon, in the fifth to sixth centuries AD she in turn received religion into her womb.

1.3 PROCLUS AND ATHENIAN NEOPLATONISM

Let us close our historical-cum-philosophical survey by introducing the man himself. To understand what part Proclus played in the eastern Neoplatonic tradition, it will be useful to sketch its entire development, starting from Iamblichus. We shall then have a look at Proclus' life and work, and finish by briefly recapitulating the last days of Neoplatonism after Proclus' death.⁴¹

1.3.1 *From Iamblichus to Proclus*

Iamblichus (around 240–325) came from the Syrian Chalcis, and it was also in Syria that after his parting with Porphyry he decided to set up a school of his own – not in his hometown, though, but in Apamea. The reason for this choice lay probably in the city's long intellectual tradition: not only

⁴⁰ A good overview of Proclus' practical piety is Dillon 2007a. Cf. below, pp. 171–3.

⁴¹ Since my work is not primarily historical, in what follows I shall mostly not refer to primary sources; they may easily be found e.g. in Fowden 1982; Siorvanes 1996: 1–47; O'Meara 2003: 16–26; Dillon 2005, and in greatest detail in Watts 2006.

was it the birthplace of Posidonius the Stoic and Numenius the Middle Platonist; even more importantly, it was to this city that Plotinus' pupil Amelius moved in 269, leaving here in the hands of his son his own notes from Plotinus' lectures.⁴² According to one hypothesis, Apamea might also have been the place where the *Chaldean Oracles* originated, which would certainly make it highly attractive to Iamblichus (just as to Amelius before him).⁴³ In any case, Iamblichus built up a renowned philosophical school here with good international reputation. Unfortunately, he could not find a worthy successor, and after his death the Neoplatonic tradition was dispersed. Each of his pupils worked elsewhere, mostly in various cities of Asia Minor (the most important of them, Aedesius, ran his school in Pergamum).

By this time, the political and religious development of the Empire made the position of the Neoplatonists increasingly precarious. After the last massive wave of anti-Christian persecutions at the turn of the fourth century by the emperor Diocletian, there came an unexpected reversal when Diocletian's successor Constantine in 312 converted to Christianity. While he did not actively fight paganism himself, and formally regarded both religions as equal, Christianity was nevertheless strongly supported by him as well as by his successors, and as it grew, it started to oppose paganism in an ever stronger way. By the 350s the position of Hellenic intellectuals was already somehow uncertain, particularly if they subscribed to the religiously inclined Iamblichean Neoplatonism. It may have been for this reason that the followers of Iamblichus frequently preferred to establish their schools on the safe home ground of their native cities.

Things were hardly improved by the attempt of emperor Julian the Apostate to restore Hellenic religion in 361–2. Julian was aware that to compete with Christianity, pagans would have to adjust to the times. Having received a Neoplatonic education himself, he saw in Neoplatonism an ideal modern theological cloak in which to dress the old cults. A remarkable testimony to his efforts is the short treatise *On the Gods and the Cosmos*, written by Julian's friend Sallustius as a theological manual designed to introduce to the general educated public the basic principles of Neoplatonism – particularly those relevant to ethics and religion. At his court in Constantinople, Julian was surrounded by several Neoplatonic philosophers. The most conspicuous of them was Maximus of Ephesus,

⁴² Porphyry, *Vita Plot.* 2.32–3; 3.44–8. Unlike Plotinus, Amelius had a penchant for traditional religion (he was *philothytēs* – *Vita Plot.* 10.33–4), and Iamblichus may thus have felt a certain spiritual affinity with him.

⁴³ Arguments for this thesis are given by Athanassiadi 1999: 153–6.

whose rather extreme passion for Hellenic religion and theurgy added little to the credibility of Julian's reforms. After Julian's tragic death in 363, an anti-Neoplatonic reaction followed quickly. Maximus was executed in 371, others were watched with distrust. Eunapius of Sardis, who at the end of the fourth century recorded the lives of Iamblichus and his successors in his *Lives of the Sophists*, seems to have seen himself as one of the last partisans of a dying tradition.

Despite this, Neoplatonism still had its most glorious period ahead. Its future lay in Athens, the most traditional philosophical town of all. In Roman times, Athens was politically and economically insignificant, but since it embodied the glory of Classical culture, it still retained great cultural and intellectual prestige. Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum were both destroyed during Sulla's sack of Athens in 86 BC, but even so their spirit kept on hovering over the town. Emperor Hadrian reconstructed the city in the first half of the second century AD, and in the 170s emperor Marcus Aurelius established four official professorships for Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism and Epicureanism. To their incumbents belonged the title of 'successor' (*diadochos*), for they were regarded as the main upholders of their respective schools. The same title would later belong to Proclus.

In the third century the stream of imperial finances seems to have run dry, but the academic tradition survived – at least in its Platonic form. In the third century Porphyry mentions several Athenian 'successors' (*Vita Plot.* 20.39–47), but regards them as mere teachers with no interesting philosophical conceptions of their own. A century later the future emperor Julian found in Athens his short but sweet philosophical refuge, but neither in his day were any important philosophers around, and the city was mainly known for its teachers of rhetoric. It was only at the end of the fourth century that things changed thanks to Plutarch of Athens and his pupil Syrianus. Under their guidance the Platonic Academy was renewed and made financially secure by private funding. Even so, the school's future was far from certain, depending on the qualities of a suitable successor to Syrianus.

Proclus came to Athens in 430, only seven years before Syrianus' death. When he arrived in town from the sea port in the evening and climbed the Acropolis, wishing to pay a visit to the sacred precinct of Athena, the goddess of philosophy, he found the doorman just about to close the gate. 'Honestly, if you had not come, I was about to close up,' exclaimed the old fellow. 'What omen, now, could have been more clear than this,' adds Proclus' biographer Marinus (*Vita Procli* 10), 'which required no Polles or Melampus or any such person for its interpretation?'

Proclus was born in 412⁴⁴ in Constantinople, but his noble pagan parents immediately took him to their native Xanthus, a rich city in Lycia on the south coast of Asia Minor. Here he spent his childhood until his father, an accomplished lawyer, sent him to Alexandria to study rhetoric and law. Proclus was highly successful in both fields, but after some time Athena appeared to him in a dream, admonishing him to study philosophy in Athens. Proclus had no experience with philosophy so far, and he first started to attend philosophy classes in Alexandria, which as a renowned university town never had a shortage of philosophers, though it seldom attracted original thinkers. Plotinus already had difficulties finding trustworthy teachers here, and in the end he was only satisfied by the idiosyncratic outsider Ammonius. At the beginning of the fifth century, the only distinctive Neoplatonic thinker here was the beautiful female philosopher and mathematician Hypatia, who was murdered in 415 by fanatical Christians supported by the bishop Cyril of Alexandria.⁴⁵ The powerful Christian presence in the city was always a crucial factor to count upon, causing teachers of philosophy to pay more attention to theologically non-controversial disciplines such as logic, physics or ethics. A particular favourite of Alexandrian teachers was Aristotle, whose philosophy was religiously neutral and in the eyes of Christians more or less inoffensive.

Proclus too applied himself in Alexandria to these 'lower' disciplines. He studied mathematics with Heron (who also instructed him in his 'religion', *theosebeia*, i.e. probably in some kind of Neopythagoreanism) and Aristotelian doctrines with Olympiodorus. This fellow was so excited about Proclus' results that he wanted him to marry his own philosophically educated daughter. Proclus found Olympiodorus' expositions intellectually unsatisfactory, however, and at the age of nineteen he preferred to hearken to the goddess and follow her to her town.

In Athens he soon convinced his teachers not only of his philosophical talent, but of his sincere Hellenic piety as well. Old Plutarch lodged him at his place and in the remaining two years of his life he read with him Aristotle's *On the Soul* and Plato's *Phaedo*. Syrianus grew no less fond of

⁴⁴ The date is derived from Proclus' horoscope, which is given by Marinus in *Vita Procli* 35 and which seems to correspond to 7 February 412, 9 am, though only after some minor corrections (see Jones 1999). The dating is made complicated by Marinus' claim that Proclus died aged seventy-five in 485. It seems, however, that Marinus was not quite certain about Proclus' year of birth (he never mentions it), and the horoscope appears as a more reliable source, for it was obviously made in Proclus' childhood (it is calculated for Xanthus, no doubt due to the fact that it was made by a local astrologer who considered Proclus a native and forgot about his birth in Constantinople).

⁴⁵ See the vivid depiction of Hypatia's personality and death in Damascius, *Hist. Phil.*, fr. 43. Cyril's instigation is only mentioned by Damascius, Christian sources describe his part in the murder as indirect.

him, and after Plutarch's death he in turn received him into his house. 'In less than two whole years', claims Marinus (*Vita Procli* 13.1–4), 'he read with him the entire works of Aristotle, logical, ethical, political, physical and the science of theology which transcends these.' After taking him through these 'lesser mysteries' he revealed to him the greater mysteries of Plato (*ibid.*, 13.10–17):

Working day and night with tireless discipline and care, and writing down what was said in a comprehensive yet discriminating manner, Proclus made such progress in a short time that, when he was still in his twenty-eighth year, he wrote a great many treatises, which were elegant and teeming with knowledge, especially the one on the *Timaeus*.

Syrianus was apparently not a prolific writer, and we only possess his *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Nevertheless, from the frequent acknowledgements in Proclus' treatises we may gather that he was a thinker of fundamental importance. It seems to have been he who has carefully rethought the slightly simpler Neoplatonism of Iamblichus and turned it into the complex system that the literarily gifted Proclus could take over and expose in his copious works.⁴⁶ While Marinus does praise Proclus' originality, the only innovation he is able to come up with is the introduction of 'a kind of souls that are able to see many Forms at once', being intermediate 'between the mind which simultaneously and in one stroke considers everything and the souls that make a progress from one Form to another' (*Vita Procli* 23). Clearly, it was only such minor points as this one that Proclus could apply his creativity to. The main outlines of the system were already thought out by Syrianus, Proclus' accomplishment consisting in their systematic presentation – a task he managed to fulfil brilliantly indeed.

Proclus became the Platonic successor around 437, and was the head of the most prestigious philosophical school of his time for almost fifty years. Like many other important Neoplatonists he never married, devoting himself solely to academic work. Every day he held five or more lectures and wrote his treatises at the rate of 700 lines a day. He also managed the school administratively, and found some time even for occasional negotiations with political authorities. Not a small portion of his life was dedicated to religion. By prayers and appropriate ceremonies he celebrated the festivals of all cities, being convinced that 'a philosopher ought not to worship in the manner of a single city or the country of a few people, but should be

⁴⁶ For Syrianus' thought see the papers in Longo 2009.

the common priest of the entire world' (*Vita Procli* 19.28–30). In addition, Plutarch's daughter Asclepigeneia initiated him into all the theurgic rites, and the goddess Athena after the removal of her statue from the Parthenon asked him to accept her in his own house. His school was thus a religious centre no less than an intellectual one.

1.3.2 Proclus' writings

Proclus' position among the late Neoplatonists is exceptional in that a relatively large part of his writings have been preserved. The philosophical ones may be divided into three main groups by genre.

(1) The first group consists of *systematic* works, whose task is to give a general exposition of Proclus' metaphysics. The most important of them are *The Elements of Theology* (*ET*), a relatively short treatise remarkable for its form no less than its content. Proclus attempts in it to present the basic rules and principles of Neoplatonic metaphysics in 211 propositions, each of which is 'proved' and shown to follow necessarily from the other ones. From the first proposition, which claims that 'every multiplicity participates in some way in unity', Proclus step by step deduces the existence of the One, as well as all the other levels, laws and categories of late Neoplatonic universe. Methodologically the work is inspired by Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, which from a small number of intuitively obvious axioms deduced an entire system of geometrical theorems. Proclus was the first thinker to apply Euclid's geometrical method to philosophy, foreshadowing the approach of medieval scholasticism as well as of Spinoza's *Ethics*.⁴⁷ Needless to say, the strict logical deductive method is in part just an illusion. As E. R. Dodds (1933: xi) put it, 'the coherence of a body of philosophical thought cannot be fully expressed in a chain of logically flawless syllogisms'. Proclus' 'proofs' are thus to be seen rather as illustrative demonstrations, which frequently simply reiterate the proposition in question at greater length, unfolding its implications and explaining its relation to other propositions (this, after all, is already true for Euclid). Once we read the *Elements* in this way as a lucid presentation of basic late Neoplatonic ideas, their value becomes enormous.

The Elements of Theology have the additional advantage of being available in an excellent Greek–English bilingual edition of E. R. Dodds, followed by an insightful commentary, in which Dodds manages to unmask most

⁴⁷ Proclus used the same method in his treatise *The Elements of Physics*, in which he mainly builds on Aristotle's *Physics* (cf. Nikulin 2003). Since Proclus' physics has been the main focus of Siorvanes 1996, in this book for reasons of space it is left out entirely.

of the seemingly abstract and general propositions and explain the particular problems behind them. He also sets all of Proclus' thoughts into their historical context, giving the reader a good chance to see what the roots of Proclus' metaphysics are and against what positions of his predecessors it reacts. For all these reasons, *The Elements of Theology* with Dodds's commentary will always remain the text to start from for all serious students of Proclus.

Proclus' second important systematic work is the *Platonic Theology* (*PT*).⁴⁸ Here too we find a general overview of late Neoplatonic metaphysics, but one that is presented in an entirely different way. While the *Elements* mainly map the *rules* of Proclus' universe, the *Platonic Theology* focuses on the *gods* who make up its basic structure (see below, ch. 3.2). Moreover, if in the *Elements* Proclus pretended to proceed by means of pure deductions, without any reference to history, in the *Platonic Theology* he takes the opposite course, striving to correlate whatever Plato says about the gods with Orphic and Chaldean theogonies. The monumental treatise is thus not a work of pure philosophy, but rather of theological hermeneutics. It is a dialogue between abstract thought and religious revelation, and an attempt to integrate as much as possible of the latter into the former. One scholar has even attributed an initiatory quality to the text: 'the system that it supposedly conveys is more like a ritual invocation or theurgic rite than a handbook of metaphysics . . . Like the statues of the theurgists, this text is meant to become enlivened through the invocations of the gods that form its itinerary' (Rappe 2000: 170–1). In effect, the work is fairly hard to digest for most modern readers, and its study should only be undertaken by those who are already well acquainted with the general outlines of Proclus' thought and are not afraid of plunging into some of its most intricate details.

(2) The second and most extensive group of Proclus' works are his *Commentaries*. For late Neoplatonists, commentaries were the most important genre of all.⁴⁹ In part this was so due to the requirements of school teaching. Just as our own philosophy classes are normally based on the close reading and interpretation of classic philosophical texts, so were those of the Neoplatonists. To some extent this had been true since the first century BC, when with the dispersal of philosophical schools after Sulla's sack of Athens teaching continuity could no longer be guaranteed by the original

⁴⁸ On the *Platonic Theology* cf. the monumental collection of papers in Segonds and Steel 2000.

⁴⁹ More on them see I. Hadot 1987 and 2002; Hoffmann 2006; Sluiter 1999. A systematic introduction to major philosophical problems dealt with by the commentators (mainly in relation to Aristotle) is Tuominen 2009.

locally bounded Athenian institutions and had to be secured by the study of texts written by the school's founders.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it was only at the end of the third century AD that commentaries became a philosophical genre par excellence. The shift in emphasis was probably tied to the fact that by this time the Hellenic intellectual tradition was losing its living spontaneity and was increasingly perceived as an old treasure to be guarded and admired (see below, ch. 9.1). An important manifestation of this was a new approach to ancient texts, of which some were now being turned into a sacred canon – a phenomenon hitherto unknown in the Greek world. In the field of philosophy this led to the sanctification of the treatises of Plato and to a lesser extent those of Aristotle as well. In the sphere of religion similar sacred authority was attributed to Homer, Hesiod, Orpheus and the *Chaldean Oracles*, all of which texts now played a part comparable to that of the Bible within Christianity.

As a result, Neoplatonic commentaries were hugely different from what we would nowadays understand by the term, resembling religious exegesis rather than critical historical study. As Philippe Hoffmann (2006: 599) puts it, philosophy was conceived as a 'revelation':

in such a context, interpreting such 'authorities' as Plato and Aristotle amounts to unveiling – with no innovation – a meaning and a truth of which the gods and 'divine men' are the source . . . The interpreter explicates what is already there: he is merely the vector of Truth. As the grandiose prologue of Proclus' *Platonic Theology* expresses it, there is furthermore no history of Truth, but only a history of its manifestation and of its unveiling.

One consequence of this was the need to harmonize various philosophical traditions, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle.⁵¹ Since philosophy is a revelation of Truth, there is no room for alternative conceptions; one can only be right or wrong. The works of Aristotle were regarded as all too important to be placed on the 'wrong' side, and most exegetes from the time of Porphyry thus felt obliged to bring them into accord with Platonic doctrines. The differences between the two thinkers that might strike us as unbridgeable were interpreted as merely pertaining to language, not to the nature of reality as such.⁵² The same applied to Plato's dialogues, which were read as manifestations of a perfectly consistent philosophical system. A fascinating amount of energy was consequently spent on extracting this

⁵⁰ Thus P. Hadot 1987. ⁵¹ See Hoffmann 2006: 599, 603–4; Gerson 2006.

⁵² It should be admitted, though, that Proclus and Syrianus were ready to take these differences more seriously than most other Neoplatonists, and were not afraid of explicitly opposing Aristotle (Romano 1993; Helmig 2009 and 2012: ch. 5); see e.g. below, p. 151.

system from the seemingly pluralistic and inconclusive dialogues. Moreover, since Plato's works were regarded as sacred, they were seen as pregnant with meaning down to the tiniest detail. Even the literary settings and the speakers involved were viewed as deeply meaningful and were interpreted by means of allegorical exegesis.

It is slightly ironic that the anxious effort at keeping to the tradition actually created space for great philosophical originality – for to interpret Plato and Aristotle in the thoroughly systematic way just described was of course far from easy and required lots of ingenuity. In fact, the enormous intricacy of late Neoplatonic thought is partly due precisely to exegetical reasons: to show the dialogues of Plato as containing a fully consistent metaphysical system was only possible at the cost of immense complexity of this system, whose subtle distinctions were frequently devised so as to absorb all the divergent claims scattered across the Platonic corpus as well as the other sacred texts (including various mythical theogonies – see below, ch. 3.2). New doctrines were not introduced as one's original insights, but merely as better ways of making explicit the unchanging Truth that was implicit in classic works from the very beginning.

Hand in hand with this went a strict order in which canonical texts were to be studied. After some general non-philosophical works, the curriculum began with the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus and Porphyry's *Isagoge* (an introduction to Aristotle's *Categories*). Next came the works of Aristotle himself: the logical writings of the *Organon*, the 'practical' treatises on ethics and politics, and finally the 'theoretical' writings, starting from physical works and culminating with *Metaphysics*. Aristotle's works were only regarded as 'lesser mysteries', though, which were meant to prepare the student for the 'greater mysteries' of Plato. As we know from the anonymous *Prolegomena to Plato's Philosophy* (§ 26), from Iamblichus onwards the study of Plato was divided into two cycles. The first cycle comprised ten dialogues: starting with the first *Alcibiades* (which teaches one to turn to oneself), it continued with the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo* (which correspond to the practice of the 'civic' and 'purificatory' virtues respectively), the *Cratylus* and the *Theaetetus* (the study of names and concepts), the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* (the study of physical realities), the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* (the study of theological realities), until finally it was concluded by the *Philebus*, which offers a first instruction about the Good. The second cycle provided the highest initiation, consisting solely of the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*, which were supposed to contain the summit of Plato's physics and theology respectively.

It is mainly to these works that the Neoplatonists wrote their commentaries, which were to be studied together with the canonical original, and whose composition also amounted to a continuous spiritual exercise, allowing the interpreter by the very act of writing to acquire a more exact understanding of the subject studied. It is for this reason that the commentaries were written over and over again by each new generation of Neoplatonists.

Proclus' commentaries were among the most respected ones, which is why quite a few of them have been preserved, though sadly all incomplete. For modern readers they are not easy to follow, for they already presuppose a fairly good knowledge of Neoplatonism. Still, they are an invaluable treasure of philosophical material, and in some cases they even help to throw light on Plato in ways that comply with modern criteria of interpretation. Moreover, since the commentaries were composed for school use, they give us the unique opportunity to peep into the late Neoplatonic classroom and see what the teaching looked like.

The most extensive of Proclus' commentaries is the one on Plato's *Timaeus*, which we have already seen praised by Marinus (above, p. 36). For modern scholars, this work is precious not just as a huge reservoir of Proclus' doctrines concerning the cosmos and many other related areas, but even more importantly on account of the numerous historical excursions into the interpretations of his predecessors that Proclus provides throughout.

In his commentary on the *Parmenides*, Proclus is unfortunately less generous and refrains from referring to earlier interpreters by name, though he still summarizes many of their views. With regard to his own thought, however, the *Parmenides Commentary* is one of the crucial witnesses. The Neoplatonists read the hypotheses of the *Parmenides* as an encrypted compendium of Platonic metaphysics: 'For in this treatise all the divine classes proceed in an ordered sequence from the very first cause and manifest their mutual interconnection.'⁵³ Accordingly, Proclus' interpretation of this dialogue unravels step by step the entire hierarchy of the Neoplatonic universe and elucidates the basic principles of its functioning.

The *Alcibiades Commentary* belongs to the very beginning of the Platonic curriculum, and is thus less rich in metaphysics, but easier to understand, throwing light on a number of interesting ethical and epistemological subjects.

⁵³ Proclus, *PT* I 7, 31.14–16. For Neoplatonic interpretations of the *Parmenides* in their historical context see Steel 2002a.

The *Republic Commentaries* are anomalous in genre, for they are not commentaries in the technical sense of the word: the *Republic* was too long for the curriculum, and was only taught in selected segments. For this reason, instead of analysing portions of text ('lemmata') one by one, as was usual, Proclus here offers a collection of essays on selected topics from the dialogue, covering again mainly ethical and epistemological topics, and providing also a highly interesting exposition of his theory of poetry (see below, ch. 6). The only part to have a standard running commentary form is the sixteenth treatise, which gives a fascinating analysis of the eschatological Myth of Er.

Yet another genre is represented by the *Cratylus Commentary*, which was actually not written by Proclus at all, consisting of a series of course-notes taken by one of his students. Despite the brevity of the treatise, it is important for understanding Proclus' philosophy of language.⁵⁴

It is highly probable that Proclus also commented on all the other dialogues in the curriculum. We know him for certain to have written commentaries on the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, *Sophist* and *Theaetetus*, all now lost. Beyond the Platonic canon we only possess the highly interesting commentary on Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, which provides an excellent exposition of Proclus' philosophy of mathematics (see below, ch. 4.4). His commentary on Plotinus' *Enneads* has not been preserved. Surprisingly, we hear of no commentaries on Aristotle written by Proclus; it is unlikely that he would have written none at all, but Aristotle clearly was not a focus of his interest. More to his taste were the *Chaldean Oracles*, which he analysed in his treatises *On the Chaldean Philosophy* and *On the Agreement between Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato concerning the Chaldean Oracles*. Both are lost, but we do have several lengthy fragments from the former, all of them of great import for our understanding of Proclus' theurgy.

(3) The last group of Proclus' philosophical works consists of shorter monographs on various subjects. Of these, only his three essays on fate, providence and the origin of evil have been preserved in full. In *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence* Proclus examines how providence has foreknowledge of contingent events, why human lives are unequal, why children are sometimes punished for the sins of their ancestors, and why the gods are often so lenient in imposing their punishment. In the essay *On Providence, Fate, and That which is in our Power* Proclus gives a systematic account of fate, providence and human decisions. In *On the Existence of Evils* he

⁵⁴ See in detail van den Berg 2008.

provides the most exhaustive analysis of evil that has been preserved from antiquity (see below, ch. 7). For today's readers all these treatises are highly interesting in that they are less technical than most of Proclus' works and may be read even without extensive preliminary knowledge of Neoplatonic metaphysics. They may also be seen as a useful ethical counterpoint to the extremely abstract metaphysical works. Their sole serious drawback is an unfortunate manner of their preservation: the original Greek text was lost in the Middle Ages, and we only possess an unintelligible Latin translation of William of Moerbeke. Luckily, the three essays were plagiarized in the eleventh century by the Byzantine prince Isaac Sebastocrator, who in his three treatises of the same name copied long passages from Proclus with only minor changes. A comparison of Isaac's essays with Moerbeke's mechanically literal translations has allowed scholars to reconstruct Proclus' Greek text, greatly easing the study of the three *opuscula*.⁵⁵

Proclus' other philosophical monographs have only been preserved fragmentarily. We know a relatively large portion of his treatise *Eighteen Arguments on the Eternity of the World*, which can be reconstructed from Philoponus' criticisms of it in his work *Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World*. A couple of fragments have also been preserved from Proclus' *Examination of the Objections of Aristotle to the Timaeus of Plato*. Last but not least, we possess a couple of pages from his highly interesting manual of theurgy *On the Hieratic Art According to the Greeks* (also known by the Latin title *De sacrificio et magia*).

Besides philosophical and theological works, Proclus was prolific in other disciplines as well. He had good knowledge of astronomy, as we can judge from his *Hypotypōsis* or *Outline of Astronomical Hypotheses*, a detailed introduction to the astronomical theories of Ptolemy and Hipparchus. The *Paraphrase of Ptolemy's Tetrabiblos* deals with astrology rather than astronomy, and its authorship is disputed by some modern scholars. Almost certainly spurious is the *Sphaira*, a short extract from the introduction to astronomy by Geminus, immensely popular in the Renaissance.

Doubts have also been raised concerning Proclus' authorship of two schoolbooks of literary theory: the *Chrestomathy*, a manual of literary genres, preserved in several lengthy extracts containing useful summaries of epic poems, and the brief handbook *On Epistolary Style*. Both works were

⁵⁵ In the standard edition of H. Boese from 1960 only about half of the text was reconstructed (viz. those parts which were directly quoted by Isaac). Now at last a complete retroversion has been prepared by Ströbel 2012 (I am grateful to him for sending me his text even before its actual publication). For the character of Moerbeke's translations see Steel 1982a: 43–54. On Isaac Sebastocrator see Steel 1982b.

apparently designed for students of rhetoric and show no traces of philosophy, but it is well possible that they were written by Proclus after all, for we know from Marinus (ch. 8) that back in his early days in Alexandria he excelled in similar subjects. He also wrote commentaries on Homer and on Hesiod's *Works and Days*; portions of the latter work have been preserved among the Byzantine Hesiod scholia. Proclus' own poetic talents as well as his sincere religious fervour may be judged from his *Hymns*, of which seven have come down to us.

1.3.3 *The final days of Neoplatonism*

After Proclus' death in 485 the Athenian school declined again. Proclus' successor was Marinus, who excelled more in diligence than in intellectual capacities.⁵⁶ After his death in 492 things got even worse, and the school was drowned in internal disputes. In spite of this, it was destined to rise from the ashes one more time. At the turn of the sixth century its saviour was Damascius – a brilliant thinker, who was not afraid to criticize and re-evaluate traditional dogmas, and who in his preserved works frequently argues with Proclus himself (usually in favour of Iamblichus). Under his leadership the Athenian school once again became the major philosophical centre of the empire – and hand in hand with this a bastion of Hellenism, sheltering the greatest minds of the time. Besides excelling in philosophy, Damascius was also an acute observer of the world around him, as we can judge from his *Philosophical History*, a remarkable work mapping the history of Neoplatonism in the fifth century. While Marinus' *Life of Proclus* was an idealized hagiographic account, Damascius is not afraid of disclosing the weaknesses of his philosophical contemporaries and predecessors, providing us with a uniquely realistic picture of the pagan intellectual scene of late antiquity.⁵⁷

Sadly, Damascius' reform of the Academy was all too successful, and started to arouse displeasure among the Christians. Their reaction was quick and severe: in 529 the emperor Justinian forbade philosophical teaching in Athens, and in 531 had the Academy closed and a large part of its property confiscated. Damascius, who by this time was more than sixty years old, decided to leave the inhuman Christian empire and seek refuge with a group of his students in Persia, which the Neoplatonists rather

⁵⁶ See his unflattering characteristics in Damascius, *Hist. Phil.*, fr. 97.

⁵⁷ The treatise (sometimes also called *Life of Isidore*) has unfortunately only been preserved in extracts in Photius and in the *Souda*. A reconstruction has been attempted by Polymnia Athanassiadi, and I am following her ordering of the fragments.

naively imagined as a haven of paganism. The emperor Chosroes of the Sasanian dynasty received them hospitably at his court in Ctesiphon, and in comparison with his Christian counterpart did prove to be tolerant and open minded indeed, but the Persian socio-political situation was far from ideal and the cultivated Neoplatonists found it intolerable. Despite this, their journey was not in vain. The young monarch sympathized with our philosophers and compensated them grandly: in the Treaty of Eternal Peace, which he signed with Justinian in 532, he expressly stipulated that the philosophers should be allowed 'to return to their homes and to live their lives with impunity without being forced to alter their traditional beliefs or to accept any view which they did not like' (Agathias, *Historiae* II 30–1).

Further fortunes of the repatriates are disputed. The last clear trace of Damascius appears in 538 in the Syrian Emesa, where his epitaph for a dead slave has been preserved on a funerary stele. According to an attractive hypothesis of Michel Tardieu (1986), Athenian Neoplatonists could have settled in Harran, a Byzantine town on the borders with Persia, which remained pagan well into the sixth century. It is here that Damascius' best pupil Simplicius may have written his extensive commentaries to Aristotle, and that the Arabs may later have become acquainted with Greek philosophical thought. Most scholars reject this theory, however (cf. e.g. Lane Fox 1986).

Very different was the development in the only other remaining Neoplatonic school in Alexandria, which in the fifth century was closely related to Athens both philosophically and personally. Around the time when Proclus succeeded Syrianus in Athens, his fellow-student Hermias became a professor of philosophy in Alexandria. His son Ammonius in turn studied with Proclus, only to take over the Alexandrian professorship of his father later on, around 470. In the strongly Christian Alexandria the position of Hellenic philosophers was much more difficult than in Athens, which were still pagan to a large extent. The situation became particularly serious after 484, when an ambitious Alexandrian pagan Pamprepius got involved in an unsuccessful coup against the emperor, which led the patriarch of Alexandria to intensify his fight against non-Christians. Many philosophers were tortured, others had to escape.⁵⁸ Under such conditions, Ammonius relaxed his Platonic moral strictness and behaved pragmatically: to save his school, he concluded a 'contract' with the patriarch – probably to the effect that he would remove from Alexandrian Neoplatonism certain

⁵⁸ Damascius, *Hist. Phil.*, frs. 112–28.

pagan elements.⁵⁹ Admittedly, while Athenian philosophical treatises were unambiguously pagan, Alexandrian Neoplatonists increasingly avoided all theological subjects. Ammonius himself almost exclusively wrote commentaries on Aristotle.

Damascius deeply despised Ammonius for his adaptability (*Hist. Phil.*, fr. 118b), but it needs to be granted that from a long-term perspective this allowed the school to survive long after 529: the last known pagan Neoplatonist Olympiodorus still taught in Alexandria in the 560s. By this time, though, the majority of his colleagues and students were Christians. The most famous one was Olympiodorus' contemporary John Philoponus, who criticized Platonic and Aristotelian cosmology in an original manner and defended the creation of the world against Proclus. Thanks to its willingness to adapt to the Christian environment the Alexandrian school was able to keep in a new form an unbroken philosophical tradition well into the Byzantine period. At the beginning of the seventh century we hear of a certain Stephanus, who was invited to teach philosophy in Constantinople (the school was closed here in 726). Alexandria itself was conquered by the Arabs in 642, but it reappears in later Muslim narratives as a mythical place of origin from which Greek philosophical and scientific knowledge was transmitted into the Arab world (via Antioch and Harran).⁶⁰ Fictitious as this probably is, it testifies to the success of the late Neoplatonic philosophical project, which was able to spread its message long after its historical extinction (see below, ch. 10).

⁵⁹ The exact content of the agreement is disputed. Cf. the overview of various hypotheses in Sorabji 2005. Sorabji himself believes that the main concessions concerned religious practice rather than doctrine.

⁶⁰ See Gutas 1998: 90–5; D'Ancona 2004: 20.

Proclus' metaphysics

The philosophy of Neoplatonism is essentially holistic. For the Neoplatonists (as indeed for most ancient philosophers), metaphysics, ethics, logic or philosophy of nature are interconnected and can never be treated as independent disciplines, as they often are today. Accordingly, by Proclus' 'metaphysics' I do not mean a self-contained discipline distinct from other branches of philosophy, but rather a system of basic principles that keep Proclus' conceptual universe together, turning it into a coherent whole.

The fundamentally holistic nature of this complex body of principles makes any lucid exposition of it an onerous task. The elementary laws of Proclus' universe are limited in number, but they all refer to one another, being hard to grasp separately. Any linear explanation of them is thus extremely difficult, for ideally the reader would need to see all the principles at once. In order to be able to introduce them step by step, I will need to have recourse to a number of deliberate simplifications, concealing important points in early sections to reveal them fully later on. In many cases I will try to create a kind of cosmological narrative designed to throw light on various parts of Proclus' system. While some Proclus specialists may find such a method questionable, the beginner will hopefully appreciate it, being spared the shock of having to absorb all of the system at once.

Proclus' metaphysics is a harmonious logical system and Proclus is always proud to demonstrate the formal coherence of his propositions. Indeed, logic and metaphysics are closely connected in Neoplatonism, and modern scholars often have an understandable tendency to discuss Proclus' metaphysics precisely from the logical perspective, reading its postulates as ways to solve various formal problems.¹ Such an approach is certainly justified: it can hardly be denied that the only point of a number of Proclus' metaphysical propositions is to make it possible to think of the intelligible world as logically consistent. It is only because of this that in his *Elements*

¹ An extreme example of this approach is Lloyd 1967 and 1990.

of *Theology* Proclus can use the Euclidean method to derive a complicated system of metaphysical theorems from a small number of initial axioms.

Nonetheless, an exaggerated focus on the formal side of Proclus' thought has the unfortunate effect of turning his metaphysics into an abstract structure the only point of which is its inner coherence. What is eclipsed in such cases is its fundamentally *dynamic* character. For Proclus, the elaborate logical structures describe the structure of reality as such, and in this regard serve as a network of fixed channels enabling the flow of divine energy. As we shall see, in Proclus' view all levels of reality are constituted by a tension between two basic principles of limit and the unlimited. While limit corresponds to a precise logical arrangement, the unlimited is an endless stream of energy that flows through the universe, providing it with life and power. In my interpretations I shall try to pay just as much attention to this aspect as to the logical one, emphasizing the dynamic nature of all ontological structures.

At its primary level my exposition will be 'synchronic', attempting to elucidate every single metaphysical postulate by relating it to Proclus' system as a whole. In addition to this, it will also be necessary to touch upon the 'diachronic', historical aspect from time to time. Far from being an original creation of a single thinker, Proclus' metaphysics results from a long philosophical tradition, sometimes being intelligible only in its context. I shall not attempt to provide a thoroughgoing historical background, however, and will only refer to Proclus' predecessors when it helps us to understand his position better. For our purpose the most important exponent of the previous tradition will be Plotinus, the first late antique Platonist philosopher who endeavoured to think as thoroughly and systematically as Proclus did two centuries later. At the same time, Plotinus is a more accessible and less technical thinker, and will thus be an ideal stepping stone for launching into the much more tangled metaphysical world of late Neoplatonists. The contrast with Plotinus will also help us to see what is specific for Proclean Neoplatonism and wherein lies its distinctive identity.

2.1 THE ONE AND THE GOOD AS THE BEGINNING AND END OF ALL THINGS

The alpha and omega of Neoplatonism is the assumption of the wholly transcendent One understood as the highest principle of all things. As we have seen (ch. 1.1), the idea as such was far from new: it was already present in the Old Academy with Speusippus, re-emerging later with the Middle Platonists. It was only Plotinus, though, who brought it to its conclusion

and made it the cornerstone of his philosophical system. The Platonic tradition takes it for granted that this imperfect visible world of ours is derived from a higher kind of reality characterized by total perfection. For a number of older Platonists this higher reality was sufficiently represented by Intellect, conceptualized as the realm of pure being patterned into ideal Forms. The crucial step of Plotinus was to see the perfection of Intellect as itself relative only. Absolute perfection must coincide with total unity, which cannot apply to Intellect for two reasons at least.² (1) Intellect is the realm of pure being, which is closely linked with form and shape (see e.g. *Enn.* v 5, 6). However, all form is limiting, implying otherness and difference, which are incompatible with complete unity. The One 'is therefore not limited in relation to itself or to anything else: since if it was, it would be two' (*Enn.* v 5, 11.3–4). Moreover, Intellect is a plurality of Forms, and though these are all contained in one another, each mirroring all the others, the resulting state is undoubtedly less perfect than unity pure and simple (*Enn.* vi 9, 2). (2) Moreover, Intellect keeps on contemplating the Forms within itself, containing thus at its heart a duality, a distinction between the thinker and the object of thought.³ Admittedly, this duality is absolutely unified, for Intellect is not separated from the Forms it contemplates, consisting in them. Nevertheless, it is a duality – and since all duality implies a decline in perfection, it cannot belong to the first principle. Accordingly, Plotinus postulates the One as the truly perfect principle which is above all duality. Being the summit of all perfection, the One can have no positive characteristics whatsoever, as these would once again make it limited and less perfect. The One needs to be totally ungraspable and undefinable. Its fullness needs to be so complete as to only admit negative descriptions.

Eastern Neoplatonists accept Plotinus' conception, working it out in two opposite directions. On the one hand, they put more emphasis on the immediate presence of the One in all things. As we shall see, while Proclus postulates a multi-layered hierarchy that makes the One extremely distant from us, he simultaneously shows this distance as relative only: in actuality the One pervades all levels and has even the remotest individual entities under its control. On the other hand, late Neoplatonists also emphasize the ultimate unfathomability of the One, pursuing negative theology in

² For a complete list of reasons see Wallis 1972: 57–9.

³ See e.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* v 3, 11.25–30, or v 3, 10.23–6: 'The thinking principle, then, when it thinks, must be in two parts, and either one must be external to the other or both must be in the same, and the thinking must be in otherness, and necessary also in sameness; and the proper objects of thought must be the same and other in relation to the intellect.'

a much more radical manner than Plotinus did. We shall examine these contrasting tendencies in the next two sections.

2.1.1 *Positive presence of the One and the Good in all things*

For Proclus, the One is not just a remote metaphysical abstraction infinitely transcending our fragmented world, but an actual power that despite its transcendence remains continuously present at the horizon of all that happens around us. Without it these happenings would have no coherence and would be impossible to grasp. Proclus explains this point at the very beginning of the *Elements of Theology* (1.1–7):

Every multiplicity in some way participates in unity.

For suppose a multiplicity in no way participating unity. Neither this multiplicity as a whole nor any of its several parts will be one; each part will itself be a multiplicity, and so to infinity; and each of those infinite elements will in turn be an infinite multiplicity; for a multiplicity that in no way participates in any unity, neither in respect of the whole of itself nor in respect of any of the individual parts of it, will be infinite in every way and as a whole.

The problem of unity and multiplicity concerns everything around us not just ontologically but epistemologically as well. Multiplicity is wherever we see some difference, wherever we are able to distinguish one thing from another. Yet if the world consisted of manifolds only, it would be altogether incoherent and impossible to grasp. We would not see any connections but only distinctions. As a result, we would not be able to comprehend any single entity – for once we tried, it would dissolve into an infinite number of parts and aspects. As Proclus observes in the *Platonic Theology* (II 1, 5.14–7), ‘if what exists were infinitely infinite, we would not be able to know it and grasp it; for all that is infinite is certainly incomprehensible and unknowable’. If, on the other hand, we do perceive the head as different from our feet, and yet can see them as two parts of a unified organism, it implies the participation of both our head and feet in some kind of unity. In this sense unity is the indispensable horizon of all knowledge and meaningful orientation in the world. At the same time Proclus takes it for granted that epistemology is in accord with ontology: if I see unity in things, it has to exist in them objectively – for both being and cognition come from the same source. Imperfect human condition may no doubt frequently be mistaken in details, but it cannot err in such a fundamental matter as this one.

The principle of the One as the necessary framework of all things is important in that it turns the Neoplatonic universe into a compact totality with clear boundaries at all levels. In this totality there is both plurality and unity, but the former is always subordinated to the latter. Following this principle, Proclus arrives at strict monism: the One pervades everything and there is nothing that would not be contained in it. Such a conclusion might seem to follow naturally from Neoplatonic metaphysics: once we postulate the One as the sole source of all, all things have to stem from it. In practice, however, such a conclusion is far from necessary. An obvious source of troubles is our material world, which in many respects remains recalcitrant and disobedient. In the half-mythical discourse of the *Timaeus* Plato significantly conceptualized this defiant aspect of our world as inflexible Necessity, which appears to act as an independent power, offering considerable resistance to the order imposed by Intellect. In this way Plato bequeathed to the subsequent tradition a possible germ of dualism that all Platonists had to cope with, proposing a whole range of possible positions. Neoplatonism is definitely situated at the monistic pole of this range, but with Plotinus the dualistic tendencies are still visible from time to time. As we shall see (ch. 7.1), while Plotinus probably does see matter as stemming from the One,⁴ he finds it to stand so far from it as to act as its adversary in a sense, being a source of evil. For Proclus such a view is unacceptable. His own metaphysics brings monism to its full conclusion, and even matter is therefore seen as closely tied to the One, being fully controlled by it. We shall explore some interesting ethical implications of this conception in [chapter 7](#).

Ethics is closely tied to another crucial 'positive' aspect of the One, namely its teleological function. The One is not just what keeps all things together but what all things long for and aspire to. The One is the measure of perfection. All decline in perfection results from a duality that gives room for discord and conflict. How far up or down an entity stands on the ontological ladder is determined precisely by the extent of its unity. At the same time, perfection is an aim that all things strive for. Unity thus has both an efficient and a teleological aspect: the One gives all the things that participate in it their coherence, while being also the highest Good

⁴ Admittedly, the generation of matter in Plotinus is a controversial subject. In my study I will not try to take account of all the scholarly disputes and will follow the influential line of interpretation best represented by Denis O'Brien (1971, 1999), seeing matter as being produced by the lowest level of Soul (see below, p. 206).

that they desire.⁵ Participation and desire are but two sides of one coin. The metaphor of participation tells us that all lower things bear a trace of something higher in themselves, this something being the ground of their being. The concept of desire points out that all lower things relate to this higher something as to their ideal aim. The Neoplatonists emphasize that both of these processes happen simultaneously, every true cause being both an efficient and a final one. At the level of the highest principle these two types of causality correspond to the One and the Good respectively – though in fact, we can hardly distinguish between them, for we all long for unity and have the Good as the ground of our being (*ET* 13):

Every good tends to unify what participates in it; and all unification is a good; and the Good is identical with the One.

For if it belongs to the Good to conserve all that exists (and it is for no other reason that all things desire it); and if likewise that which conserves and holds together the being of each individual thing is unity (since by unity each is maintained in being, but by dispersion displaced from existence): then the Good, wherever it is present, makes the participant one, and holds its being together in virtue of this unification.

And secondly, if it belongs to unity to bring and keep each thing together, by its presence it makes each thing complete. In this way, then, the state of unification is good for all things.

But again, if unification is in itself good, and all good tends to create unity, then the Good unqualified and the One unqualified merge in a single principle, a principle which makes things one and in doing so makes them good. Hence it is that things which in some fashion have fallen away from their good are at the same stroke deprived of participation of unity; and in like manner things which have lost their portion in unity, being infected with division, are deprived of their good.

Goodness, then, is unification, and unification goodness; the Good is one, and the One is primal good.

In understanding the first principle as the Good the Neoplatonists follow an old Greek tradition that sees the good as an aim of all human activity. Plato and Aristotle already agree that whatever we do, we do 'for sake of the good'⁶ and that the good may be defined precisely as 'that which all things desire'.⁷ At the basic level this is a fairly trivial claim. Socrates has little problem in the *Gorgias* (467–8) to convince Polus the sophist that the good is the aim of all human activities: for whatever we do, we do because

⁵ In *PT* II 6, 40.9–10 Proclus phrases the same idea in more technical terms, explaining the name 'One' as an image of the 'procession' of all things from the first principle, while the name 'the Good' as signifying their 'reversion'. For the meaning of these terms see below, ch. 2.2.2.

⁶ Plato, *Gorg.* 468; cf. *Phlb.* 20d. ⁷ Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1094a3.

we find it better to do this than not, seeing the activity as somehow useful for us. Polus accepts this claim, understanding it in a purely subjectivist way: in his view the good is whatever one considers as such. In the same passage, however, Plato makes it clear that he interprets his thesis in a much stronger sense, being ready to distinguish between what *seems* good and what really *is* good regardless of what the agent may believe.

It is precisely this far from self-evident distinction that stands at the heart of Platonic ethics and metaphysics. The Platonists take it for granted that the distinction between the good and the evil is not just a matter of opinion or social convention, but that there are independent criteria of the good by which all action can be measured. In a number of passages Plato suggests that he considers this absolute good not just as a moral but as an ontological measure as well. In the *Phaedo* he gives the good as the main physical cause, insisting that an explanation of a physical phenomenon is only relevant if it demonstrates the phenomenon's relation to the good, presenting the natural arrangement in question as the best one possible.⁸ Moreover, in the *Republic* 509b he suggests that one should see the Good as the highest principle of all reality: it is the source of both knowledge and being, while transcending them itself and being 'beyond being' (*epekeina tēs ousias*). Nevertheless, in his dialogues Plato confines himself to vague insinuations and he deliberately refuses to turn them into a coherent metaphysical system.⁹ The Neoplatonists, on the other hand, seek precisely this, bringing Plato's claims concerning the good to their ultimate logical conclusions.

For the Neoplatonists, longing for the good is the basic driving principle of reality. If from one perspective our world is characterized by multiplicity participating unity, from another point of view we can describe the same thing as defectiveness desiring perfection. All that exists is limited in some way – for it all needs to have a form and a boundary. But every limitedness implies an imperfection,¹⁰ creating a kind of 'vacuum' in things that strives to be filled. This means, however, that there has to exist some supreme

⁸ Plato, *Phd.* 97b–99c. Plato develops this theoretical programme in the *Timaeus*, where he discusses the arrangement of the universe precisely from this teleological aspect.

⁹ One may wonder whether Plato did not attempt such a thing in his 'unwritten doctrines' at least. Yet, the fact that already each of his personal pupils, Speusippus and Xenocrates, interpreted Plato's teaching in a different way makes this possibility highly unlikely. Cf. Dillon 2003: 16.

¹⁰ This statement is a simplification. Proclus only talks about 'imperfection' at the level of our world; all the higher levels are perfect, for they exist as balanced holistic systems and are 'self-constituted' and capable of reverting to themselves (see ch. 2.2.3). Nonetheless, Proclus does apply to them the adjective *atelés* ('imperfect') in comparative and speaks of different degrees of their perfection (see e.g. *ET* 25; 36–7). In this sense the Soul, for instance, is perfect as such but imperfect (or 'less perfect', to be precise) in relation to Intellect.

fullness that brings the striving forth. The longing of every entity for its good implies the existence of the Good as such (ET 8.1–15):

All that in any way participates in the Good is subordinate to the primal Good which is nothing else but good.

For if all things which exist desire their good, it is evident that the primal Good is beyond the things which exist. For if it were identified with any thing that there is, either this thing is identical with the Good, and by this identity excluded from desiring the Good (since all appetite implies a lack of, and a severance from, the object craved); or (since this is impossible) its being is to be distinguished from its goodness, and the latter will be immanent in the former and participated in by it. If so, it is not *the* Good, but *a* good, being immanent in a particular participant: it is merely the good which this participant desires, not the unqualified Good desired of all existing things. For that is the common object of all yearning, whereas an immanent good belongs to the participant.

The primal Good, then, is nothing else but good.

Just as the One, despite its transcendence, is ever present to all things through participation, so the Good, despite being incomprehensible in itself, acts as the most elementary impetus of all that happens.

2.1.2 Negative theology

While letting the One pervade everything down to the tiniest detail, Proclus places an equally strong emphasis on the One's ultimate transcendence. In a certain sense the coupling of immanence and transcendence is typical of all the higher causes. As Proclus explains in proposition 98 of the *Elements of Theology*, every higher cause is 'at once everywhere and nowhere': it is everywhere, for all things participate in it, but it is nowhere since it never mixes with what it pervades, abiding in itself in its transcendent purity. For the One, though, this is true in a much stronger sense. The One is not just transcendent, but essentially incomprehensible as well – for any comprehension would impose limits on it, making it constrained and less perfect.

Incomprehensibility and ineffability is a natural product of the idea of unity brought to its conclusion, and is already a frequent motif with Plotinus. Nevertheless, Plotinus' reaction to it is slightly different: while greatly emphasizing it, he simultaneously keeps on searching for ways to overcome it and attain at least an approximate comprehension of the One's unity.¹¹ Accordingly, Plotinus tries to do his best to approach the One by way of analogy at least. He never tires of inventing bold images and metaphors

¹¹ See above, pp. 19–20, and in greater detail Schroeder 1996; Hoffmann 1997: 340–72.

that despite their necessary inadequacy may yet tell us something about the One's nature. Quite often he has recourse to language experiments, pushing conceptual expressions to their very limits and twisting words to make them say more than they are normally able to.¹²

Eastern Neoplatonists take a different course. In their metaphysical accounts they are able to speak of the One quite clearly and precisely, but at the same time they constantly stress that none of their statements actually capture the true One as such. A radical version of this strategy was introduced by Iamblichus, who tried to safeguard the transcendence of the first principle by postulating one more higher principle above the One, refusing to say anything about it except that it is absolutely unspeakable and unlike anything else we know.¹³ Damascius, the last head of the Athenian Academy, who reports Iamblichus' view while sharing it himself, explains this surprising step as an attempt to free the first principle from all relation to anything lower. Every relation implies duality, but the first principle is 'beyond any opposition . . . not just an opposition that might take place within one and the same level, but even beyond the opposition that might arise between the First and that which comes after it'.¹⁴

Proclus never goes this far himself and in proposition 20 of the *Elements of Theology* he explicitly claims that 'beyond the One there is no further principle'. In essence, however, he has much sympathy with Iamblichus' approach, and in the *Platonic Theology* we can discover the following statement:

Not even the first principle is really one; it is superior to the One, as has often been said. Where, therefore, do we find the One that is altogether one in the strict sense of the term? Well, there is a One which is before Being and which brings Being into existence as its primal cause, while what precedes this One is beyond unity and causality too, maintaining no relation to anything, transcending all things and being unparticipated by them.¹⁵

¹² One example of this is Plotinus' frequent use of the adverb *hoion*, 'as if, something like', which according to *Enn.* vi 8, 13.49–50 we should 'understand with each expression' relating to the One. This allows him to talk e.g. of 'something like Intellect in the One which is not Intellect' (*Enn.* vi 8, 18.21–2). Meijer (1992: 38, n. 35) speaks fittingly of a '*hoion metaphoricum*' in these cases.

¹³ See Damascius, *De princ.* 186.3–87.7 (where Iamblichus is contrasted with the more simple approach of Porphyry). A similar tendency to replace 'worn-out' highest concepts by a new highest principle which is even more ungraspable than the previous ones has a nice Indian parallel in the eleventh century in Abhinavagupta (and his Kashmir Shaivist commentators), who has postulated beyond the 'highest' thirty-sixth tattva (*śiva*) an even more transcendent thirty-seventh tattva (*paraśiva*), and beyond it (to be on the safe side) another thirty-eighth tattva, which is unnamed and unobjectifiable. Cf. Hanneder 1998: 171–2.

¹⁴ Damascius, *De princ.* 1 5.20–6.7. Cf. Dillon 1996b; Hoffmann 1997: 375–86.

¹⁵ Proclus, *PT* III 8, 31.12–18; cf. *PT* II 12, 72.19–73.23; *In Parm.* 1196.22–31. For the argumentational context of the lower/higher One distinction see Meijer 2003.

What Proclus wants to point out here is that the very category of unity is already comprehensible and limited to a certain extent, and thus cannot be the truly ultimate principle but has to correspond rather to the primal Limit that is the source of all further limitations (see ch. 2.2.4 below). In general, however, Proclus avoids this subtle distinction and in most cases we can rest assured that by the 'One' Proclus does mean the first principle.

A more typical Proclean strategy is different: rather than postulating a higher, not yet 'worn-out' principle above the One, he takes precautions that would prevent such wearing out in the first place. In practice this means that although Proclus speaks of the One often and with great precision, he keeps on reminding us that his statements do not really capture the true heart of the One, being but conjectural approximations that we make by analogy with the lower levels. A good example is *Platonic Theology* II 9, where after a certain hesitation Proclus admits that if we understand the first principle as the source of the good and the aim of all things, we are probably not too wide of the mark; things are more complicated, though, with most of our other usual assertions (*PT* II 9, 58.19–59.4):

If we wish to attribute productive and generative causality to it, however, we are already starting to depart from the perfect unity of the first principle. For even if it is a cause of existing things, generating them all, lower beings are not allowed to know it or express it in words. It is only in hymns of silence that we are bound to praise the ineffability of this non-causal cause preceding all causality (*pro tōn aitiōn pantōn anaitiōs aition*). It is only by analogy with the first terms participating in it that we transfer causality (whether final or efficient) onto the first principle, together with the notions of the good and the one. And we can pardon the soul if, driven by her birth pangs, she tries to relate to the unified God, longing to think about him and speak of him. Yet we need to insist that the transcendent superiority of the One surpasses all such speaking to an extent that is impossible to express.

Readers accustomed to Plotinus' daring philosophical trips into the realm of the One might find Proclus' position rather defeatist. E. R. Dodds (1933: 265) classically attributed it to the baleful influence of theurgy, which replaced active ascents to the One by passive obedience to ritual rules. Dodds's view is biased, though there is a grain of truth in it. It can hardly be doubted that the belief in the fundamental unknowability of the One is related to the late Neoplatonists' doctrine of the soul's incapability to leave its proper ontological level, which we have seen as closely allied to their embrace of theurgy (ch. 1.2.2–3). For Plotinus the soul at its highest point is rooted in the One, and under favourable circumstances, and with

utmost effort, is capable of joining it in a *unio mystica*. It is this perspective that helps us understand Plotinus' language experiments in his attempt to capture the nature of the One: they can be seen as a special 'spiritual exercise' designed to break through the inner barriers with which we all separate ourselves from the One. From this point of view it is only natural that Plotinus can never cease in his struggle to grasp the One, ever circling around it, searching for new ways to get close to it.¹⁶

Proclus, too, aims at a mystic union with the One, but his version of it is more modest. Not only does he see the union as taking place at the psychic level only (in the 'one in the soul'), but he also views our human capacities as more limited, putting greater emphasis on the need of divine help. Significantly, he postulates Faith (*pistis*) as one of the crucial cosmic forces (together with Love and Truth) acting as a mediator between human souls and the One (*PT* I 25, 110.6–12):¹⁷

To put it summarily, divine Faith unifies with the Good in an unspeakable manner all the classes of the gods and daemons as well as those souls that are blessed. For the Good is not to be searched for by way of cognition, nor is the search to remain uncompleted. Accordingly, we need to close our eyes, give in to the divine light and let us become established in the unknowable and secret Henad of all beings.

Plotinus too was aware that the ultimate unification is unattainable by purely human means; in the last stage one cannot but close one's eyes, waiting till the One appears of itself.¹⁸ With Proclus, however, this passive aspect is stressed much more, coming to the foreground.

At first sight this might only seem to confirm the harsh verdicts of E. R. Dodds. Indeed, Proclus' refusal to speak of the One has misled Dodds as well as other scholars into thinking that it betrays his failure to really ever reach the final aim.¹⁹ Such a conclusion is unlikely and results from an inadequate comparison with Plotinus. Unlike Plotinus, Proclus was not a pure philosopher. As we shall see in chapter 5.2.2, in eastern Neoplatonism all philosophical progress went hand in hand with theurgic techniques that helped to complete what was prepared by intellectual work and spiritual exercises.²⁰ Not even the realm of Intellect was accessible by thought alone; one also needed to perform rituals (both physical and mental) and work

¹⁶ See the detailed description of Plotinus' negative method in Carabine 1995: 126–53, and the contrasting analysis of Proclus' negative theology *ibid.*, pp. 160–87. For Plotinus' 'spiritual exercises' see Hadot 1995: 99–101; Hadot 1988: 52, 347–51.

¹⁷ In this he follows the *Chaldean Oracles* (fr. 46). Cf. Hoffmann 2000.

¹⁸ Plotinus, *Enn.* v 5, 8.1–5 (quoted below, p. 174).

¹⁹ Dodds 1933: xxiii. Cf. Rist 1964a: 220, or more recently Cleary 2000: 87.

²⁰ Cf. Hoffmann 1997: 372–5; Saffrey 1986: 253–4.

with religious symbols that through their incomprehensibility helped the souls of the adepts 'to step out of themselves, grounding them in the gods and making them divine'.²¹ For the final unification with the One Proclus possessed special mystical techniques that we shall examine in chapter 5.2.2.

It is for this reason that Proclus can remain content with stripping away all discourse from the One and leaving it altogether unspeakable. For Plotinus, the spiritual exercises that could lead him towards the One were philosophical in essence, consisting in various intellectual techniques for purifying the soul and stripping it of all the positive features that separate it from the One. Proclus possessed other, supplementary means, and hence he could afford to keep philosophical silence. The function of negative theology for him is preparatory and cathartic.²² It is not meant to accomplish the final act of unification, but to remove all conceptual obstacles standing in the way between us and the One. Since the negative method itself is no more than a preparation for receiving the light shining from the One, we need to leave it behind in the last stage of our ascent, giving up any claim to a philosophical knowledge of the One:

For this whole dialectical method, which works by negations, may conduct us to what lies before the threshold of the One, removing all inferior things and by this removal dissolving the impediments to the contemplation of the One, if it is possible to speak of such a thing. But after going through all the negations, one ought to set aside this dialectical method also, as being troublesome and introducing the notion of the things denied with which the One can have no neighbourhood.²³

At the end of the negative journey we encounter the ultimate unknowability of the One. As Carlos Steel aptly puts it, 'Proclus has no "negative theology" if one means by this term a negative discourse whereby one expresses through negations what the divine cause is: God is without multiplicity, without division, without time, without space, an incorporeal being.'²⁴ The negative dialectic only aims at removing all discourse, negations as well as affirmation, leaving the soul speechless "in silence". All we can do is deny any possibility of making a meaningful statement about the One.

Yet, while the soul cannot know the One, she can attain likeness to it, experiencing its unity. Negative theology is the precondition for this, purifying the soul for the inflow of divine inspiration (*In Parm.* 1094.22–1095.2):

²¹ Proclus, *In Remp.* II 108.23–4. Cf. below, ch. 5. ²² See Carabine 1995: 176–83.

²³ Proclus, *In Parm.* VII 520.30–521.5 (= 74K.15–20).

²⁴ Steel 2005a: 20. As Steel points out in a footnote ad loc., it is in this limited way that 'the scholastic philosophers integrated negative theology into their metaphysical ontology'.

For, if we are to approach the One by means of these negative conceptions and to emancipate ourselves from our accustomed ways of thought, we must strip off the variety of life and remove our multifarious concerns, and render the soul alone by itself, and thus expose it to the divine and to the reception of divinely inspired power, in order that having first lived in such a way as to deny the multiplicity within ourselves, we may thus ascend to the undifferentiated intuition of the One.

The receiver of this divine inspiration is ‘the one’ in us, which ‘warms’ the soul, inducing in it the kind of divine madness that Plato describes in the *Phaedrus*. In it the soul finds its ‘mooring’, leaving all intellective activity behind and dancing blessedly around the One.²⁵ The soul is now ‘everywhere closing her eyes, and contracting all her activity and being content with unity alone’.²⁶ How exactly this state is achieved is not entirely clear, but it seems likely that even here pure philosophy was insufficient, requiring the help of ritualized meditation (see below ch. 5).

In the eyes of modern readers a reference to non-philosophical mystical techniques for reaching the One will be but a poor solace. Unlike Neoplatonic texts, theurgy has not survived, and Proclus’ principal reluctance to represent his experience of the One in words must lead to this aspect of his world being closed to us forever. Despite this, all is not lost – for while we cannot actively experience the unspeakable One, we can at least appreciate the positive general impact that the unknowability of the first principle has within Proclus’ metaphysical system. In other words, we can see negative theology as an indispensable horizon against which all positive metaphysical assertions are pronounced, and one that influences their nature in a vital manner.

One of its most interesting positive implications is the ability of the One to penetrate into the remotest recesses of reality. This is particularly significant in Proclus’ analyses of divine providence and of the gods’ capacity to know worldly events (see ch. 7.7). In Proclus’ view, every being can only have knowledge in a manner appropriate to its own mode of existence. Were the gods comprehensible and clearly delimited, they would only be able to know that side of events which is also such. In other words, they would only recognize events from the standpoint of their form, regularity and predictability, but would have no access to their contingent aspect – for contingency consists precisely in that a mortal being fails to realize its form properly due to the weakness of matter.²⁷ It is only thanks to their

²⁵ Proclus, *In Parm.* 1071.7–1072.11. ²⁶ Proclus, *In Parm.* VII 520.22–3 (= 74K.8–9).

²⁷ For the correlation contingent – unlimited (unformed), necessary – limited see Proclus, *De dec. dub.* 13–14; *De prov.* 65. For failure as the sole source of indeterminism cf. below, ch. 7.4.

transcending all form that the gods can also follow all our contingent decisions, being able to supervise our activities even when we commit mistakes and make our lives perverted.²⁸

The example just adduced is but a particular instance of the general cosmic significance that the One's incomprehensibility has. As we have seen (ch. 1.1), in late antiquity Platonism evolved to ever stronger forms of monism. In the universe of the Middle Platonists it was just the higher levels that were under the full control of the gods, the sublunary realm being partly given up to contingency. With Plotinus the One starts to act as an all-embracing principle penetrating as far as individual material things; nevertheless, its control is still not absolute due to the influence of matter, conceived as a principle offering resistance to the One.²⁹ With late Neoplatonists this last obstacle is gone and even matter is entirely subordinated to the One. Their universe thus becomes a completely closed system in which the One supervises everything down to the tiniest details. Understandably, such a 'totalitarian' subordination of all things to the first principle threatens to lead – in the words of Dodds (1933: 223) – to 'a rigid monistic determinism', denying us any possibility to decide for ourselves.

It is precisely by founding their positive theology in the essential negativity of the first principle that late Neoplatonists are able to sidestep this conclusion. Were the One definable in any way, its supervision would necessarily have the form of strict rules to which all things must conform. Such a view, of course, would be entirely unrealistic, failing to explain the infinite variability and unpredictability of particular events and situations in our world. Every totality founded on clearly defined principles sooner or later turns into an ossified system that has lost all touch with life in its unique fluidity. Neoplatonic totality, however, is based on a principle that has no form or definition itself, being open to every possible development. Thanks to this, the One's providential care for the world does not consist in inexorable rules and precepts, offering opportunity for all alternatives and being able to relate flexibly to every possible situation.³⁰ Despite this it is not a relativistic principle. The One is the absolute measure of the good, guiding us to perfection with firm hand. Nevertheless, it gives room to individual decisions, adroitly reacting to whatever course of action we

²⁸ For contingency as a mistake and a failure to realize one's form properly see below, chs. 7.2 and 7.6. For divine supervision of human mistakes see ch. 7.7.

²⁹ Plotinus would never say directly that matter 'offers resistance' to the One, and would try to maintain a monistic position at all costs. Despite this, as we shall see in ch. 7.1, his conception does show traces of dualism.

³⁰ This subject is discussed in detail in the first three of Proclus' *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence*.

may choose. We shall discuss some interesting implications of this view in our chapter on Proclus' theodicy (ch. 7.7).

In addition, it is important to realize that Proclus' refusal to speak about the One does not result in intellectual resignation. On the contrary: if he finds the One as such altogether unknowable, it is all the more important for him to get a good grasp of all the other entities adjoining it, as well as of all the intermediate levels standing between the One and our world. The fact that there are theurgic techniques for approaching the One does not mean that we could dispense with philosophical investigation. Theurgy is only capable of bringing to fulfilment what was begun by intellectual means. As Proclus emphasizes in *In Tim.* I 211.9–11, our unification with the One is conditioned by our 'knowledge of all the divine orders that we approach in our worship; for if we did not know their specific properties, we would not be able to approach them in an intimate way'. In the end, Proclus is thus able to say much more about the One than Plotinus. True, he cannot tell us anything about its essence, but he is able to discuss at length all of its lower manifestations, some of which stand extremely close to the One, revealing it to a significant extent.

The most conspicuous example of this approach is Proclus' postulation of the 'henads' or 'gods' as the basic 'subunits' existing within the One. We shall take a closer look at them in [chapter 3](#), but for the moment we may note that their introduction into the system has the crucial and beneficial effect of shifting the boundary of the apprehensible as close to the highest point as possible. The incomprehensible One turns out to be really just a tiny point on the top of the pyramid of all things in which everything else is subject to apprehension. Although the henads are unknowable themselves, we can know them safely through their effects (*ET* 123):

*All that is divine is itself ineffable and unknowable by any secondary being because of its supra-essential unity, but it may be apprehended and known from the things which participate in it. For this reason, only the First Principle is completely unknowable, as being unparticipated in.*³¹

For all rational knowledge, inasmuch as it grasps intelligible notions and consists in acts of intellection, is knowledge of real beings and apprehends truth by an organ which itself belongs in the class of real beings. But the gods are beyond all being. Accordingly the divine is an object neither of opinion nor of discursive reason nor yet of intellection: for all that exists is either sensible, and therefore an object of opinion; or true being, and therefore an object of intellection; or of intermediate rank, at once being and becoming, and therefore an object of discursive reason. If, then, the gods are supra-essential, or have a substance prior to beings, we can have

³¹ For the One as 'unparticipated' see below, chs. 2.4.2 and 3.1.

neither opinion concerning them nor scientific knowledge by discourse of reason, nor yet intellection of them.

Nevertheless from the beings dependent upon them their distinctive properties may be inferred, and this with the force of necessity. For differences within a participant order are determined by the distinctive properties of the principles participated in. And participation is not of all by all, since there can be no conjunction of things that are wholly unlike each other, nor does any chance thing participate in any chance thing, but to each cause is attached, and from each proceeds, that effect which is akin to it.

If the realm of being is well apprehensible, while the first principle is completely incomprehensible, the gods (or the henads) are perfect mediators between both: being unknowable in themselves, they may be known indirectly through their effects, and that even 'with the force of necessity' (*anankaiōs*), i.e. in a systematic and reliable way.

We can see, therefore, that the ultimate unfathomability of the first principle is no obstacle to speculations about it, being a kind of dark framework within which Proclus' metaphysical discussions take place. It is notable that in the *Elements of Theology* the axiom of unknowability is only mentioned a couple of times, while positive analyses of the One are to be found in dozens of passages. Negative and positive theology are interconnected and complement each other.

2.2 THE CYCLE OF PROCESSION AND REVERSION

2.2.1 *Why does the One create lower levels?*

All Neoplatonists see the One as absolutely perfect, complete and self-sufficient. If this is so, it is only natural to ask why the One has created anything in the first place. Why has it not remained satisfied with its own perfection, and has created something different, and less perfect, besides itself? A simple and elegant answer is already given by Plotinus, who resolutely denies that the creativity of the One would be a result of its conscious decision or intent of any kind. The One is creative simply because of its perfection, the natural by-product of every perfection being the tendency to 'overflow', so to speak, spreading and expanding unintentionally (*Enn.* v 4, 1.23–36):

If the First is perfect, the most perfect of all, and the primal potency, it must be the most powerful of all beings and the other potencies must imitate it as far as they are able. Now when anything else comes to perfection, we see that it produces, and does not endure to remain by itself, but makes something else. This is true not

only of things which have choice, but of things which grow and produce without choosing to do so, and even lifeless things, which impart themselves to others as far as they can: as fire warms, snow cools, and drugs act on something else in a way corresponding to their own nature – all imitating the First Principle as far as they are able by tending to everlastingness and generosity. How then could the most perfect, the first Good, remain in itself as if it grudged to give of itself or was impotent, when it is the productive potency of all things?

If the God of the Christians *wished* to create the world, for the Neoplatonists creation is but a spontaneous by-product of the One's perfection. The One is often compared by them to the sun, whose rays do not illuminate our world intentionally, being a natural result of the sun's hotness.³²

There is one important consequence to this approach: it follows that the One takes no conscious interest for the lower levels, just as the sun cares little for the world it illuminates. Being supremely perfect, the One does not need anything. If it showed any interest in the world, this would betray some flaw within it, an impertinent curiosity that results from the One's not being content with itself. Plotinus describes the situation of the first principle as follows (*Enn.* v 5, 12.40–9):

He does not need the things which have come from him, but leaves what has come into being altogether alone, because he needs nothing of it, but is the same as he was before he brought it into being. He would not have cared if it had not come into being; and if anything else could have been derived from him he would not have grudged it existence; but as it is, it is not possible for anything else to come into being: all things have come into being and there is nothing left. He was not all things: if he was he would have needed them; but since he transcends all things he can make them and let them exist by themselves while he remains above them.

The Neoplatonists follow a long Greek tradition in this regard. While the gods of the poets liked to be involved in worldly affairs, not hesitating to sacrifice a great deal of their Olympian beatitude for the sake of humans, the philosophers found such an active engagement incompatible with their concept of the gods as supremely perfect and blessed beings. Accordingly, all the chief schools of philosophy attempted to conceptualize the gods so as to spare them such a disgrace, allowing them never to leave their beatific state of being. An extreme version of this effort was presented by Epicurus, who denied that the gods have anything in common with our world at all: he saw the gods as perfect beings who know no cares, spending their life in pure bliss. The significance of such gods was ethical only: they were meant to be seen as ideals of perfect existence worthy of

³² See e.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* v I, 6.29; vI 9, 9.7; Sallustius, *De deis* 9.3.

imitation.³³ A more cautious version of the same conception was advocated by Aristotle, who equally denied that god would care for our world in an active manner. The highest god is conceived by him as the first unmoved mover, ever contemplating himself in his perfection. As opposed to the gods of Epicurus, the Aristotelian god does exercise some cosmic administration, but does so teleologically only: he is an ideal paradigm that all things strive for and imitate.³⁴

The Neoplatonists partly accept Aristotle's model, but see it as only one side of the coin, insisting that the first principle is not just the final but the efficient cause of our world as well (cf. Steel 1987). The One is self-absorbed indeed, being a paragon of consummate autarky that all things desire. Nevertheless, despite its self-centredness it brings all things forth and even exercises providential care for them – albeit in a purely spontaneous and involuntary manner. How does the One achieve this? The answer is offered by one of the central concepts of Neoplatonism: the cycle of procession and reversion.

2.2.2 *Procession and reversion*

The conception of procession and reversion is only formalized with Iamblichus, but its foundations are already to be found in Plotinus, who in one of his early treatises offers the following model of emanation (*Enn.* v 2, 1.7–21):

This, we may say, is the first act of generation: the One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself. This, when it has come into being, turns back upon the One and is filled, and becomes Intellect by looking towards it. Its halt and turning towards the One constitutes being, its gaze upon the One, Intellect. Since it halts and turns towards the One that it may see, it becomes at once Intellect and being. Resembling the One thus, Intellect produces in the same way, pouring forth a multiple potency – this is a likeness of it – just as that which was before it poured it forth. This activity springing from the essence of Intellect is Soul, which comes to be this while Intellect abides unchanged: for Intellect too comes into being while that which is before it abides unchanged. But Soul does not abide unchanged when it produces: it is moved and so brings forth an image. It looks to its source, and is filled, and going forth to another opposed movement generates its own image, which is sensation and the principle of growth in plants.

³³ See Festugière 1955, ch. 4; Mansfeld 1993.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Met.* xii 1072a–1073b.

It is unnecessary to discuss all the levels of Plotinian universe at this stage. Suffice it to point out that each level originated through the interplay of two complementary movements. At the beginning there is an indefinite and formless flow of energy. This flow departs from its source, becoming less perfect due to its departure; a kind of 'vacuum' arises thus within the flow, longing to be filled again. As a result, the flow stops at a certain stage of its descent, turning its gaze back to the source, trying to imitate it. Thanks to this imitation a new level of being is established, whose activity consists in ever contemplating the level immediately superior to it, structuring itself in harmony with it. Late Neoplatonists describe this model as a coordination of three moments: the moment of 'remaining' (*monē*) of the higher level in itself, the moment of 'procession' (*prohodos*) of this level from itself in the form of an unlimited stream of energy, and finally the moment of 'reversion' (*epistrophē*) of the stream to its source – though not in the sense of an annihilation of the stream, but merely in that a kind of 'energy loop' is established and a firmly structured lower level comes into being, eternally contemplating and imitating the higher level it has come from.

Proclus' emanational model is similar to that of Plotinus, but differs in being formalized and brought to greater precision. In his thought the cycle of remaining, procession and reversion becomes a universal pattern working at all levels of reality and helping to explain all relations between causes and their effects. By 'causes' in this context Proclus does not mean physical causes as we know them from our world (these are but secondary, accessory causes), but metaphysical causes that bring about their effects in a much stronger sense, being both their model and a source of being.³⁵ In Proclus' view, all causality works on the principle of likeness, and the effect thus needs to resemble its cause. Nevertheless, it also has to be different from it – otherwise it would blend with the cause and not be its effect. 'Insofar, then, as it has an element of identity with the producer, the product remains in it; insofar as it differs it proceeds from it.'³⁶ But the difference needs to have its limits: were the effect too different from its cause, it would start losing touch with it, cutting itself off from its own wellspring of being. For this reason every effect, after attaining a certain measure of difference, longs to revert to its cause. The reversion is accomplished by renewed imitation (*ET* 32):

³⁵ See Proclus, *ET* 75.1–2: 'Every cause properly so called transcends its resultant.' The distinction between true causes giving the reason and meaning of each thing, and physical accessory causes (*synaitia*) was already made by Plato, see *Tim.* 46c–e; *Phd.* 97c–99d.

³⁶ Proclus, *ET* 30.12–14. Cf. Gersh 1978: 46–57.

All reversion is accomplished through a likeness of the reverting terms to the goal of reversion.

For that which reverts endeavours to be conjoined in every part with every part of its cause, and desires to have communion in it and be bound to it. But all things are bound together by likeness, as by unlikeness they are distinguished and severed. If, then, reversion is a communion and conjunction, and all communion and conjunction is through likeness, it follows that all reversion must be accomplished through likeness.

Reversion does not mean that the effect would disappear in its cause, but that it is directed towards it, having it as its model. A complete reversion can never take place, for parallel to reverting the process of proceeding is going on as well. The result is the establishment of a closed circuit enabling the flow of energy (*ET* 33.1–6):

All that proceeds from any principle and reverts upon it has a cyclic activity.

For if it reverts upon that principle whence it proceeds, it links its end to its beginning, and the movement is one and continuous, originating from the unmoved and to the unmoved again returning. Thus all things proceed in a circuit, from their causes to their causes again. There are greater circuits and lesser, in that some revert upon their immediate causes, others upon the superior causes, even to the beginning of all things. For out of the beginning all things are, and towards it all revert.

In itself Proclus' model of causation may seem rather abstract and it will be useful to illustrate it at the level of the physical world. Let us take the stone as a simple example. From the perspective of modern physics the stone is a dynamic field of energy, being an active body of millions of microparticles which are charged with power and moving constantly. Nevertheless, the motion of these particles has stabilized itself into a fixed structure, so that from the point of view of macrophysics the stone appears as an exceptionally static piece of 'dead' matter with little activity of its own. These two perspectives correspond to a certain extent to what Proclus calls *procession* and *reversion*. In its aspect of proceeding the stone is an unbounded stream of energy spontaneously overflowing from some higher level. As a result of the above-described 'vacuum effect', however, this stream turns back to its source at some point, trying to return to it. By imitating its source – i.e. some Form of which it is an image – the stone becomes like it, the flow of energy that founds the stone's existence being thereby stabilized in a clear structure. In effect the stone appears as stable and unchanging, though in fact its stability is dynamic in essence. The stone is permanently anchored in its higher cause: by virtue of its likeness it remains in it, by virtue of its unlikeness it proceeds from it, and by virtue

of its renewed imitation it reverts to it again.³⁷ Its being consists in the whole of this cycle, resembling a chewing gum bubble coming out of our mouth and yet being only kept in existence by the constant stream of air we are blowing into it.³⁸

By way of analogy, all of our world is such a ‘bubble’ that may seem steady and firm at first sight, and yet would immediately burst and collapse if the higher levels stopped pumping their energy into it. Luckily enough, such a thing can never happen, for the energy flows from the higher levels as a spontaneous by-product of their perfection. It could only end if the perfection were lost – which for Proclus is unthinkable.

The example of a stone is useful but not entirely faultless. A stone seems more or less inert and it might make us think that Proclus sees the world as a passive manifestation of the higher levels. The world would thus resemble a film which goes on lively and realistically on the screen, while in fact wholly coming from the projector and having no activity of its own. For Proclus, such an idea would be unacceptable, for it would turn beings in our world into passive puppets. His own metaphor is that of a theatre, rather, in which the script may be given but the actors still have to do their best to act it out themselves.³⁹ In this sense all the beings in our world are perpetually driven to imitate their causes and to act out the forming principles from which they proceed – for it is only in this way that the circuit of their being may be kept closed and the energy spent on acting may be ‘recycled’, flowing down once again and keeping the world going.

Significantly, it is not just to humans but to the world in its entirety that the theatre metaphor applies. In Proclus’ view even stones need to strive for the preservation of their form, i.e. at all times they need to actively imitate the higher principle they come from.⁴⁰ In case of a stone its ‘striving’ is fairly basic, of course, and rather inconspicuous.⁴¹ The effort is much more obvious with plants. These need to struggle for their existence not just at the level of *being* (i.e. their chemical structure and outward shape), but at that of *life* as well, using motion to act out their proper pattern of behaviour. Every gardener knows how much effort certain weeds are able

³⁷ See Proclus, *ET* 35.1–2: ‘Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts on it.’

³⁸ The difference is, of course, that in the bubble the flow is in one direction only, while in Proclus’ cycle energy flows in both ways, proceeding and reverting. In this respect the image of blood circulation would be more appropriate.

³⁹ See e.g. Proclus, *In Tim.* II 305.7–15; *De dec. dub.* 60; Plotinus, *Enn.* III 2, 17.

⁴⁰ Cf. the theurgic examples of the activity of stones below, p. 131.

⁴¹ Geologists take it for granted, though, that even minerals ‘work’, evolve and strive for their place in the world – even if they only do so slowly and in a way which for the casual observer is hard to notice.

to show in this respect and how tirelessly they fight the obstacles set up against them. According to Proclus this struggle for existence is a natural consequence of the plants' never-ending desire to revert to their causes by imitating them. The effort becomes even more marked with humans, who in addition to being and life also exert themselves to achieve *knowledge*. Not even our thirst for knowledge is incidental: it is rather an essential drive that helps to keep our souls in existence. Proclus summarizes all of these levels as follows (*ET* 39):

All that exists reverts either in respect of its being only, or in respect of its life, or by the way of knowledge as well.

For either it has from its cause being only, or life together with being, or else it has received from thence a cognitive faculty also. Insofar, then, as it has bare being, it reverts simply by being what it is; insofar as it lives, it reverts vitally; insofar as it also has knowledge, it reverts cognitively too. For as it proceeds, so it reverts; and the measure of its reversion is determined by the measure of its procession. Some things, accordingly, have appetency in respect of their bare being only – that is, their appetency consists in their fitness for the participation in their causes. Others have a vital appetency, that is, a movement towards the higher principles. Others, again, have a cognitive appetency, which is a consciousness of the goodness of their causes.

As we can see from this passage, the basic principle that keeps the cycle of procession and reversion going is 'appetency' (*orexis*). As Proclus puts it in *ET* 31, 'all things desire the Good, and each attains it through the mediation of its own proximate cause: therefore each has appetency of its own cause also . . . and the primary object of its appetency is that upon which it reverts'. Even stones thus have to desire their being, or else they would vanish. Desire is the motive power of the universe, making it active and dynamic.

The cycle of procession and reversion provides an elegant answer to the problem of divine care for lower levels outlined above. On the one hand, the One acts on our world unintentionally, letting its energy flow down into it while not worrying about its further course. Nonetheless, the energy has a natural tendency to revert upon its source by imitating it. In this manner the One spontaneously organizes all the lower levels by being a model and a teleological cause of them – just like the unmoved mover of Aristotle that all things tend towards.⁴² The Neoplatonists thus combine the Aristotelian teleological model with their own emanational scheme, turning it in this way into a truly complex and flexible concept.

⁴² Aristotle, *Met.* XII 1074a37.

All things aim towards the Good because they are proceeding from it, every procession inevitably provoking the desire to revert. As a result, the higher levels may have our world under their control without paying any conscious attention to it, being only turned towards themselves as well as other levels superior to themselves.

At the same time it is clear that this type of providential care gives enough leeway to the lower levels too, for it is really up to them exactly how they wish to accomplish their reversion. The truth is that in most cases this possibility remains unused. In view of the Neoplatonists all the levels except for the lowest are still so perfect as to be able to revert in the best way possible, their behaviour being altogether deterministic. It is only at the material level that the measure of imperfection grows too large, resulting in frequent failures to achieve reversion in the best manner. Our world is therefore only determined in its basic tendencies and appetencies, leaving it largely up to us how properly we manage to fulfil them. An obvious paradoxical consequence of this conception is that the faculty of *decision* is but a token of our imperfection. A perfect being needs no decisions whatsoever, being always capable of acting in the best way possible. We shall return to this interesting point later on in chapter 7.4.

2.2.3 *Self-constituted levels*

The model of reality presented so far has been simplified in several respects, making it impossible to answer a fundamental cosmological question: how can this altogether automatic process of spontaneous replications of all levels ever reach its bottom? What guarantees that the emanation is not to go on forever? To answer these questions, we need to make our emanational scheme a little more complicated.

In the exposition of Plotinus quoted above we have seen the Intellect originate thanks to the fact that the stream of energy proceeding from the One halts its progress at some stage, turning its gaze back to its source. In this way the circuit of remaining, proceeding and reverting is established, constituting the existence of Intellect. Yet if Intellect only reverted to its source, it would never be able to produce anything further. As we have seen, the power to produce results from the overflowing fullness and perfection of the producer. Should Intellect have the aim of its activity (i.e. all its 'good') outside itself in the One, true perfection would not pertain to it – for to be truly perfect means to be self-complete, having the aim of one's activity within oneself in a certain sense. In view of the Neoplatonists, perfection implies at least a relative measure of self-sufficiency. In our world

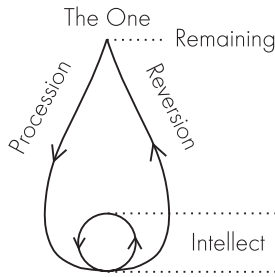


Fig. 1 Two cycles of procession and reversion

there is nothing perfect whatsoever, for all things depend on their higher causes, longing for them perpetually. Intellect depends on the One too, but at the same time possesses a certain measure of autonomy. Like us, it has the true Good outside itself; unlike us, however, it has a kind of derivative good within itself, desiring it and ever attaining it. As a result, Intellect does not just longingly gaze at the One but contemplates itself as well.

In other words, the level of Intellect is constituted not just in that the stream of energy coming from the One reverts back to its source at some point, but also in that at this lowest point of the cycle another, smaller cycle is established, one of procession and reversion of Intellect from and towards itself. Owing to this it partakes in perfection, and thus in the ability to produce lower levels (fig. 1).

The idea of procession and reversion of Intellect from and towards itself can already be traced in Plotinus, who in *Enn.* vi 7.35 expresses it by means of a striking image: when looking back at the One, Intellect has the gaze of one who is 'in love' and 'drunk with nectar' – for in this gaze it turns towards something that transcends its comprehension.⁴³ Intellect is essentially tied with form, but the One is beyond all form, and it is not surprising that its sight makes Intellect feel giddy. When looking at itself and its Forms, on the other hand, Intellect has the gaze of one who is 'sober' and 'in its right mind'. It is only through this measured gaze that Intellect is established as an autonomous hypostasis. Still, both gazes are inseparably linked, taking place simultaneously and complementing each other.

Proclus takes up this conception of Plotinus but as usual makes it more systematic. In his view the reversion to itself does not just concern Intellect

⁴³ See Plotinus *Enn.* vi 7, 16.13–14: 'But it was not yet Intellect when it looked at him [sc. the One], but looked unintellectually.' The image of being drunk with nectar comes from the myth of the birth of Eros in Plato's *Symposium* 203b.

but all the superior levels in general (except for the One, which does not need to revert to itself due to its perfect unity). These are all able to find their relative good in themselves, attaining thus a kind of autonomy. In Proclus' terminology, such levels are 'constituted in themselves' or 'self-constituted', (*authypostata*):⁴⁴

All that is self-constituted is capable of reversion upon itself.

For if it proceeds from itself it will also revert upon itself, since the source of the procession of any term is the goal of the corresponding reversion. If, proceeding from itself, it should in proceeding not revert, it could never have appetency for its proper good, a good which it can bestow upon itself. For every cause can bestow upon its product, along with the being which it gives, the well-being which belongs to that being; hence it can bestow the latter upon itself also, and this is the proper good of the self-constituted. Were it incapable of reversion upon itself, it would have no appetency for this good; not desiring it, it would not be able to attain it; and not attaining it, it would be incomplete and not self-sufficient. But self-sufficiency and completeness belong to the self-constituted, if they belong to anything. Accordingly the self-constituted must attain its proper good; and must therefore desire it; and must therefore revert upon itself.⁴⁵

'Self-constitution' is a powerful feature indeed, for it implies that the level in question creates all of its specific characteristics by itself, not having them as 'borrowed' from the higher levels. In this sense it is 'self-productive, since it proceeds from itself to itself' (*ET* 41.7–8). This is not to say, of course, that the level would be entirely independent of its superiors. Intellect receives all its power and energy from the One, but *qua Intellect* it constitutes itself by its own self-reflection. In general we may say that every higher level establishes itself as to its specific mode of existence, while depending on its priors in all other regards which are not its unique creations. In this sense, for instance, Intellect depends on the One in respect of its unity, constituting itself as to its being articulated in forms.

It is due to their self-constitution that the higher levels attain perfection, being able to produce further secondary levels. This process only comes to a halt at the level of matter, which is no longer self-constituted, being altogether dependent on higher hypostases. Proclus sums up the entire hierarchy as follows (*In Tim.* I 232.11–18):

The One is therefore superior to all self-constitution, for it has to transcend all multiplicity. Eternal Being⁴⁶ is self-constituted already, but has its ability to

⁴⁴ For a detailed exposition of this concept see Proclus, *ET* 40–51; cf. Steel 2006. For a historical background of the doctrine see Whittaker 1975.

⁴⁵ Proclus, *ET* 42.

⁴⁶ In Proclus' metaphysics Being is the highest level of Intellect. See below, ch. 2.3.2.

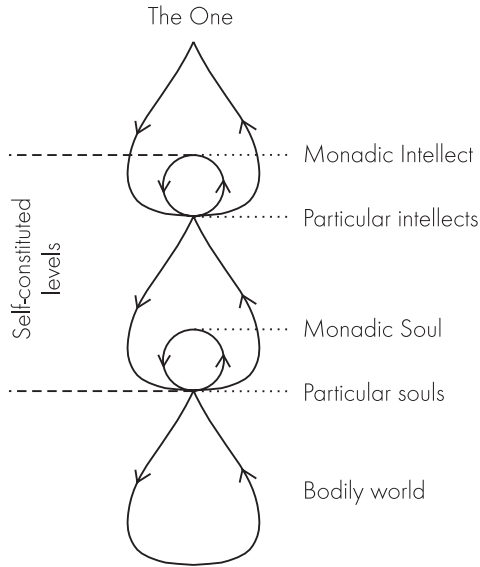


Fig. 2 Procession and reversion of self-constituted hypostases

constitute itself directly from the One. All the subsequent levels are both self-constituted and constituted by some other productive cause. Such is also the status of our soul. The last terms, on the other hand, proceed into being from some superior cause but are no longer self-constituted (*authypostata*), being rather unconstituted (*anhypostata*).

Why is matter 'unconstituted'? In a simplified fashion we may say that the perfection and autonomy of each level is linked to its measure of unity. The One is supremely perfect, representing absolute unity (this is why it is not self-constituted: for self-constitution implies procession and reversion from and towards itself, involving thus some kind of multiplicity). With all the subsequent levels down to Nature we see an ever growing increase of plurality and differentiation; nevertheless, they all still retain some essential unity. Within Intellect, for instance, we find a plurality of Forms, and even a multiplicity of particular intellects, but at heart these are all unified. Proclus is convinced that each higher level has a 'monadic' summit, unifying all the multifarious aspects of this level and representing its pure and unified core – its 'monad'. It is due to this core that each of these levels is able to revert to itself. The basic emanational scheme can thus be delineated as in [figure 2](#).

At the level of matter things change fundamentally. To understand how, we need to form at least a basic idea of what matter is all about. The Neoplatonic emanational process can generally be described as a gradual development from total unity to ever higher degrees of differentiation. At the level of Intellect the measure of unity is still extremely high, since it is situated outside both time and space, all the Forms being contained as if in a single point, each mirroring all the others. With Soul the differentiation is bigger, for it is here that we see appear the important category of *time*, conceived as a discursive motion from one psychic state to another. This motion is cyclic, however, and in this sense still very much unified. The Soul attains perfection in that it is capable of comprising all existing forms, unfolding them on the time axis. In effect, though all the forms (called *logoi* or ‘formative reason-principles’ at this discursive stage) cannot coexist, each of them is given a chance for a full manifestation.

At the level of matter the situation becomes further complicated by the emergence of *space* as another crucial factor. Not that we should identify matter with space pure and simple. It is rather a principle of *spatiality* and *extension*. It is that aspect of reality that makes forms three-dimensional, turning them into bodies. Innocent as this might sound, from the Neoplatonic perspective it is precisely extension that is the source of grave ontological troubles, setting up conditions for the highest degree of differentiation possible, thus making the proper manifestation of forms more than difficult. At the level of matter each form is constrained by three-dimensional space which forces it to assume one place only, allowing for no overlap with other bodies.⁴⁷ As a result there rises great tension between all the bodies, each wishing to take up the other’s place. Forms that coexist harmoniously at higher levels come into conflict here, forcing out one another (*In Parm.* 739.27–740.5):

The contraries in matter are destructive and yield to each other out of their common receptacle, and what is occupied by the one cannot participate in the other. A white object does not become black except by the destruction of the white, nor is the warm made cold without the disappearance of heat.

As Proclus puts it elsewhere (*In Parm.* 843.17–18), matter ‘accepts different forming principles (*logoi*) at different times, for although it desires to enjoy

⁴⁷ Admittedly, Proclus knows of the existence of one type of spatiality that is free from such troubles, namely the geometrical space of imagination which allows us to think of several three-dimensional geometrical objects occupying the same space (see below, ch. 4.4). This kind of spatiality is an ideal prototype of the spatiality of the corporeal world, and Proclus therefore speaks of it as ‘intelligible matter’, *hylē noētē*. See below, ch. 4.4, and MacIsaac, 2001b: 133–5.

them all, it is not able to partake of them all at the same time'. If the forms are to be realized in space at all, our material world needs to change constantly, new forms being born and old ones perishing. Still, the resulting forms are very hazy and unstable.

When analysing this principle of extension, the Neoplatonists have come to see matter as a wholly indefinite medium having no qualities of itself, being altogether passive and formless. Consequently, matter is opposed to forms, being precisely that aspect of reality which is responsible⁴⁸ for problems with their realization. According to this conception a body consists in a union of form and matter. Form comes from above, guaranteeing all the particular features and qualities a body might have. Matter, on the other hand, is the cause of all the imperfections that might come about in these particular features and qualities. Matter is the reason why form can only be realized approximately in this corporeal world of ours.

Crucial for us is the fact that corporeal spatiality always implies an insurmountable *separation* of bodily parts. Although all bodies together make up the cosmos, there is no 'monadic Body' to which all particular bodies might revert. The cosmos is a unity in the strong sense of the term in respect of its cosmic soul, but certainly not in respect of its corporeality. Proclus explains this point in *ET* 15:

All that is capable of reverting on itself is incorporeal.

For it is not in the nature of any body to revert on itself. For if that which reverts upon anything is joined to that upon which it reverts, then it is plain that all the parts of any body that reverted upon itself must be joined to every other part – since self-reversion is precisely the case in which the reverted subject and that on which it has reverted become identical. But this is impossible for a body and, in general, for any divisible substance: for the whole of a divisible substance cannot be joined with the whole of itself because of the separation of its parts, which occupy different positions in space. No body, therefore, is of such a nature as to revert upon itself in such a way that the whole is reverted upon the whole. Thus if there is anything which is capable of reverting upon itself, it is incorporeal and without parts.

What this means, in effect, is that our world can never find its good within itself, being altogether dependent on the higher levels and possessing no independence. The higher levels, on the contrary, do possess at least a relative independence, behaving as balanced, self-enclosed systems. In the end these depend on higher principles too, of course, but they actualize

⁴⁸ 'Responsibility' is only meant metaphorically, since Proclus (as opposed to Plotinus) categorically denies that matter is to be blamed for causing evil, except inadvertently. See below, ch. 7.1.

their dependence precisely through their autonomy. In other words, their autonomy is the best way of imitating the perfection of higher levels.

In this way the Neoplatonists are able to explain why the material world has to exist in the first place. At first sight it might seem that the existence of matter entails more problems than benefits, and the universe would have been much more perfect if the emanational process simply stopped at the level of Soul. In fact, however, such an early termination of the process of creation would not have been possible. The Soul is still too perfect, being able to revert towards itself. For this reason the ‘overflow’ effect has to take place again: the Soul’s relative perfection needs to give rise to something lower. The emanation can only stop at a level that is no longer capable of self-reversion – i.e. on the level of matter. Only here the imperfection becomes so enormous as to produce nothing further, the multi-layered procession of reality finally reaching its bottom.⁴⁹

The utter imperfection and indeterminacy of matter helps to explain why in Neoplatonic schemes the plane of our world is frequently represented not by matter but, surprisingly, by Nature. Though our world is first of all defined by its materiality, all that is comprehensible in it comes not from matter but from Soul – or to be more exact, from the Soul’s lowest offshoot which enters matter and forms it. This lowest emanation of Soul immersed in matter is already designated as Nature by Plotinus, who often treats it as a quasi-independent hypostasis.⁵⁰ Proclus follows in his footsteps, but in his love of clear distinctions he no longer regards Nature as an aspect of Soul, treating it rather as an independent hypostasis – though one whose status is rather paradoxical, for it is not self-constituted in the strict sense of the term, being inseparable from bodies and incapable of reverting back to itself.⁵¹ As a result, Nature may sometimes stand for the corporeal world in general, being its only component that can still be compared to the higher levels. Strictly speaking, matter is not a hypostasis at all, lacking a real ontological foundation and being ‘unconstituted’ (*anhypostatos*). Matter is rather a name we use for the lowest point at the bottom of things, helping us define the range of reality but having no ‘extension’ as such. What makes our material world into a tangible ‘something’ is precisely Nature, being the source of all forms that together with matter make up bodies. It is thus

⁴⁹ See Plotinus, *Enn.* II 9, 8.21–5; I 8, 7.17–23 (see a quotation of this passage below, p. 205). Cf. Proclus, *De mal.* 7.

⁵⁰ See Armstrong 1967b: 254–5; Rist 1967: 92–3.

⁵¹ Proclus, *In Tim.* I 10.19; 12.28. The fullest discussion of Nature is to be found in Proclus, *In Tim.* I 9.31–12.25. See in detail Martijn 2010.

understandable, therefore, that it represents our world in all hierarchic models that need to treat corporeal reality as something substantial.

2.2.4 *Limit and the Unlimited*

In the previous sections we have been describing the triad of remaining – procession – reversion primarily as a formalization of Plotinus' conception of emanation. Plotinus' insights are undoubtedly one of the crucial roots of Proclus' metaphysics, but they do not agree with it in all regards. Eastern Neoplatonists follow Plotinus in many points, but they also transform his metaphysics, stressing some points and altering others. A shift of this kind can also be traced in their model of emanation.⁵²

As we know already, Plotinus sees the beginning of each emanation in an outflow of unlimited energy coming from the higher level and becoming distinct from it. Due to the 'vacuum effect' this stream of energy turns around by itself at a certain stage, looking back to its source while contemplating itself. As a result it is formed, taming its unlimitedness by clear structure. The first boundless outflow is an unstructured potentiality, representing a kind of indeterminate 'substratum' of the new hypostasis. For this reason Plotinus speaks of it occasionally as 'intelligible matter'.⁵³ Like the matter of our bodily world, intelligible matter is a pure potency – but a potency in the sense of a creative potentiality. In this regard Plotinus follows (but reinterprets) Aristotle, who in his *Metaphysics* introduces a distinction between *passive* potency, i.e. 'a potency for being passively affected', and *active* potency 'that the change of state caused from outside is coming from to the passive subject'.⁵⁴ Intelligible matter is a potency that contains all of reality in a nutshell, having the ability to actualize it creatively – which it perpetually does in the process of emanation. At higher levels potency (*dynamis*) and actualization (*energeia*) go hand in hand, intelligible matter

⁵² The shift is discussed in detail by van Riel 2001 (I do not follow him in all points, though, finding some of the oppositions he postulates between Proclus and Plotinus too extreme). Cf. the much more impressionistic account of Trouillard 1972: 69–89.

⁵³ Plotinus, *Enn.* II 4, 15.17–20; II 5, 3. Cf. Rist 1962; Bussanich 1988: 118–20. In Proclus' thought 'intelligible matter' means a different thing: it concerns geometrical objects in our imagination which are clear of sensible matter but still have a spatial character, having thus an intelligible matter as their substratum (see n. 47 above, and ch. 4.4 below).

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Met.* IX 1046a11–13. Plotinus does not use Aristotle's terminology, designating active potency simply as 'potency' (*dynamis*) while the passive one as 'potential existence' (*to dynamēi*); see *Enn.* II 5, 3.22. Proclus, on the other hand, does speak of active and passive potency; see e.g. *In Alc.* 122.8–10: 'For potency is of two kinds: one is active, the other passive (*hē men tou poiountos, hē de tou paschontos*), the former being the mother of activity, the latter the receptacle of perfection.' See in detail Steel 1996.

being fully formed all the time, needing no external impulse for its realization (*Enn.* II 5, 3). Intellect arises in that the unbounded potency springing from the One turns to its source as well as towards itself, becoming structured and being thereby established as an independent hypostasis, doing so entirely by itself without needing the incentive of its generative cause.

Things are very much different at the level of our world. Its beginning follows the same old pattern: the lowest level of Soul (i.e. Nature) overflows in its fullness, giving rise to an unlimited stream of potential energy. However, Nature is too far from the first principle already, and its outflow is weak and imperfect only. In the potency that is coming out of Nature all the creativity has been used up, there being nothing left but utter passivity and indefiniteness (*Enn.* III 4, 1.8–14):

Just as everything which was produced before this was produced shapeless, but was formed by turning towards its producer and being, so to speak, reared to maturity by it, so here, too, that which is produced is not any more a form of soul – for it is not alive – but absolute indefiniteness. For even if there is indefiniteness in the things before it, it is nevertheless indefiniteness within form; the thing is not absolutely indefinite but only in relation to its perfection; but what we are dealing with now is absolutely indefinite.

The matter of our world is no longer capable of turning to its source by itself, being altogether dependent on the soul's formative care. It is a passive potency pure and simple. While being a potential 'basis' for all bodily forms, it contributes nothing whatsoever to their formation, making the creation of forms only more complicated. Whatever is beautiful in our world is an achievement of soul. Matter is seen by Plotinus as total privation, deforming forms and preventing their full realization.⁵⁵

Late Neoplatonists take these ideas up but alter them slightly. They too see the formation of unlimitedness as the basis of the emanation process, but they formalize it in a way that makes all the levels of emanation much more dependent on the One – including the crucial level of matter. At the heart of all existence Proclus sees the cooperation of two principles: Limit (*peras*) and the Unlimited (*apeiria*). In this he builds on Plato's *Philebus*, as well as on the Neopythagorean polarity of Monad and the indefinite Dyad, which was also prominent in the Old Academy and appears to have been a part of the unwritten doctrines of Plato.⁵⁶ For Proclus, Limit and the Unlimited represent a sort of basic 'interface' between the One and

⁵⁵ See O'Brien 1999: 67–9. For the difference between Plotinus and Proclus see van Riel 2001; Opsomer 2001.

⁵⁶ See Dillon 2003: 17–20.

the lower levels. In the One as such they are not yet distinguished, being pre-embraced in it in a unitary manner; but when a lower lever attempts to relate to the One, it can only do so through their prism. According to Proclus the One is altogether incomprehensible and transcendent in itself, and if we do speak about it, we do not really talk about that first unfathomable principle, but about its first relatively comprehensible image which is already delimited in some way (cf. above, p. 55). This 'image' is identical with Limit which 'determines and defines each entity, constituting it within its proper boundaries' (*In Crat.* 42.3–4). Nonetheless, Limit is always tied to the Unlimited (*PT* III 8, 31.18–32.7):

If this [comprehensible] One is to cause and produce being, it needs to contain a potency capable of generating it. For every cause produces on the basis of its potency which stands inbetween the cause and the effect, being a procession and as if extension of the former, and a generative cause set before the latter . . . This One which precedes potency, being the first to be set up by the unparticipated in and unknowable cause of all things [i.e. by the true highest One], is what Socrates calls 'Limit' in the *Philebus* (23c9–10), while the potency generating all things has been designated by him as 'the Unlimited'. For he says: 'We have said somewhere that god has shown existing things in one regard as limit, while in another as the unlimited.'

All that exists needs to depend on these two primal principles: it needs to be limited while possessing an indefinite potency. Proclus identifies limit with the remaining of effect in its cause, i.e. with that aspect in which each effect resembles its cause and is identical to it. The unlimited corresponds to the stage of procession in which the effect departs from its cause (*PT* III 8, 32.19–28):

For all wholeness and all unification and communion of existing things and all divine measures depend on the first Limit, while every differentiation and generative production and procession into plurality is brought about by that most basic Unlimitedness. Accordingly, when we say that each divine entity both remains and proceeds, we will surely agree even here to relate its stable remaining to Limit, while its procession to the Unlimited. And every such entity contains both a unity and a plurality within itself: unity is linked to Limit, plurality to the Unlimited.

The stage of reversion corresponds to a 'mixture' (*mikton*) of limit and the unlimited.⁵⁷ In the process of reversion each entity keeps its difference while relating to its cause and becoming like it. Limit and the unlimited are thus conjoined, making up the existence of every single thing.

⁵⁷ More on this stage see *PT* III 9.

All that exists down to the lowest levels consists of limit and the unlimited. As might be expected, both principles assume less and less perfect forms as they descend on the scale of things, yet they never lose their distinct properties (*PT* III 8, 33.7–34.5):

Intellect too is an offspring of Limit, inasmuch as it is unified and whole, and inasmuch as it contains the paradigmatic measures of all things; but inasmuch as it perpetually brings all things forth and through all eternity supplies them all at once with being due to its own inexhaustible potency, to that extent it is begotten by the Unlimited. And similarly, Soul falls into the causal sphere of Limit in that it sets firm limits to its own motions, measuring its life by circulations and cyclic returns; but in that it never stops moving, making the end of each of its cycles the beginning of a new period of life, it comes under the domain of the Unlimited. . . . And the same applies to all becoming: inasmuch as it consists of clearly delimited and ever unchanging species, and inasmuch as it follows a cycle that imitates the rotation of the heavens, it resembles Limit; but with regard to the variety and unceasing exchange of all particular things that come to be and to the element of ‘more-or-less’⁵⁸ in their participation in Forms it is an image of the Unlimited. In addition, every natural thing that comes to be resembles Limit in its form, but the Unlimited in its matter, these being the remotest manifestations of the two principles; it is this far that both principles have proceeded in their creativity.

In certain respects Proclus’ conception is no more than an elaboration of that of Plotinus, and at higher levels of reality it differs little from it. For Proclus the unlimited corresponds to procession, and is thus subordinated to limit in a sense, being less perfect⁵⁹ – just like the boundless outflow of ‘intelligible matter’ in Plotinus. At the same time, however, both philosophers agree that limit and the unlimited complement each other and cannot exist apart. As Plotinus puts it, in the intelligible world matter and form are ‘not separated except by rational abstraction’.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the difference between the two Neoplatonists shows clearly in the realm of the sensible world. For Plotinus, there is a fundamental difference between intelligible matter and the matter of our world (*Enn.* II 4, 15.22–3): ‘They

⁵⁸ For the element of ‘more-or-less’ (i.e. the mutual relativity of opposites such as wet–cold which only admit degrees and can never have absolute values) as being in the class of the unlimited see Plato, *Phlb.* 24a–25a.

⁵⁹ See *PT* III 8, 32.28–32.2: ‘And in general it holds true for every opposition within the classes of the gods that the superior pole is related to Limit, while the less perfect one to the Unlimited.’

⁶⁰ Plotinus, *Enn.* II 5, 3.16. Proclus endorses Plotinus’ conception in *PT* III 10, 39.24–40.4, though he stresses that he can only agree with him if ‘intelligible matter’ is interpreted as ‘potency’ (which undoubtedly is just how Plotinus understands it in II 5, 3) and not as ‘some kind of formless, shapeless and indefinite nature’ that would be in need of being imprinted by form. This seems to have been overlooked by van Riel (2001), who postulates an all too sharp opposition between Proclus and Plotinus.

differ as the archetype differs from the image . . . which has escaped from being and truth.' The passive potency of matter is nothing but a caricature of the active potency of higher levels, offering resistance to forms. It is significant that – as we shall see (ch. 7.1) – Plotinus regards matter as the chief source of evil.

Proclus is well aware that corporeal matter is potency in the least perfect sense of the term,⁶¹ but he refuses to draw a radical distinction between it and the higher degrees of potency, taking pains to soften the transition between them as much as possible.⁶² He is able to do so thanks to the above-sketches Aristotelian opposition between active and passive potency. The primal Unlimited is seen by him as an absolute active potency, which is 'perfect' in that it is capable of actualizing both itself and all the other things. Matter, on the other hand, is a pure passive potency (just as it is for Plotinus), which is 'imperfect' in that it entirely depends for its actualization on some subordinate cause in which it participates.⁶³ Yet, if for Plotinus this passive potency was but a failed copy of the active one, Proclus regards it in a more neutral way and does not limit it to the bodily world. In his view, the cooperation of both potencies is at play in all participation, which always consists in a relation of two terms: a lower one that participates, and a higher one that is participated in. As an example we can take the good old stone again – marble, for instance. It participates in the Form of marble, which has its marbleness from itself, being ready in its active potency to impart it on something lower. In practice it does not impart it on everything but on that only which has a proper 'fitness' (*epitēdeiotēs*) for participating it (*ET* 39.9–10) – i.e. to that which is itself marble in (passive) potency. The Form of marble is able to actualize this potency, the result being a physical piece of marble. It is important that Proclus conceptualizes the passive potency of the participating term as its 'appetency' (*orexis*) for the realization of its potentiality (*In Parm.* 842.12–20):

Accordingly we must affirm that the cause of this participation is, on the one hand, the active potency of the primordial divine Forms themselves, and on the other hand the appetency of the beings that are shaped in accordance with them and that participate in the formative activity that proceeds from them. For the creative action of the Forms is not sufficient to bring about participation; at all events, though these Forms are everywhere to the same degree, not all things participate alike in them; nor is the appetency of the beings that participate adequate without their creative activity. For desire by itself is imperfect; it is the perfect generating factors that lead in the form-giving process.

⁶¹ Proclus, *PT* III 8, 34.7–11, and in greater detail III 10.

⁶² Cf. his long discussion of the origin of matter in *In Tim.* I 384.16–387.5.

⁶³ Proclus, *ET* 78. See the excellent analysis by Steel 1996.

The essential thing for us is that this pattern also has to apply to the higher levels, where participation takes place as well – e.g. when Soul participates in Intellect. Even here the lower level needs to long for the higher one, being less perfect in this regard in relation to it, and having thus a certain degree of passive potency that it is incapable of actualizing by itself.⁶⁴ In comparison with the material world the degree of passivity is considerably lower, of course, for the higher levels, besides being derived from the One, are also self-constituted, and thus partly capable of self-actualization. In this sense they do possess active potency indeed, for – in the words of Dodds (1933: 224) – an entity is self-constituted in that it ‘determines the particular potentiality which shall be actualized in it’. Nevertheless, the self-constituted levels only actualize themselves in that mode of existence which is typical for them, arising as something new at their level. In this sense the soul, for instance, actualizes its own discursive rationality by itself, while still depending on its priors in many other regards (such as in its being or unity) and thus apparently possessing a degree of passive potency.

It is obvious that the passive potency will grow with the distance of each level from the One – for the lower it stands, the more prior levels there are for it to depend on. The active potency, on the other hand, will gradually diminish, for the number of lower levels produced by that level will be progressively smaller.⁶⁵ The sum total of active and passive potency will presumably always be infinite, but the difference will be in the imaginary dividing mark that specifies the degree of both potencies. At the highest point of the scale active potency will be infinite and passive potency non-existent – for the One generates everything, depending on nothing. At the lowest point, active potency will be zero (matter produces nothing) and active potency infinite (matter depends on its priors in all regards, being capable of no self-actualization).

While Proclus never actually uses the descriptive model I have just sketched, he comes close to it in the *Timaeus Commentary* when he comments on the constitution of the Soul in the *Timaeus* as follows (II 138.6–14):⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Proclus never says this explicitly, but if we carry his scattered thoughts to their conclusions, this interpretation seems inevitable. Cf. Gersh 1973: 41–8.

⁶⁵ Proclus, *ET* 60–2; see e.g. *ET* 61.1–5: ‘Every power (*dynamis*) is greater if it be undivided, less if it be divided. For if it be divided, it proceeds to multiplicity; and if so, it becomes more remote from the One; and if so, it will be less powerful, in proportion as it falls away from the One which contains it in unity.’

⁶⁶ For the broader context of the passage see MacIsaac 2001a: 132–52.

Every existence, potency and activity⁶⁷ derives from both Limit and the Unlimited, and is either of the form of Limit (*peratoeidēs*), or of the form of the Unlimited (*apeiroeidēs*), or is not more one than the other. For this reason all that is in the realm of Intellect is said to be limit and to be the same to such a degree that one may ask whether there is some difference in it as well; and likewise it is said to be at rest to such a degree that one may be in doubt if there is some intellective motion in it as well. And all bodily things are said to be friends to the unlimited. Souls, on the other hand, are said to manifest at the same time plurality and unity, rest and motion.

The description presented here is less precise than the one I have offered above, but it amounts to the same thing. The degree to which a potency is passive or active corresponds precisely to the extent in which the unlimited dominates limit or is dominated by it. The actual proportion of limit and the unlimited is the same throughout the hierarchy, but what varies is the way these principles behave and interact. In the realm of Intellect the potency of the unlimited is always capable of self-actualization due to its being 'of the form of Limit'. In the bodily world the relation is the other way round, so that it is only with difficulties that limit can imprint its forms into the passive potency of matter at all.

In his conception of matter as passive potency Proclus agrees with Plotinus, but unlike him he refuses to see a radical break between matter and the higher levels, envisaging rather a gradual transition. Rather than being a deplorable caricature of the active potency of higher principles, the passive potency of matter seems to be an extreme form of something that in milder forms is also to be found at higher planes of reality. Moreover, it is significant that Proclus interprets passive potency as *appetency*. It follows that matter can never be the principle of evil, for it longs for forms, always wanting to be filled by them.⁶⁸ That it is only capable of this to a limited extent is not really its fault. As a result Proclus manages to secure for matter a relatively dignified mode of existence, even calling it 'a good of some sort'.⁶⁹ It is remarkable that in doing so he relies on more or less the same basic principles as Plotinus does; he puts them together in a different way, however, achieving a worldview effect that is entirely different.

⁶⁷ The triad existence (*hyparxis*), potency (*dynamis*) and activity (*energeia*) is another way Proclus often uses to describe an entity in its three aspects of remaining in, proceeding from and reverting to itself. Cf. Siorvanes 1996: 109–10.

⁶⁸ See Proclus, *De mal.* 32.9–19; 36.25.

⁶⁹ Proclus, *In Tim.* 1 385.15. According to Proclus matter is not 'an unqualified good' (*haplōs agathon*), for in that case it would have to be an object of desire, which it is not; nonetheless, it is good in the sense of having been produced 'for the sake of good', since without it reality would be incomplete (*De mal.* 36–7).

2.3 GRADES OF CAUSALITY

2.3.1 *All things are in all things*

The introduction of Limit and the Unlimited as two basic principles winding through all the planes of reality makes it possible for Proclus to bridge the gap between the highest and the lowest levels. Nonetheless, it is not the only tool Proclus has at his disposal for stressing the closeness of higher levels to our world. Until now, for instance, we have been describing emanation as a step-by-step process in which each level ‘passes the baton’ to its successor, so to speak, creating exactly one new level below: the One gives rise to Intellect, Intellect to Soul, Soul to matter. Does this mean that the One has finished its creative work with the production of Intellect, having nothing to do with the lower levels? In Proclus’ view certainly not. As we learn from proposition 38 of the *Elements of Theology*, ‘all that proceeds from a plurality of causes passes through as many terms in its reversion as in its procession’. In other words, if Soul proceeds from Intellect, it also has to proceed from the One, the same being true of its reversion: Soul reverts not just to Intellect but to the One as well. We can therefore distinguish at least two different cycles of procession and reversion in Soul:⁷⁰ in the first one it proceeds from and reverts to Intellect, in the second one it proceeds through Intellect from and to the One. In the bodily world there will even be three cycles (and that in the simplest possible model only – on close up we would discover even more cycles; see ch. 2.3.2). The entire model is depicted in [figure 3](#).

At first sight such a model might seem a bit overcomplicated, but its significance is enormous. As we have seen in chapter 1.2.2, unlike Plotinus late Neoplatonists postulate sharp boundaries between different levels, insisting that no lower being can leave its station and rise higher. In that case, however, we may wonder why the more distant higher levels should matter to us at all. If each level just proceeded from the level immediately above it, such a question would be highly pungent. For us, the inhabitants of the bodily world, for instance, the only relevant higher level would be Soul, for it is by Soul that our world is produced and that it proceeds from and reverts to. The existence of the One and Intellect would in that case be no more than an abstract philosophical hypothesis with little practical impact

⁷⁰ The above-quoted proposition 33 on the cyclic nature of all procession and reversion continues (*ET* 33,6–9): ‘There are greater circuits and lesser, in that some revert upon their immediate priors, others upon the superior causes, even to the beginning of all things. For out of the beginning all things are, and towards it all revert.’

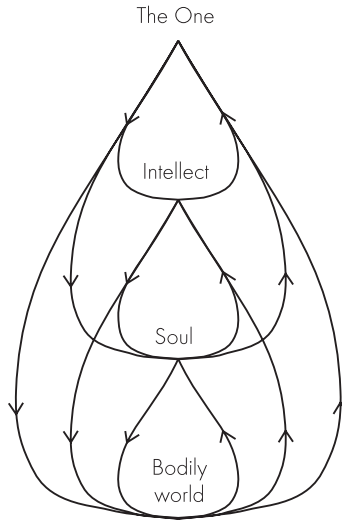


Fig. 3 Multiple layers of procession and reversion

due to its essential inaccessibility. A similar idea is unacceptable for Proclus, for in his view the One and Intellect despite their transcendence represent an indispensable framework of all human experience. Accordingly, he lets each level proceed from all the previous planes as well. Thanks to this we earthlings do have something to do with the One and Intellect after all, for we constantly revert to them too, trying to imitate them at a certain level of our being.

This is not to say, of course, that the boundaries between levels of reality may be blurred or declared insignificant. While the lower levels may be said to proceed from all of their priors, on closer examination we find them doing so through a number of intermediary terms: 'All that proceeds through a plurality of causes passes through as many terms in its reversion as in its procession; and all reversion is through the same terms as the corresponding procession' (*ET* 38.1–3). What this amounts to, presumably, is that Intellect is only capable of fully assimilating a certain amount of the One's infinite potency that it has originated from. The rest is intellectualized incompletely and becomes 'the one in Intellect' (see below, ch. 5.1). Its equivalent is the above described 'drunken' gaze that the Intellect turns directly towards the One, stepping out of itself and being in a state of divine ecstasy (see p. 70). It is thanks to this look that Intellect is able to retain some measure of true unity (albeit in a much more diluted

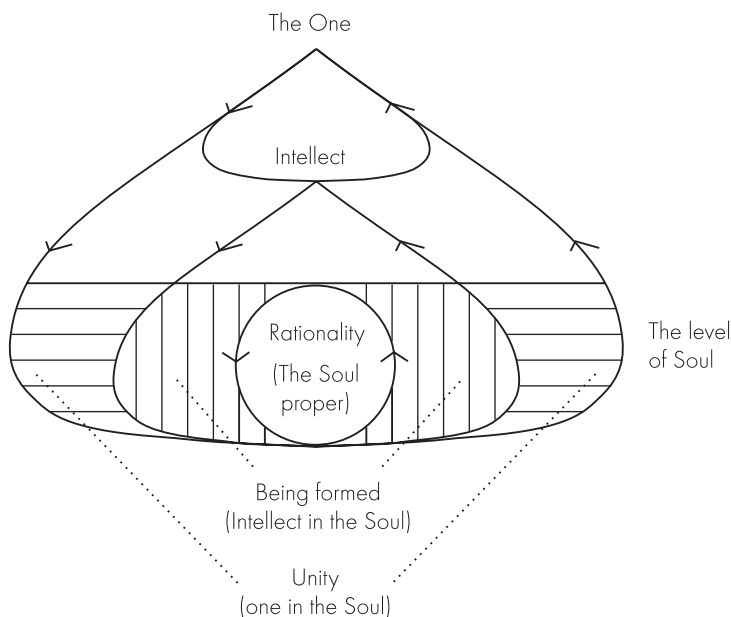


Fig. 4 Layers of Soul

state than the one we would find in the One itself), being able to pass it on to other levels.

An interesting upshot of this conception is the fact that every single hypostasis actually hides several sub-layers within itself, each having its own cycle of procession and reversion. If we look at Soul from this perspective, for instance, we can distinguish three basic layers within it: (1) First of all, Soul proceeds from the One, imitating it in turn by its highest and most fundamental layer; it is by virtue of this 'one in the Soul' that the Soul is unified and can transmit unity to other things. (2) It further proceeds from Intellect, which produces another sub-layer, the 'intellect in the Soul', which ensures that the Soul is well formed and is capable of forwarding forms to its lower effects as well. (3) Finally the Soul proceeds from and reverts to itself, becoming thus a self-constituted level with specific properties of its own, i.e. one endowed with discursive rationality. Schematically, the multi-layered nature of Soul can be shown in [figure 4](#).

The entire hierarchy of reality may be then imagined as a pyramid, as we see it in [figure 5](#) (the number of arrows expresses the strength of causal potency).

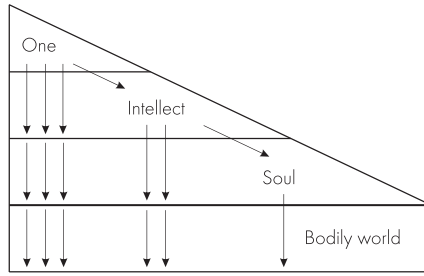


Fig. 5 Grades of causality

In addition, Proclus considers the bigger cycles more important and powerful than the smaller ones. Higher levels possess greater causal potency, and their effects thus have to be more substantial than those of the lower levels.⁷¹ In effect, the gifts of higher levels serve as a firm basis, making possible the growth of the more complex but less stable effects of the lower levels (*ET* 71.1–10):

All those characters which in the originative causes have higher and more universal rank become in the resultant beings, through the irradiations which proceed from them, a kind of substratum for the gifts of the more specific principles. And while the irradiations of the superior levels thus serve as a basis, the characters which proceed from secondary levels are founded upon them. In this way some types of participation come first and some second, and different emanations come down to the same recipient in succession: the more universal causes affect it first, while the more specific ones only bestow their gifts on the participants after the first ones have presented theirs.

As an example we can take man. Man is kept in existence by his soul, and at first sight it might seem that it is this that he has most of his human characteristics from. On closer inspection we discover, however, that most of what the soul gives to man has its source not in the soul as such, but rather in its higher causes. The most elementary function of soul is to turn the body into an organic unity, making sure that all the cells cooperate. Yet, the true source of this unity is the One (*ET* 1–5), the soul being just its transmitter. The soul further endows the body with form and visible shape. Still, not even this is its unique contribution: form too is only forwarded by soul from its true fountainhead, which is Intellect. The same applies to perception, which is nothing but the simplest kind of cognition, and in this sense may be seen as an earthly imitation of the activity of Intellect. As

⁷¹ See Proclus, *ET* 56.1–3 (quoted below, p. 91).

we shall see soon (ch. 2.3.2), even life is regarded by Proclus as springing from Intellect, despite its being traditionally considered as coming from the soul. The only truly specific gift of the soul is rationality, which in proportion to the other characteristics is really but extra icing on the cake, being the most dazzling but the least enduring feature of human beings (*ET* 70.8–19):

Thus, for example, a thing must exist as a being before it has life, and have life before it is human. And again, when the logical faculty has failed it is no longer human, but it is still a living thing, since it breathes and feels; and when life in turn has abandoned it, being remains to it, for even when it ceases to live it still has being. So in every case. The reason is that the higher cause, having a greater causal potency, operates sooner upon the participant (for where the same thing is affected by two causes, it is affected first by the more powerful); and when the secondary cause is active, the higher cause cooperates with it, because whatever is produced by a secondary level is at the same time coproduced by the more efficacious level. And where the former has withdrawn, the latter is still present (for the gift of the more powerful principle is slower to abandon the participant, being more efficacious).

The power and causal potency of the higher levels will stand out even clearer if we consider the corporeal world as a whole. We cannot but notice that rationality as a specific contribution of the soul is not only the least permanent but also the least usual gift. While being, for instance, is characteristic of all that exists in our world, rationality only concerns a tiny handful of beings. Proclus formalizes this insight in the *Elements of Theology*, explaining that the causal activity of the more powerful levels always reaches further than that of the weaker secondary levels (*ET* 57.1–13):

Every cause⁷² both exercises its activity prior to its effect and gives rise to a greater number of terms following on it.

For if it is a cause, it is more perfect and more powerful than its effect. And if so, it must be a cause of more things: for greater power produces more effects, equal power, equal effects, and lesser power, fewer; and the power which can produce the greater effects upon similar subjects can produce also the lesser, whereas a power able to produce the lesser will not necessarily be capable of the greater. If, then, the cause is more powerful than its effect, it is productive of more things.

But again, the powers which are in the effect are present to a greater extent in the cause. For all that is produced by secondary entities is produced in a greater

⁷² Once again the reader should be reminded that for Proclus causality is an essentially vertical category. To be a cause of some effect means to be the source of its meaning and existence, and thus to stand higher at least by one level. (The ability of self-constituted levels to cause themselves in some regard is but a specific horizontal extension of this basic vertical causality, and Proclus therefore does not take it into consideration in our passage.)

measure by prior and more causative principles. The cause, therefore, cooperates in the production of all that the effect is capable of producing.

What Proclus means becomes clear when the rule is applied to the structure of reality (*ET* 57.18–26):

From this it is apparent that what Soul causes is caused also by Intellect, but not all that Intellect causes is caused by Soul. Intellect operates prior to Soul; and what Soul gives to secondary beings, Intellect gives them in a greater measure. And at a level where Soul is no longer operative, Intellect irradiates with its own gifts things on which Soul has not bestowed itself – for even the inanimate participates in Intellect or in the creative activity of Intellect, insofar as it participates in Form.

Again, what Intellect causes is also caused by the Good, but not conversely. For even privations of Form derive from the Good, since all things stem from it. But Intellect, given that it is Form, cannot give rise to privation.

Here too we need to remember that the entire process takes place indirectly. The immediate cause of all that exists in our world is the Soul, but in producing all things it uses various parts of its being. While bestowing rationality on the world directly out of its innermost psychic essence, it is only second-hand that the Soul endows it with forms, which it receives from Intellect (though leaving its own psychic imprint upon them). The same applies in an even stronger degree to the creation of matter: it is apparently just in a state of divine frenzy of ‘the one in the Soul’ that the Soul is able to beget its sheer formlessness and nondifferentiation.⁷³

Translating this into a scheme (fig. 6), we will see the pyramidal structure of the higher levels from our previous diagram mirrored in the corporeal world.⁷⁴

It is worth noticing that the whole conception gives Proclus another opportunity for enhancing the status of matter. In his attacks against matter Plotinus often laid stress on the fact that matter is maximally distant from the One, being the very bottom of reality. Proclus admits this but hastens to add that on account of this matter is paradoxically very close to the One, being produced by it only and bearing no traces of the lower levels (*ET* 72). To visualize this, we may redraw the pyramidal scheme from figure 6 using a different arrangement (fig. 7 – full lines signify the production of features specific to the given type of earthly terms).

The implications of this scheme are more than interesting. It indicates that although in one respect matter stands farthest from the One, in another

⁷³ We shall see below (p. 133), though, that the entire process of causation is only indirect from our perspective. From the point of view of the gods (i.e. the henads) themselves their causation is immediate down to the very bottom of things.

⁷⁴ The scheme is provisional only; for its full version see figure 10 below, p. 98.

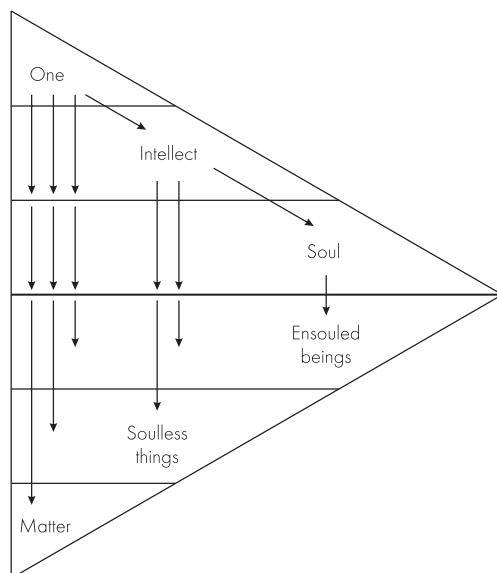


Fig. 6 Material world as mirroring the higher levels

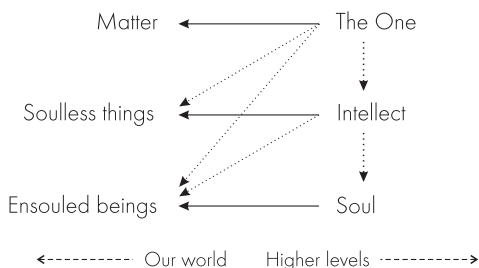


Fig. 7 The One and matter as causally interconnected

it shows surprising inverse resemblance to it. Just like the One it is totally unformed and simple. It is a neutral substrate without distinctions, which is pertinently compared by Plato in the *Timaeus* (50e) to the pure liquid that has to be thoroughly freed from all smell by perfume makers to serve as a proper receptacle for the sweet scents that it is meant to bear.⁷⁵ In its simplicity matter is very much like the One – except that its simplicity

⁷⁵ Plato does not yet speak of 'matter' (the term *hylē* is Aristotelian); nevertheless, the 'receptacle' (*hypodochē*) he describes in the *Timaeus* is one of the two main sources (together with Aristotelian matter in the sense of passive potentiality) of the Neoplatonic concept of matter.

is empty and passive, while the One is simple in its activity and fullness. Both extreme poles of reality also have their non-being in common – even though the One is non-being in the sense of what is 'superior to being' (*ET* 138.13), while matter in the sense of what is weaker than being.⁷⁶ Proclus points out their mirror resemblance in *ET* 59.1–12.⁷⁷

Whatever is simple in its being may be either superior to composite things or inferior to them.

... For the last being is, like the first, perfectly simple, for the reason that it proceeds from the first alone; but the one is simple as being above all composition, the other as being beneath it.

No less interesting is the position of ensouled creatures. In the pyramidal scheme they stood of all earthly entities closest to the higher levels. Now, on the other hand, we see them as being most distant from the One, representing the most complex, and thus the least unified, type of existence. An interesting practical consequence of this may be observed in Neoplatonic theurgy. If the theurgists attribute great power to soulless objects, which are the lowest and simplest terms in our world, it is precisely because these are easiest to use for evoking divine potency that by its simplicity surpasses all rational insights.⁷⁸ Though Proclus never says this explicitly, we find the idea clearly formulated by Iamblichus, who draws attention to the fact that for divinatory purposes divine power often extends to inanimate objects, such as pebbles, rods, or certain woods. By descending to the lowest material objects god does not just demonstrate his might, but shows us something even more interesting (*De myst.* III 17.57–62):

For just as he makes some simple-minded human being utter statements full of wisdom, by which it becomes clear to all that this is not some human but a divine accomplishment, so through beings deprived of knowledge he reveals thoughts which surpass all knowledge.

The lowest inanimate objects are thus particularly suited for manifesting the divine, for by being deprived of all traces of intelligence they symmetrically mirror that which transcends Intellect on the other side of the scale of

⁷⁶ For matter as non-being see Proclus, *In Parm.* 999.19. The similarity between matter and The One is already noted by Plotinus (*Enn.* VI 7, 13.3–4), but it is not pursued any further by him.

⁷⁷ See Proclus, *In Tim.* III 328.20–31.

⁷⁸ See Dodds 1933: 233; Wallis 1972: 156–7. Siorvanes (1996: 187–8) disputes this conclusion, arguing that the theurgists strove to ascend and if they 'attempted to reach divinity through material objects, their soul would descend into darkness'. This is a misunderstanding however, for by manipulating material objects the Neoplatonists do not turn towards matter but towards the divine powers that these material 'symbols' are capable of evoking. See below, ch. 5.2.1.

reality.⁷⁹ To evoke divine unity by psychic concentration only without the help of external ritual objects, on the other hand, is much more difficult due to the soul's immense complexity – although we shall see that in the eyes of both Proclus and Iamblichus an evocation of this type is more valuable in the end, being able to bridge the furthest poles of the universe, containing in itself all the other kinds of unity (ch. 5).

The theurgic outcomes of Proclus' concept of causal steps may not be appreciated by everyone, and it is probably more useful to consider some of its more neutral metaphysical implications. Possibly the most important one of them is the fact that every single level of reality is divided into sub-layers in a way that mirrors the structure of reality as a whole. Proclus sums this up in one of the most fundamental rules of late Neoplatonist metaphysics: 'All things are in all things, but in each according to its proper nature.'⁸⁰ The best example is our world, which in the pyramidal scheme is an exact mirror of the higher levels. But the same is true of every single higher level. Thus we find both the one and intellect present in Soul, though only in a manner appropriate to it: the one in the Soul is not as unified as the One as such, and the intellectual Forms too exist in Soul in a far more unfolded manner than they do in the true Intellect. By analogy, in Intellect there is a layer corresponding to the One ('the flower of Intellect'), though only representing an intellectual emulation of unity that cannot equal the true unity of the One (see ch. 5.1 for details).

It might seem that in the other direction Proclus' rule is more difficult to apply, for in Intellect there appears to be no layer corresponding to Soul. Nonetheless, in Proclus' view Intellect contains Soul too, though just potentially and 'secretly'. As we learn from *ET* 56.1–3: 'All that is produced by secondary beings is in a greater measure produced from those prior and more determinative principles from which the secondary were themselves derived.' In other words, every cause contains all of its effects in potency – but again only 'according to its proper nature', and thus with a lower degree of differentiation than would pertain to the effects themselves (*PT* III 9, 39.20–4): 'In the primal levels of reality multiplicity is present secretly and without separation, while in the secondary levels it is differentiated. The closer a term stands to the One, the more it hides multiplicity within itself, defining itself by unity only.' In effect, Intellect does contain

⁷⁹ Cf. below, p. 191, for a similar motif in Proclus' theory of mythical symbols: it is by using perverse and monstrous images that myths are capable of evoking divine transcendence.

⁸⁰ Proclus, *ET* 103.1. It is a general Neoplatonic rule that is already to be found in Porphyry's *Sententiae* 10.

Soul as well, but it is hidden within it, being anticipated in potency. In this way it even contains the sensible world (*ET* 173.15–17):

Thus every intellect is all things intellectually, both its priors and its consequents: that is to say, as it contains the intelligible world intellectually, so it also contains the sensible world in an intellective manner.

In like fashion, the One contains all things in potency, but in a transcendent manner incomprehensible for lower beings.⁸¹ Proclus sums up the mutual presence of all things in all things in *ET* 65:

All that subsists in any fashion exists either in the manner of a cause (kat' aitian), as an originative potency (archoeidōs); or in its own mode of existence (kath' hyparxin); or by participation (kata methexin), after the manner of an image.

For either we see the product as pre-existent in the producer which is its cause (for every cause pre-embraces its effect before its emergence, having primitively that character which the latter has by derivation); or we see the producer in the product (for the latter participates in its producer and reveals in itself by derivation what the producer already is primitively); or else we contemplate each thing in its own station, neither in its cause nor in its effect (for its cause has a higher, its resultant a lower mode of being than itself, and besides these there must surely be some being which is its own) – and it is as in its own mode of existence that each has its being in its own station.

Accordingly, Proclus will claim that the henads pre-embrace all things 'in a manner conformable to their unity' (*ET* 118.8), while every 'intellect is intellectually identical both with its priors and with its consequents – with the latter as their cause, with the former by participation. But since it is itself an intellect and its essence is intellective, it defines everything, both what it is in the manner of a cause and what it is by participation, in its own mode of existence.'⁸²

2.3.2 *Being – Life – Intellect*

In the previous section we have seen a number of sub-layers arise within each hypostasis due to its simultaneous procession from all the preceding levels at once. Nevertheless, higher hypostases do not just proceed from their causes; they are self-constituted as well, proceeding from and reverting to

⁸¹ See Proclus, *ET* 118. For the incomprehensibility with which the One embraces all things see *ET* 123 (quoted above, pp. 61–2).

⁸² Proclus, *ET* 173.1–5. For an application of the same rule on soul see *ET* 195.

themselves. This autonomous cycle generates further stratification within each level.⁸³

The most important example of such stratification is to be found on the plane of Intellect. Its preliminary version can already be spotted in Plotinus, who occasionally reflects on the fact that within Intellect there exists a certain duality: Intellect is defined by its thinking, but thinking implies the existence of something thought as different from the one who thinks.⁸⁴ In a number of passages Plotinus speaks of these two aspects as of Intellect (the contemplating subject) and Being (the contemplated object).⁸⁵ Nonetheless, he follows Aristotle in insisting that the Intellect really thinks itself, i.e. – and here the parallel with Aristotle ends – its own Forms.⁸⁶ Logically the contemplated object should precede the contemplating subject, and we might expect being to be prior to thought. For Plotinus, however, such a view is but a consequence of the dividedness and discursivity of our thinking: at the level of Intellect no discursivity exists, and being and thinking are two sides of the same coin (*Enn.* v 9, 8.11–22).

Late Neoplatonists are unsatisfied by this solution. They too understand Being and Intellect as two aspects of one and the same hypostasis, but being fond of clear hierarchies, they take it for granted that aspects of the same entity can easily be subordinated one to another. Since every thinking subject must first of all *be* to be able to *think*, of necessity being must come before thinking. As a result, Proclus frequently treats Being as an independent ‘intelligible’ (*noēton*) level above Intellect, being contemplated by it. Intellect, on the other hand, strictly speaking refers to an ‘intellective’ level (*noeron*), i.e. one that has the nature of contemplating Intellect. The reader might rightly be puzzled by such a distinction, for it seems to contradict our previous exposition that treated Intellect as the first level emerging after the One. The truth is that Proclus uses the term Intellect in two different senses as it suits him in his analyses: (1) Whenever a basic description is sufficient for him, he uses ‘Intellect’ to designate the first hypostasis coming after the One. (2) Whenever he needs to explain some subtle problem concerning this hypostasis, he switches to a mode of higher resolution, naming as ‘Intellect’ the lower layer of that first dependent hypostasis, using the term ‘Being’ for its higher layer. Which of the two uses applies in each particular case has to be deduced from the context. If

⁸³ In my interpretation of internal stratification as arising due to the self-constitution of each hypostasis I am following Gersh 1978: 126–9.

⁸⁴ See e.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* v 3, 10; v 6, 1–2. ⁸⁵ See e.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* v 1, 4.26–33; v 2.1.11–13.

⁸⁶ See e.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* v 4, 2.43–48; cf. Aristotle, *De anima* 430a2–5.

I ever need to distinguish between the two Intellects in my exposition, I shall qualify 'Intellect' in sense (1) as 'general'.

The distinction between Being and Intellect is just one part of the internal stratification within general Intellect. Proclus' thought is essentially triadic. Eastern Neoplatonists strove to make the hierarchy of reality as continuous as possible, often having recourse to a strategy designated by Dodds (1933: xxii) as the 'law of mean terms': if we have two terms standing in opposition to each other, we must postulate a third mediating term between them that would bridge the gap.⁸⁷ As a mediator between Being and Intellect late Neoplatonists chose Life. Their chief inspiration was a classic passage from Plato's *Sophist* 248e–249a, in which life (together with thinking, motion and soul) is listed as one of the basic attributes of being. For this reason life already appears as an aspect of Intellect with Plotinus, without however being hypostatized in any way.⁸⁸ It was only the successors of Plotinus who fully formalized the presence of life in the intelligible domain, turning it into its middle term.⁸⁹ As Proclus explains in *PT* IV 1, if Intellect is 'intellective' and Being 'intelligible', Life needs to be 'intelligible-intellective'. Life represents thinking as such, 'which is filled by the objects of thought while itself filling Intellect with its contents' (7.22–3). It is a stream of energy linking the thinking subject to the object of thought, making their relation dynamic. No wonder that Proclus regards it as the potency (*dynamis*) of general Intellect (7.26–8.4).

The triad Being – Life – Intellect is analogous to the two previous triads we have met. In the first place it corresponds to the triad of remaining – procession – reversion. Being is general Intellect in its aspect of remaining in itself, Life corresponds to its procession out of itself, Intellect to its reversion to itself (*PT* IV 1, 7.9–13). No less clear is the analogy with the triad limit – the unlimited – mixture. In this case Being corresponds to limit, Life represents the unlimited stream of energy, Intellect the mixture of both.⁹⁰ In yet another manner we may regard Being as the moment of

⁸⁷ See Wallis 1972: 130–3, on the 'law of mean terms' and the late Neoplatonic tendency to think in triads. It should be remarked, though, that modern interpreters often treat this 'law' in an all too formalist manner, causing the impression that the numerous Proclean triads are but a result of its stubborn mechanical application. In actuality most of the triads have good internal reasons, offering an elegant way of resolving various specific problems.

⁸⁸ Plotinus, *Enn.* I 6, 7.11; V 4, 2.43; V 6, 6.20–1; VI 2, 7; VI 6, 7.15–8.2. Cf. Hadot 1960.

⁸⁹ Scholars dispute whether this formalization was carried out by Porphyry (thus Hadot 1966), or whether it only emerged with Iamblichus (thus e.g. Edwards 1997).

⁹⁰ It should be said, though, that Proclus' sophisticated symmetries reach their limits here: if Life is 'intelligible-intellective', we would expect it to correspond to mixture rather than the unlimited.

‘existence’ (*hyparxis*) of the general Intellect, Life as its ‘potency’ (*dynamis*), while Intellect as its ‘activity’ (*energeia*).⁹¹

Proclus often treats Being, Life and Intellect as if they were entirely independent levels. In fact, however, they are all inseparably connected, being all contained in one another. Proclus explains their relation in *ET* 103:

All things are in all things, but in each according to its proper nature: for in Being there is life and intellect; in Life, being and intellect; in Intellect, being and life; but each of these exists upon one level intellectually, upon another vitally, and on the third essentially.

For since each character may exist either in the manner of a cause or in its own mode of existence or by participation [see *ET* 65 above, p. 92], and since in the first term of any triad the other two are embraced as in their cause, while in the mean term the first is present by participation and the third as in its cause, and finally the third contains its priors by participation, it follows that in Being there are pre-embraced Life and Intellect; but because each term is characterized not by what it causes (since this is other than itself) nor by what it participates in (since this is extrinsic in origin) but by its own mode of existence, Life and Intellect are present there after the mode of Being, as essential life and essential intellect. And in Life are present Being by participation and Intellect in the manner of a cause, but each of these vitally, Life being their own mode of existence. And in Intellect both Life and Being are present by participation, and each of them intellectually, for the being of Intellect is cognitive and its life is cognition.

Clearly, this makes the entire model rather complicated. Intellect, for instance, is to be found in Proclus’ system in no less than four variants: besides the above-mentioned distinction between general Intellect and intellectual Intellect as the lowest term of our triad we need to take into account the existence of intelligible Intellect at the level of Being and intelligible-intellectual Intellect at the level of Life!⁹² Both of these Intellects are only present at their respective levels implicitly (‘in their cause’), but this does not prevent Proclus from treating them as altogether real entities, analysing their functions in great details. In the *Platonic Theology* he devotes a full three books out of six to such analyses (III–V). We shall not follow him in these nuances, though, limiting ourselves to the observation that in consequence Being, Life and Intellect are all the more strongly shown to be three aspects of the same entity. General Intellect really forms a matrix

⁹¹ See Proclus, *In Tim.* II 138.6–14 (quoted above, p. 82), for this triad. In *PT* IV 1 Proclus only mentions *hyparxis* and *dynamis*.

⁹² For the difference between intelligible and intellectual Intellect see e.g. Proclus, *PT* III 21, 74.23–75.23; for a combination of all three types see *PT* V 12, 41.10–15.

| | remaining | procession | reversion |
|------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| remaining | Intelligible Being | intelligible Life | intelligible Intellect |
| procession | Intelligible-intellective Being | Intelligible-intellective Life | Intelligible-intellective Intellect |
| reversion | Intellective Being | Intellective Life | Intellective Intellect |

Fig. 8 The structure of general intellect

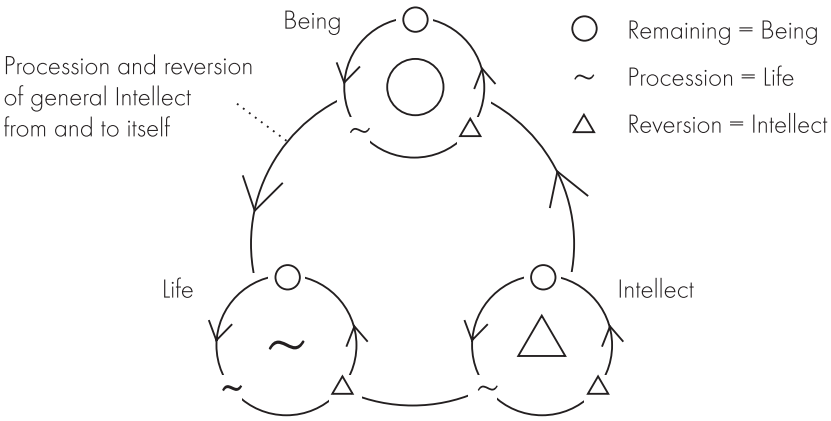


Fig. 9 General Intellect in its self-reversion

of three times three elements (fig. 8 – the bold terms are in their own mode of existence).⁹³

From the viewpoint of the cycle of procession and reversion the same matrix can be represented as in figure 9.⁹⁴

For the purpose of our introductory study it is more interesting to consider the way in which the Being – Life – Intellect distinction is projected into the structure of bodily world. In ch. 2.3.1 we have already mentioned that in Proclus' view the essence of soul is rationality; the only specific effect of soul in our world is human reason, all the other gifts being transmitted

⁹³ In fact, in *PT* Proclus goes on to introduce further subdivisions within this matrix. In the end, he assigns nine members to Being, twenty-seven to Life (*PT* IV 3), and seventy-two to Intellect (*PT* V 2; Rosán 1949: 151 [= 2009: 147]).

⁹⁴ The scheme is a modified version of the diagram in Gersh 1978: 129.

by it secondarily. Such an idea might seem strange, for in consequence most traditional psychic functions are transferred over to Intellect, which at first sight does not appear as an ideal candidate for being the source of such properties as life or motion. The Being – Life – Intellect triad helps to solve this problem in an elegant way, which is no doubt one of the reasons for its prominence in late Neoplatonic metaphysics.

Proclus presents the fullest version of his theory in the *Platonic Theology* III 6, where he enumerates all the levels of reality systematically. His starting point is the corporeal level, the existence of which is made obvious by our everyday experience. However, all bodies receive their being from soul (whether an individual or the cosmic one), which thus has to be postulated as the first level superior to material world. Nonetheless, the soul cannot be the highest level, since ‘not all beings participate in Soul, which is capable of rational life; Intellect, on the other hand, and its intellective emanation is also participated in by beings that have a share in knowledge of some sort’ (21.27–22.1). But not even Intellect can be the first (22.19–23):

While Intellect is only participated in by beings capable of cognition, life pertains even to those that have no share in knowledge whatsoever; for we say of plants that they are alive. Accordingly, beyond Intellect we need to place the plane of Life which gives rise to a greater number of effects, irradiating its own gifts into more beings than Intellect does.

Yet this still cannot be the top of the hierarchy, for ‘though all living beings also possess being and essence, many of the things that there are have no share in Life. The plane of Being, therefore, has to be constituted before that of Life’ (23.6–9). Being is a cause of all that is; in our world, however, a no less important part is played by non-being and privation, which certainly cannot be a product of Being. It follows that the highest principle has to be the One, which can also give rise to privations (26.6–11). The entire hierarchy can be represented in [figure 10](#).

This hierarchical arrangement has clear consequences for the conception of soul and its workings in lower beings. While at first sight soul might seem to belong to all beings capable of their own motion,⁹⁵ Proclus finds things to be more complicated (*PT* III 6, 23.16–24.17):

It is only rational living beings that have a share in soul, for strictly speaking it is only the rational soul that deserves the name of ‘soul’, the task of soul being to

⁹⁵ See e.g. Plato, *Phdr.* 245c–e, *Leges* 895e–896b, or the pseudo-Platonic *Definitions* 411c: ‘Soul is that which moves itself, being the cause of vital motion for all living beings.’

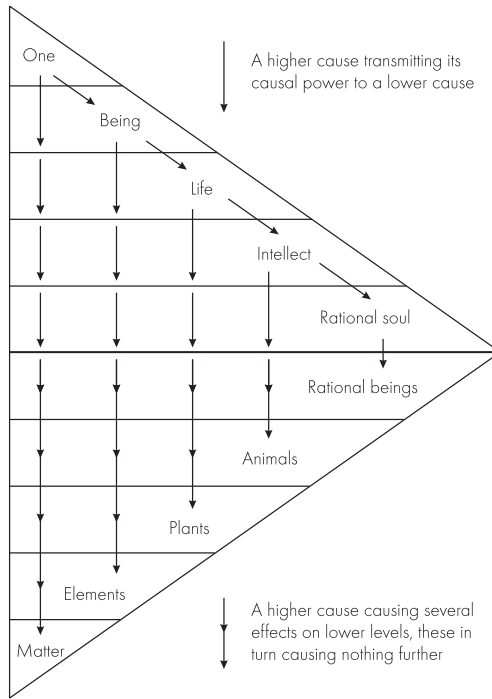


Fig. 10 Material world as mirroring the higher levels

reason and investigate the things that are, as Plato says in the *Republic*.⁹⁶ And ‘all soul is immortal’, as he puts it in the *Phaedrus* (245c), whereas the irrational soul is mortal, as the Demiurge claims in the *Timaeus* (41d). And on the whole it is clear from a number of passages that Plato only regards as soul the rational one, deeming other souls to be its semblances only, inasmuch as they are intellective and vital themselves, cooperating with universal powers⁹⁷ to bring life into bodies. As for participation in intellect, however, we can surely attribute it not just to rational beings but equally to all those that possess the faculty of cognition: imagination, memory and perception . . . For all cognition is begotten by intellect, just as all reason is an image of soul. Now, whatever has a share in intellect, needs also have a share in life – some beings in a stronger manner, others in a weaker one. But not all living beings also partake of the intellective faculty; for as *Timaeus* says (*Tim.* 77b), even plants are living beings, though having no portion in perception or imagination, except in the sense of being aware of pleasure and pain. And

⁹⁶ Proclus presumably has *Resp.* 353d in mind, where the task of soul is said to be ‘taking care, ruling, deliberating and all such things’.

⁹⁷ . . . *meta tôn holōn*, i.e. with the divine powers ruling the cosmos that participate in Life in a more universal manner (thus Opsomer 2006: 137, n. 6); cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* III 237.31–238.2.

generally, all appetitive faculties are types of life, being the lowest reflections and effects of universal Life, while having no share in themselves in the faculty of cognition. This is why all appetencies know no measure and limit by themselves, being deprived of all cognition.

In this long passage we have a clear confirmation of what we only hinted at in chapter 2.3.1, namely that strictly speaking it is only the rational soul that may properly be designated as 'soul'. All the lower psychological functions are not gifts of the soul as such but of the higher levels on which the soul depends. The soul acts as a transmitter of these higher gifts, and may thus seem to be the true source of life and perception as well. Nonetheless, the actual wellspring of these 'psychological' faculties lies on the planes of Intellect and Life.

2.4 LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

2.4.1 *Participating – participated – unparticipated*

Until now we have been describing the hierarchical relation between various levels of reality primarily through the metaphor of 'procession' and 'reversion', as well as the images of 'begetting', 'producing' or 'causing'. All of these metaphors are crucial for Proclus' metaphysics, but are not the only type of description available. As we have seen in chapter 1.2.1, eastern Neoplatonism tries to describe reality from many different angles, each being associated with slightly different metaphors, helping to capture some details that are hard to discern from other perspectives. One of the most important of these metaphors is the traditional Platonic concept of participation. As we can expect, late Neoplatonists have greatly elaborated on it, inventing subtle conceptual tools capable of describing its various aspects.⁹⁸

The problem of participation, as formulated in a classic way in Plato's *Parmenides* (131), has already been reviewed briefly in chapter 1.2.2. We have seen that if a thing is to participate in a Form, the Form needs to be immanent to some extent, being present in its participant. At the same time, however, it cannot be exhausted by this presence and has to remain whole and untouched by the participation. It follows that in some way the Form has to be seen as both immanent and transcendent. This is expressed clearly by Proclus in *ET* 98, where we learn that every higher cause is 'at once everywhere and nowhere': it is everywhere, for it pervades all the things that participate in it; it is nowhere, for despite permeating all things it never

⁹⁸ On participation in Proclus see Sweeney 1982; de Rijk 1992.

blends with them, remaining fully transcendent. Nonetheless, as a true late Neoplatonist Proclus cannot stay content with such a simple formulation, feeling the need to systematically explain how exactly the immanent and transcendent aspect of participation go together. The subject is crucial for him owing to the fact that in his view participation concerns not just the relation between the Forms and sensible thing, but more generally every relation of one level of reality to a level superior to it (such as that of Soul to Intellect or of Intellect to the One). The precise nature of participation thus affects the entire construction of Neoplatonist universe.

Proclus' solution (already designed by Iamblichus)⁹⁹ is typical of late Neoplatonism: it consists in the meticulous differentiation of various aspects of the participation process. Let us take the Form of Man as a simple example. All men participate in it, and each participating (*metechōn*) man carries it in himself immanently. Yet this immanent presence does not exhaust the Form, being but its 'participated' aspect (*to metechomenon*). The Form as such is transcendent vis-à-vis all particular men, being untouched by participation or, as Proclus would say, 'unparticipated' (*amethektos*). The actual object of participation is the Form's lower irradiation. Proclus summarizes his conception in the *Parmenides Commentary* (707.8–18):

Look at this first in the case of the Forms; see how Man, for example, is double, one transcendent and one participated in; how Beauty is twofold, a beauty before the many and a beauty in the many; and likewise Equality, or Justice. Hence the sun, the moon, and each of the other forms in nature has a part that is outside and a part that is in itself. For the things that exist in others, i.e. the common terms and the forms that are participated in, must have prior to them that which belongs to itself and is whole and unparticipated in. On the other hand the transcendent Form which exists in itself, because it is the cause of many things, unites and binds together the plurality; and again the common character in the many is a bond of union among them. This is why Man himself is one thing, another is the man in the particulars; the former is eternal, but the latter in part mortal and in part not. The former is an object of intellection, the latter an object of perception.

While the Form of Man is unparticipated in and altogether transcendent, in every particular man we find as its reflection the immanent 'form in matter' (*enhylyon eidos*) that actively imprints human form on him.¹⁰⁰

As a graphic example of the entire process we can take the sun. It is 'participated', for all earthly things have a share in it. Nevertheless, the sun as such has no immediate contact with our world: it is 'unparticipated',

⁹⁹ See Proclus' account of Iamblichus' position in *In Tim.* II 240.4–9.

¹⁰⁰ For the concept of 'forms in matter' in Proclus see Helmig 2006. The immanent forms are often spoken of as *logoi* by Proclus; see ch. 4.1 for details.

only approaching us through the light that it emits. The important thing is that while the sun exists in itself and for itself, its light may be regarded as only existing *in relation* to us. Sunlight is the sun as it appears from our perspective. If the sun took up all the universe and no other thing existed, sunlight would not exist either – for there would be nothing that the sun could appear to in the form of its sunlight. By way of analogy, the immanent participated versions of the Forms only exist in consequence of being participated in by something lower.

2.4.2 Participation and the relation between levels of reality

As we have hinted already, for Proclus participation is a general all-pervading process, concerning not just the relation between the Forms and particulars, but even more importantly the relation of each single level of reality to another level superior to it. Proclus explains this concisely in the follow-up to the *Parmenides Commentary* passage quoted above (707.18–26):

Therefore as each of the kinds is double, so also every whole is double [i.e. each plane of reality taken as a whole]. For the kinds are parts of wholes, and the unparticipated whole is distinct from the participated. The unparticipated Soul is one thing, the participated another, the former tying together the plurality of souls, the latter generating the plurality. And the unparticipated Intellect is distinct from the participated, the latter introducing the intelligible plurality, the former holding it together. Hence the unparticipated Being from which all beings come, including the whole number of them, is different from the participated, which also is one being; the former has ‘snatched itself away’¹⁰¹ above beings, the latter is participated in by beings.

To understand what Proclus means we can take the soul as the most accessible example. As embodied beings we know the soul as it is immanently present in our body that participates in it. But is this participated soul identical to soul as an independent hypostasis? For Proclus certainly not: if it were, the boundary between the levels of body and soul would be blurred. In actuality it is not the soul as such (i.e. the unparticipated Soul) which is present in our body, but only soul as it appears from the bodily perspective, i.e. as a participated soul.¹⁰²

This topic is closely related to another important rule that Proclus formulates in *ET* 21.1–3: ‘Every order of reality has its beginning in a

¹⁰¹ An allusion to the *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 3.1.

¹⁰² However, see ch. 2.4.3 for further complications of this basic model.

monad and proceeds to a multiplicity coordinate with that monad; and the multiplicity in any order may be referred back to a single monad.' By 'monad' Proclus means the *unparticipated* universal 'essence' of each level (e.g. the universal Intellect), by 'a multiplicity' the wide range of *participated* aspects that the level in question offers to some lower level to be shared by it, e.g. a number of particular intellects to be participated in by Soul (*ET* 21.22–33):

From this it is apparent that even at the level of natural bodies unity and multiplicity coexist in such a manner that the one Nature contains many natures dependent on it, and, conversely, these are derived from one Nature, that of the whole; that the psychic order, originating from one primal Soul, descends to a multiplicity of souls and again carries back the multiplicity to the one; that to intellective essence there belongs an intellective monad and a multiplicity of intellects proceeding from a single Intellect and reverting on it; and that for the One which is prior to all things there is the multiplicity of the henads, and for the henads the upward striving towards the One. Thus there are henads following upon the primal One, intellects following on the primal Intellect, souls following on the primal Soul, and a plurality of natures following on the universal Nature.¹⁰³

Schematically we can represent the hierarchy in [figure 11](#).

A significant consequence of Proclus' model is the fact that participation always takes place through plurality. If the level of soul is said to 'participate in Intellect', it does not really participate in Intellect as such (i.e. in 'monadic' Intellect), which is unparticipated, but in its various aspects, i.e. in the plurality of particular intellects. Together these comprise all aspects of monadic Intellect, but each captures one intellective point of view only. Monadic Soul is able to participate in all of these points of view at once, its relation to Intellect thus being complex and well balanced. Nevertheless, its view of Intellect is necessarily broken up by greater plurality than pertains to Intellect itself. Particular souls are in an even worse position, being only able to relate to Intellect from one specific angle, each through the particular intellect that it participates in; it is only through the medium of monadic Soul that they are capable of obtaining a more holistic vision.¹⁰⁴

Proclus captures the difference between these different participatory relationships by distinguishing between three types of wholes (*ET* 67.1–11):

¹⁰³ As Martijn points out (2010: 49), the fact that unlike the higher hypostases Nature is not characterized as 'primal' (*prōtē*) suggests that monadic Nature is not actually unparticipated, for it is inseparable from bodies. The real transcendent cause of Nature is the Demiurge.

¹⁰⁴ See Proclus, *ET* 108.1–4: 'Every particular member of any level can participate in the monad of the rank immediately supra-adjacent in one of two ways: either through the universal of its own level, or through the particular member of the higher level which is co-ordinate with it in respect of its analogous relation to that level as a whole.'

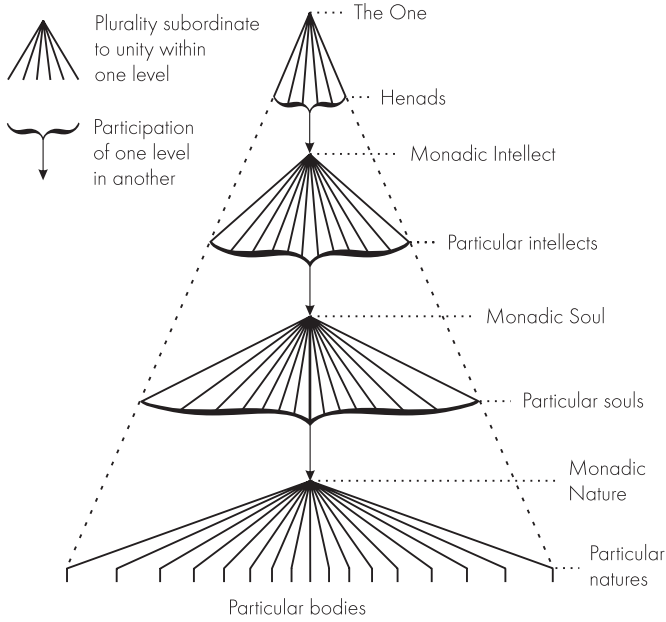


Fig. 11 Hierarchy of participation

Every whole is either a whole-before-the-parts, a whole-of-parts, or a whole-in-the-part.

For either we contemplate the form of each thing in its cause, and this form pre-existing in the cause we say is a whole-before-the-parts; or else we contemplate it in the parts which participate in the cause, and this in one of two manners. Either we see it in all the parts taken together, and it is then a whole-of-parts, the absence from which of any single part diminishes the whole; or else we see it in each part separately, in the sense that even the part has become a whole by participation in the whole, which causes the part to be the whole in a partial mode. The whole-of-parts, then, is the whole in its own mode of existence; the whole-before-the-parts is the whole in the manner of a cause; the whole-in-the-part is the whole by participation (see *ET* 65 above, p. 92).

From this perspective the unparticipated monad of each level is a 'whole-before-the-parts', while the monad of the immediately subordinate level can only relate to it as to a 'whole-of-parts', being able to participate in all of its aspects at once. As for particular members of this subordinate level, each of them can only relate to the superior plane through one of this plane's own particular members that mirrors the monad in itself by being a 'whole-in-the-part'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ See Proclus, *In Parm.* 703.9–25; *ET* 24.11–13.

One striking consequence of this model is that the pluralistic particular members of each level only exist as independent entities from the point of view of some subordinate level participating in them. Thus it is only in relation to participating bodies that particular souls exist, for instance, while in itself Soul is always monadic. Such an idea might seem surprising, for it implies that without its body no particular soul could exist. Strange as this may appear, it is just what Proclus believes – with the important addendum that bodies themselves are of course produced by Soul. One might wonder whether this is not a danger to the individual soul's immortality and imperishability. Late Neoplatonists are aware of the problem and resolve it by introducing another kind of body different from the physical one – a subtle and invisible body that the soul can be participated by even after the death of the physical body (*ET* 196):

Every participated soul makes use of a first body which is perpetual and has a constitution without temporal origin and exempt from decay.

For if every soul is eternal in its essence, and if further by its very being it directly ensouls some body, it must ensoul it at all times, since the being of every soul is invariable. And if so, that which it ensouls is on its part ensouled at all times, and at all times participates in life . . . But every participated soul is directly participated in by some body (for that is why it is participated and not unparticipated) and by its very being it ensouls this participating body. Accordingly, every participated soul makes use of a first body which is eternal and in its essence is without temporal origin and imperishable.

Proclus often calls this first perpetual body a 'vehicle' (*ochēma*) of soul, designating it as 'astral', 'luminescent' or 'aetherial',¹⁰⁶ in contrast to the physical body which is 'earthly' and 'oyster-like'.¹⁰⁷ Even the irrational soul needs to have a subtle body of its own. True, irrational souls are not immortal, and in theory they could perish after the death of our physical body. In that case, however, it would be hard to make sense of Plato's myths which depict the fate of souls between incarnations, apparently taking it for granted that the souls carry all their irrationality with them – otherwise there would be no point in punishing them and they would not make so many inconsiderate mistakes in the choice of lives in the Myth of Er in the *Republic*. Accordingly, Proclus assumes the existence of a 'pneumatic' body, which is not perpetual but survives through a number of reincarnations

¹⁰⁶ See e.g. Proclus, *In Tim.* III 195.5 (*ochēma astroēides*); II 81.20–1 (*ochēma to augoēides*); I 5.15 (*ochēma aitherion*).

¹⁰⁷ See e.g. Proclus, *In Tim.* I 5.16 (*ochēma gēnon*); III 298.27–9 (*ochēma ostroēdes*). 'Oyster-like' body refers to Plato's *Phaedrus* 250c6: we humans are 'bound to our body in the manner of oysters'.

until the soul goes through all that is required of it to purge itself of its own irrationality.¹⁰⁸

The postulation of three types of bodies is a typical example of the philosophical approach of the eastern Neoplatonists. Readers used to Plotinus or older Platonic tradition may perhaps regard this as a needless complication, leading to an endless multiplication of layers of reality by introducing further and further higher entities (which in this case, moreover, disconcertingly remind one of modern Spiritualism). For Proclus, however, it is an inevitable logical step without which he would not be able to pursue the problem of participation to all of its logical conclusions. As Proclus attempts to describe reality by means of a fully coherent logical model, he cannot avoid making his scheme immensely complicated in details. The relative simplicity of Plotinus' metaphysics was only possible at the expense of not striving for absolute coherence, relying on various particular insights that need not always be logically compatible. Late Neoplatonists are no longer satisfied by such a flexible approach, regarding it as too vague and open-ended. Instead they take the road of strict logical consistency, never minding the fact that it sometimes leads them to propositions that make modern readers feel rather dizzy.

2.4.3 *Degrees of participation*

Until now we have presented Proclus' model of participation in its simplest form, describing it by means of three terms only: the unparticipated monad, its participated aspects, and the participating terms at the lower level. However, in his perfectionism Proclus is not always content with such a simple scheme, and for more detailed analyses he needs to introduce other sophisticated distinctions that can capture various subtle hierarchical nuances. This refinement concerns mainly the middle term of our triad. While we have so far treated the participated aspects of each level as one monolithic category, in fact there is an entire hierarchy of participated terms. Within this hierarchy the most important distinction is between two types of entities (*ET* 64.1–12):

Every originative monad gives rise to two sets of its members, one consisting of substances complete in themselves, and one of irradiations which have their substantiality in something other than themselves.

¹⁰⁸ See Proclus, *In Tim.* III 236.32–237.9; 299.27–300.13. Cf. Opsomer 2006: 147–51. For the historical background of the concept of astral and pneumatic body see 'Appendix II' in Dodds 1933.

For if procession consists in a declination through terms akin to the constitutive causes, from the wholly perfect there will proceed in due order things relatively complete, and through the mediation of these in turn there arise the incomplete. Accordingly, there will be one order of substances complete in themselves, and another of incomplete ones. The latter are such as to already belong to their participants, for, being incomplete, they require a substratum for their existence. The former make the participants belong to them, for, being complete, they fill the participants with themselves and establish them in themselves, and for their substantial existence they have no need of inferior beings.

In *ET* 82 we further learn that this more powerful kind of participated entities is also capable of self-reversion, which in other words means that it is self-constituted. However, such a capability implies essential *separateness* from the participating terms (*ET* 82):

Every incorporeal entity, if it is capable of reverting upon itself, when participated in by other things is participated without loss of separateness.

For if it were participated in inseparably, its activity would no more be separable from the participant than would its essence. And if so, it would not revert on itself: for if it did, it would be separate from the participant as one distinct thing against another. If, then, it should be capable of reverting upon itself, when participated in by others it must be participated in in a separable manner.

Such a proposition appears surprising, being seemingly in contradiction to what has been said above. How can any participated terms be separate from their participants, if the very essence of participation consists precisely in a relation between the participating and the participated in, being therefore impossible without the presence of some participating term? The answer is that 'separateness' cannot be taken literally here. Just as we can say of the self-constituted levels that they 'produce themselves' (*ET* 40–1), although from a different perspective they are begotten by levels superior to them, in a similar manner the separateness of 'substances complete in themselves' (*autoteleis hypostaseis*) is to be seen as relative only. In actuality they too cannot exist unless being participated in by something – but unlike the lower type of participated entities, they have their participating terms fully under control, being unaffected by them. Proclus expresses this distinction nicely at the end of the above-quoted proposition 64: the presence of participating terms is required by both types of participated entities, but the lower ones 'belong to their participants', being assimilated to them, while the higher ones 'make the participants belong to them', remaining altogether dominant. The substances complete in themselves thus depend on their participants in respect of their existence only (for they would

not exist without being participated in), but in their behaviour they stay completely independent, imprinting their properties on the participants without being susceptible to any influence from them.

But what does Proclus actually mean by this distinction? The answer can be found in the continuation of proposition 64 (*ET* 64.19–26):

From this it is apparent that, among the henads, some proceed self-complete from the One, while others are irradiated states (*ellampseis*) of unity. And so among intellects, some are self-complete essences, while others are intellective perfections; and among souls some belong to themselves, while others belong to ensouled bodies, as being merely appearances of souls. And so not every unity is a god, but only the self-complete henad; not every intellective property is an intellect, but only the essential; not every irradiation of Soul is a soul, but there are also images of souls.

While in previous sections we simplified things by regarding participated entities as immanent reflections of a higher level in a lower one, for Proclus this only represents one aspect of participation. If this were all that participation is about, there would only be the monad at each level, all the participated aspects really existing at a lower level as immanent states of its participating terms. Proclus is convinced, however, that in addition there has to exist a number of independent particular terms at each level. Thus besides souls as irradiated states present in bodies there has to exist a category of souls as separate entities which are still participated in, but nevertheless retain some relative transcendence, never becoming a property of the corporeal level.

We may certainly ask how a participated entity can ever be transcendent (albeit in a relative sense), when the very distinction between unparticipated in, participated in and participating serves primarily to reconcile the transcendence of higher causes with their immanence: every higher entity is transcendent in its unparticipated core but immanent in its participated aspects. Is not a participated term, therefore, immanent by its definition already? Proclus admits this objection but manages to get round it by means of the following proposition (*ET* 81):

All that is participated without loss of separateness is present to the participant through an inseparable potency which it implants.

For if it is itself something separate from the participant and not contained in it, something which subsists in itself, then they need a mean term to connect them, one which more nearly resembles the participated principle than the participant does, and yet actually resides in the latter. For if the former is separate, how can it be participated in by that which contains neither it nor any emanation from it?

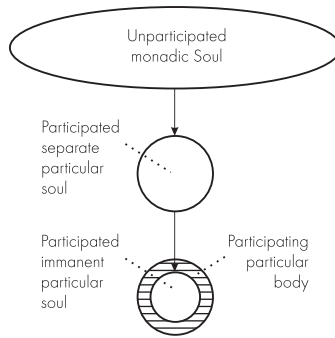


Fig. 12 Participation of human body in soul

Accordingly a potency or irradiation, proceeding from the participated in to the participant, must link the two; and this medium of participation will be distinct from both.

In other words, a substance complete in itself can only be participated in through its own irradiated state (*ellampsis*) which is immanently present in the participant term. The problem can best be demonstrated on the relation between body and soul, which undoubtedly is the main reason why Proclus introduces this subtle distinction. What exactly do we mean when we say that man 'has soul'? At the most basic level we mean that man's body participates in soul. Proclus, however, finds such a statement too vague and needs to make it more precise. In the end, he conceptualizes the relation between body and soul as involving no less than four entities. The first is the body which participates in a particular rational soul. Yet, the latter is 'complete in itself' and 'separate', and thus cannot enter into a direct relation with the body. Accordingly, as its shadowy image or 'semblance' it brings forth the irrational soul which acts as a mediator. The irrational soul can easily be present in the body, for it has the status of an 'irradiated state' which belongs to the participating body. The fourth term is the monadic Soul, playing the part of a transcendent guarantor of the entire participation process: being unparticipated in itself, it is unrelated to the particular body, but it does have a relation to the particular rational soul, which is its participated aspect (or more precisely, the particular soul has a relation to it, the monadic Soul remaining absorbed in itself). The entire process is depicted in [figure 12](#).

Nonetheless, it is only with the highest terms of each level (i.e. in this case with human bodies) that we find this complete version of participation.

The reason is given in proposition 62: ‘Every multiplicity which is nearer the One has fewer members than those more remote, but is greater in power.’ It follows that ‘bodily natures are more numerous than souls, and these than intellects, and the intellects more numerous than the divine henads’ (*ET* 62.9–11). Proclus infers from this that at each lower plane there has to exist a number of terms that have no direct connection to the terms of the supraordinate level (*ET* 110.1–5):

The first members of any level, which are closely linked with their own monad, can participate in virtue of their analogous position in those members of the supra-adjacent level which lie immediately above them; but the less perfect members, which are many degrees removed from their proper monadic principle, are incapable of enjoying such participation.

A typical example are bodies: these are greater in number than souls, which is why not every body possesses a soul of its own. According to Proclus it is only humans as rational creatures that have their own souls, being able to relate to souls ‘complete in themselves’, i.e. to rational souls. The other living beings only possess souls in the sense of ‘irradiated states’, bearing no link to any true (i.e. separate) soul.¹⁰⁹

The idea of animals having only a lower trace of soul is one that even Plotinus would agree with.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, he would strongly refuse to apply the same rule to all the higher levels – which is precisely what Proclus does in *ET* III.1–6:

The intellectual level comprises divine intellects which have received participation in gods, and also bare intellects; the psychical level comprises intellectual souls, linked each with its own intellect, and also bare souls; corporeal nature comprises natures over which souls preside, and also bare natures destitute of the soul’s company.

From the perspective of humans it is mainly the level of soul that is highly interesting. Proclus recognizes three basic types of souls: divine, daemonic and human souls. While the first two possess intellects of their own, human souls, which stand lowest in the hierarchy, have no such luck (*ET* 181–3). Just as animals only have a semblance of soul, humans only have a semblance of intellect. Not even the philosophers are an exception, as Proclus explains in the *Cratylus Commentary* (64):

The essential Intellect contains as a whole, all together and in actuality the true understanding of all reality. The intellect of the philosopher, however, since it is

¹⁰⁹ See *PT* III 6, 23.16–17: ‘It is only rational living beings that have a share in soul, for strictly speaking it is only the rational soul that deserves the name of “soul”.’

¹¹⁰ See Plotinus, *Enn.* VI 4, 15.8–17; IV 4, 18.6–9.

not essential but an illumination of Intellect and, as it were, an image of Intellect, thinks on the particular level and comprehends the truth only intermittently.

If Plotinus saw himself as firmly rooted in the intelligible domain at the true core of his being, managing occasionally to unify even with the One as such, the late Neoplatonist view is more modest: the philosopher is seen as standing at the interface of body and soul, having no direct access to any higher level. Intellective activity can merely be psychically emulated by humans. True intellective insight only belongs to gods and daemons.

None of this means, of course, that we should not strive for intellective insight at all. The philosopher is aware of his own limits, knowing his psychic intellect to be just an imitation of the true one. Nevertheless, he knows that even this derivative intellective activity is good for the soul. Indeed, according to Proclus, the fact that we only have an indirect access to intellective activity makes it all the more important for us to aspire to it. Participated entities 'complete in themselves' are available to their participants automatically, so to speak. Being capable of self-reversion (*ET* 82), they are self-constituted (*ET* 42–3), and thus perpetual as well (*ET* 45–6). It follows from this that they are participated in by their appropriate participants continually, for if their participation were interrupted for a single moment, they would vanish and merge with their monad. In case of irradiated states, however, there is no such necessity of participation: since they belong to their participants, not having their being in themselves, they can originate and perish freely, and participation in them can easily be interrupted.

In Proclus' universe this can only happen at the level of soul. The higher levels have no way of bringing their participation to an end, being wholly unchangeable (*ET* 76). The soul is immutable and eternal in its essence too, but is subject to time in its activity (*ET* 191), being therefore capable of change. Of all the classes of souls it is only the human ones that make use of this unfortunate ability. As the first changeable entities (*ET* 184), human souls are able to fall away from the intellective irradiation that is perpetually being offered to them from above,¹¹¹ this 'falling away' becoming a source of evil.¹¹² In effect, it is all the more important to cultivate our intellective

¹¹¹ More on this see below, ch. 7.6.

¹¹² See Proclus, *De mal.* 20–1. Proclus speaks of 'occasional falling away from participation' in *In Alc.* 118.3, associating it with the concept of 'parasitical existence' (*parhypostasis*) that he normally uses to describe the ontological status of evil (118.15–119.1): 'For no parasitical states can exist in terms that are either simple or always participating: in the former this is prevented due to their simplicity, in the latter due to the eternity of their participation. It follows necessarily, therefore, that something worse can only emerge as a parasitical state in the third type of terms, those that participate intermittently. Thus in our world justice is joined by injustice as its parasite, beauty by ugliness, the equal by the unequal.' See ch. 7.2. for more details.

activity, for it is only by means of that that we can reconnect to our higher causes. Late Neoplatonists may lack Plotinus' Olympian confidence, but their effort to link up with the higher levels is no less intense – though in their view this linking up can only be achieved indirectly.

CHAPTER 3

Proclus' polytheistic theology

In chapter 2.1.2 we have already briefly touched on Proclus' belief in the existence of a plurality of henads at the level of the One. It is time now to look at this curious but important side of Proclus' thought more closely. As we shall see, the existence of the henads is understandable in light of Proclus' theory of participation. At the same time, however, there are certain aspects of the doctrine that cannot fully be explained in terms of Proclus' standard ontology. With the henads we enter for the first time a domain in which philosophy enters into dialogue with religion, adapting to its requirements. It is also for this reason that the entire conception is highly unclear in places, requiring a great deal of speculative effort – as is only understandable in case of entities which are in themselves ineffable and unknowable (*ET* 123).

3.1 HENADS

Greek Platonists had always taken the existence of a plurality of gods for granted, but seldom had attempted to find a clearly defined place for it in their metaphysical systems. When some of them did venture to localize the gods unambiguously, they usually tended to place them in the intelligible world, without however identifying them with the Forms. Thus we find Plotinus, for instance, describing a vision of the intelligible universe 'with all the gods', where 'each god is all the gods coming together into one'.¹ To locate the gods higher than the realm of Intellect would no doubt have seemed absurd to Plotinus, and he was no exception in this regard. According to Damascius (*De princ.* I 258.1–5), until Iamblichus nearly all philosophers situated the gods at the level of Intellect, claiming 'that there is one supra-essential God, while all the other gods are essential, being divinized by illuminations coming from the One'. It was possibly

¹ Plotinus, *Enn.* v 8, 9.15–17; cf. v 8, 3.16–21; II 9, 9.33–5.

Iamblichus himself who for the first time understood the gods as aspects of the One as such.² For Proclus this identification is one of the most important pillars of his thought.

To understand Proclus' henads, we need to keep his theory of participation in mind. We have seen in chapter 2.4.2 that the relation between the henads and the One is analogous to that between particular participated intellects and the monadic Intellect: the henads are participated aspects of the unparticipated monadic One (*ET* 21). Thanks to this, they may from one perspective be seen as its different 'modes' or 'individuations' (*ET* 133):

Every god is a beneficent henad or a unifying goodness and has this mode of existence qua god; but the primal God is the Good unqualified and Unity unqualified, whilst each of those posterior to him is a particular goodness and a particular henad.

For the several henads and the excellences of the several gods are distinguished by their peculiar divine individuality (*idiotēs*), so that each in respect of some especial individuation (*idiōma*) of goodness renders all things good, perfecting or preserving in unity or shielding from harm. Each of these peculiar individualities is a particular good (*ti agathon*), but not the sum of good (*pan to agathon*): the unitary cause of the latter is pre-established in the First Principle, which for this reason is called the Good, as being constitutive of all excellence. For not all the gods together may be matched with the One, so far does it overpass the divine multitude.

At first sight to postulate a plurality of henads in the realm of the One may seem a strange idea, and Proclus' sophisticated claim that 'the whole number of the gods has the character of unity' (*ET* 113.1) is not likely to comfort the incredulous modern reader. Nonetheless, the existence of a plurality of henads is understandable if we read it precisely from the perspective of Proclus' theory of participation (cf. *PT* III 4). As we may remember (ch. 2.4.2), the plurality of participated terms of each level is a *participated* plurality, i.e. one that in its full-blown form only exists secondarily from the point of view of the lower participating level. When Intellect proceeds out of the One, constituting itself as an independent hypostasis, it does so as monadic Intellect which embraces all its aspects as closely unified. When in the next step Soul proceeds out of Intellect and in reverting back to it starts to participate in it, it does not participate in the monadic Intellect in its wholeness, but only in those aspects of Intellect that are participable, viz. in the plurality of particular intellects. The common

² See Dillon 1972. Saffrey and Westerink in the introduction to their edition of *PT* (vol. III, pp. ix–lii) argued against Dillon that the henads were an invention of Syrianus, but Dillon's original thesis has found more supporters; see Bechtle 1999; Dillon 1993; D. Clark 2010.

statement that the Soul participates in Intellect is thus an abbreviation for a more complicated process in which the actual object of participation is not the monadic Intellect as such (which is the unparticipated whole-before-the-parts) but a simultaneously comprised plurality of its various aspects (whole-of-parts). From the perspective of Intellect this plurality is entirely unified, but from the point of view of Soul it appears as a multitude of distinct particular intellects.

In the same way we may look at the henads. Though contained within the One, they never really stand out as multiple entities, 'pre-subsisting' in it in an unspeakable and entirely unitary manner.³ It is only from the perspective of the lower participating hypostases that they stand out as actually pluralistic. In themselves in their own mode of existence (*kath' hyparxin*) they are unitary to an absolute degree. It is only in the manner of a cause (*kat' aitian*) that they exist in full plurality, for the lower hypostases cannot grasp their unity, perceiving the One as a unified multiplicity.

None of this means, of course, that the henads would be a creation of Intellect. Each participated entity is constituted at its own level, being firmly grounded in its monad. The henads too, therefore, are established in the One. They are established by it in a unitary manner, however, only revealing their plurality from an external perspective. We can compare the One to light, perhaps, which contains all the colours, but is colourless in itself, only revealing its multicoloured potentialities when it falls on the lower levels, refracts through them and shows its colours in ways that correspond to the fitness (*epitēdeiotēs*) of their recipients, each object bringing out a different colour according to the reflective properties of its surface.

All this said, it is important to stress that for Proclus the henads are not merely aspects of the One, but exist in it in a very strong sense as independent individualities. Proclus brings this out forcefully in the *Parmenides Commentary* (1048.9–20), when explaining the difference between the henads and the Forms. As we might expect, he starts by stressing the greater degree of mutual unity of the henads: while the Forms participate in one another, 'the henads are all in all of them, which is not the case with the Forms' (14–15). Surprisingly, however, Proclus goes on to explain that the henads are also more *distinct* from one another than the Forms are (16–20):

³ Proclus never says this directly but he uses a similar description when analysing the individual henads and their attributes in *ET* 118.1–3: 'Every attribute of the gods pre-subsists (*prohyphestēken*) in them in a manner consonant with their distinctive character as gods, and since this character is unitary and above Being, they have all their attributes in a unitary and supra-essential manner.'

And yet, in spite of this degree of unity in that realm, how marvellous and unmixed is their purity, and the individuality of each of them is a much more perfect thing than the otherness of the Forms, preserving as it does unmixed all the divine entities and their proper powers distinct.⁴

In what sense can the henads be both more *unitary* and more *distinct* than the Forms? A comprehensive answer to this question (though one that is far from certain) has been offered by Edward Butler,⁵ who argues that the basis of the henads' unity is precisely their individuality (*idiotēs*).⁶ According to Butler, there is a crucial metaphysical break between the realm of being (in all of its forms down to the lowest) and that of the henads. The sphere of being is organized according to the logic of wholes and parts, which forms the basis of Proclus' theory of participation: in each order of being 'there exists a single monad prior to the multiplicity, which determines for the members of the order their unique relation to one another and the whole' (*ET* 21.15–18). As we climb up the scale of reality, the monadic wholes will be more and more unified. Yet, even the monad of Being, the most unified entity there is, will not be altogether unitary, being related to all particular beings as their common element. Only the supra-essential gods can be truly unitary (*heniaioi*), 'whereas Being, Life and Intellect are not henads but each of them a unified group (*hēnōmenon*)' (*ET* 115.3), i.e. a group of multiple members that all need another principle above them from which to derive their unity.

If this infinite regress is to stop, the top of the hierarchy needs to be arranged differently. First of all, the difference between the One and the henads must approach zero, the henads existing 'around' the One rather than below it (*PT* III 3, 12.2–13.4):

The first plurality (*arithmos*), which shares the same nature with the One, is one-like, ineffable, supra-essential and altogether similar to its cause. For in the realm of the very first principles there appears no otherness that would separate the products from the producer, transferring them to another level of reality. . . . No, the cause of all things transcends all motion and differentiation in a unitary manner, and it has established the divine plurality around itself (*peri heauto*), having unified it with its own simplicity.

⁴ See Proclus, *In Remp.* 1 89.7–9: 'for although the divine genera are constantly united to one another, at the same time together with their unity they anticipate in themselves unconfused distinctions'.

⁵ Butler 2005 and 2008a, both based on Butler's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (2003), all downloadable at henadology.wordpress.com. Some of Butler's points are anticipated by Guérard 1982.

⁶ *Idiotēs* is indeed one of the most typical terms Proclus uses in connection with the henads. As he puts it in *In Parm.* 1049.24–5, we call the communion (*koinōnia*) of the henads 'unity' (*henōsis*), but their 'distinction from one another' we term 'individuality' (*idiotēs*). Cf. *ET* 118.1–3; 119.7; 133.5; 135.6, 145.1 etc.

What is more important, the henads must not form any multiple field to be unified by a monad above them – in Proclus' terms, their plurality must be 'unitary' (*heniaion* – *ET* 113.9) rather than 'unified'. Instead of deriving their unity from the One, each henad must have the source of its unity in itself. Proclus does indeed emphasize that each henad is a 'self-complete unit' (*henas autotelēs* – *ET* 114), whose unity lies in its absolute simplicity and independence of anything internal or external (*ET* 127):

All that is divine is primordially and supremely simple, and for this reason completely self-sufficient.

That it is simple, is apparent from its unity: every deity is perfectly unitary (*henikōtaton*), and as such is simple in an especial degree. That it is completely self-sufficient, may be learned from the reflection that whereas the composite is dependent, if not upon things external to it, at least upon its own elements, the perfectly simple and unitary, being a manifestation of the One which is identical with the Good, is wholly self-sufficient; and perfect simplicity is the character of deity. Being an absolute goodness (*autagathotēs*), deity needs nothing extraneous; being unitary, it is not dependent upon its own elements.

In similar vein it is denied by Proclus that the henads might have any *relations* between them. When speaking of the henads, 'instead of relation (*schesis*) we must apply the concept of self-identity, and prior even to this self-identity the existence (*hyparxis*) of each entity in itself; for each thing in that realm exists primarily for itself, and by existing in itself is united to anything else' (*In Parm.* 936.19–22). As we know from *ET* 66, Proclus recognizes four kinds of relations: identity, difference and the relation between whole and part and part and whole. All of these, however, only concern 'beings' (*ta onta* – *ET* 66.1). The gods 'are entirely pure (*amigeis*) and therefore are not multiplied by becoming related to one another' (*ET* 126.8–9). 'The differentiation of coordinates from one another', which is typical of the particular members of all the lower levels, is replaced in the realm of supra-essential entities (*en tois hyperousiōis*) by 'individual peculiarity' (*idiotēs*).⁷

Owing to this, the henads act as a crucial interface between the One and the Many. They are absolute unities, each existing in and for itself and bearing no relation to anything external. Their only distinguishing characteristic is their 'individual peculiarity'. This gives rise to a kind of primordial plurality, but one that is solely pluralized by individual uniqueness which makes each of the henads a self-contained unit.

⁷ Proclus, *In Parm.* 1190.28–31. The context of the passage is complex; for its discussion see Butler 2003: 25–7.

‘In this way,’ concludes Butler, ‘the cardinal doctrine of Neoplatonism, the pre-eminence of *unity* and its identity with the Good, is identified by Proclus with the primordial nature of *individuality* in relation to all other determinations’.⁸

The resulting conception might have important religious consequences, for it would be close to an attitude towards the divine often observed in polytheistic religions, one that has sometimes been referred to as ‘monolatry’ but that might perhaps more accurately be described as ‘focalization’, viz. the tendency of worshippers to respect all the gods but single out provisionally one divinity only at a time for actual worship, making it the focus of their momentary attention and treating it as a representative of the entire divine realm, though without losing the other gods from the picture entirely.⁹ In a similar manner it is emphasized by Proclus in his excursus on prayer in the *Timaeus Commentary* (I 212.23–5) that the worshipper should ‘separate himself from all other preoccupations, so that he may be united in solitude with a solitary deity and does not attempt to join himself to unity while in the company of plurality’. While we might take this to refer to the unity with the One as such (echoing the famous phrase of Plotinus in *Enn.* VI 9, 11.51), the context of the passage makes this unlikely, since the gods one is supposed to unite with are in the rest of the excursus strictly referred to in the plural. It seems more plausible to assume with Butler (2003: 57) that what Proclus has in mind is precisely a ‘focalized’ form of worship, praying to one particular deity at a time and being united with all the others through it.

If this speculative interpretation is correct (which many Proclus scholars would deny), it means that in their own mode of existence the henads are neither in a state of undistinguishable fusion, nor is their plurality one of discrete coordinate units to be unified by a monad above them. Rather, the plurality is strictly ‘focalized’, i.e. it exists *within* each of the henads. The gods do not need to be unified with one another, for each god possesses all the others in himself (or herself), though from his (or her) individual point of view. As the last surviving pagan Neoplatonist Olympiodorus puts it a hundred years later (*In Alc.* 214): ‘All the gods are in Zeus zeusically, and in

⁸ Butler 2003: 75. Cf. Proclus’ claim in *ET* 13.4–5 that ‘that which conserves and holds together the being of each several thing is unity (*to hen*)’, which Dodds already (1933: 199) took to mean that the One is ‘the ground of individuality’.

⁹ The term ‘focalization’ is used by Follet 1962: 190–2 in the context of Mesopotamian religion. Butler (2003: 57) takes ancient Egypt as an illustration of the same phenomenon, leaning on Hornung 1982. The concept of ‘monolatry’ was originally coined to describe the exclusive worship of Yahweh in the pre-monotheistic stage of Israelite religion, and should therefore better be avoided in truly polytheistic contexts.

Hera heracically – for no god is incomplete.’ For us, of course, this is fairly difficult to visualize. We may take one of the henads, no doubt, and show it as an independent self-contained unit comprising all the other henads in itself (though not as parts). We may try this with different henads, and each time we will reach a similar image, though with distinct individual colouring. But when we try to think about all the henads at once and their exact status vis-à-vis one another, we will probably have to agree with Proclus (*ET* 123; 162) that in the end they are secret and unknowable in themselves, being solely intelligible as participated in by beings – viz. not as unitary but as unified only.

Butler takes his interpretation too far, perhaps, when he declares that there is ‘*no such thing* as the One Itself, if we mean something different than the henads; Godhood is nothing other but the Gods themselves’.¹⁰ While from a certain perspective this might be true, it only gives us half of the picture, one that is relativized by Proclus himself, who emphasizes that ‘not all the gods together may be matched with the One, so far does it overpass the divine multitude’ (*ET* 133.10–12). More to the point seems Butler’s acknowledgement that Proclus’ metaphysics attempts to integrate two different discourses: that of philosophy and that of religious theology. When speaking as a philosopher, Proclus regularly hypostatizes the One and treats it as the First Principle that holds his metaphysical system together, acting as the monad of the henadic realm (*ET* 21.29–30). At the same time, however, this same system is a grandiose work of theological hermeneutics which attempts to take seriously the divinities of traditional religion that Proclus still ritually worshipped on an everyday basis. In this theological discourse the One as an abstract principle seems to retreat, becoming a name for the unique individuality of each of the henads that has been revealed in local myths and cults. We shall see some interesting implications of this below in chapter 3.3.

Be this as it may, it is useful to note that the introduction of henads into the realm of the One has important worldview implications, offering another way of mitigating the closed totalitarianism of Proclus’ monistic universe. As we have seen (ch. 2.1.2), Proclus tries to alleviate the totalitarian subordination of all things to the One by making the One entirely negative, and thus flexible and open to various alternatives. Nevertheless, the lower orders are incapable of relating to the One in its pure, negative mode, and the One’s control over them must necessarily take on a more determined form anyway. To soften this determination, Proclus conceives

¹⁰ Butler 2005: 98. Cf. the criticism of Butler by MacIsaac 2007: 148.

it as essentially pluralistic. The rule of the One is not uniform, refracting into a number of modes which are all equally valid. As a result, Proclus' universe is a *pluralistic totality*, allowing the combination of absolute subordination to one Principle with appreciation of uniqueness and plurality of perspectives.

3.2 LOWER GODS AND THE HIERARCHY OF HENADS

By postulating the henads the eastern Neoplatonists found a perfect 'home' for the gods, but they could not remain content with it. For ancient Greeks in general the divine was too flexible a category to be related to just one particular class of supra-essential beings. It was famously noted by the German scholar Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff that the Greek word *theos* primarily has a predicative force, i.e. the Greeks found it more natural to claim that 'something is god' rather than that 'god is something'.¹¹ This means, in other words, that the divine was primarily perceived by the Greeks as a *power* which in itself is impersonal (though not necessarily lacking in individual features), acquiring a personal form in its concrete manifestations only (cf. Vernant 1983). It follows that these particular manifestations can be extremely numerous, taking place on different hierarchic levels.

To what extent this was a natural way of regarding the gods can easily be illustrated by Plato. As W. J. Verdenius (1952) has shown, Plato talks about the gods in many different senses. Thus in the *Timaeus* he designates heavenly bodies as 'visible and generated gods' (40d4), but besides them also recognizes the gods of traditional religion as described by the poets (40d–41a), only to introduce two pages later a special category of 'young gods' (42d), who perform various lower creative tasks in the cosmos. In addition, the Demiurge himself is also spoken of as god, though it is far from clear what his exact status is. A number of other entities are referred to by Plato as 'divine': the Forms (*Phd.* 80a–b, *Resp.* 611e, *Pol.* 269d), soul (*Leges* 726a etc.), reason (*Resp.* 590d, *Alc. I* 133c) or a good man (*Resp.* 383c). When finally we are told in the *Phaedo* (91c) that the soul is 'more divine than the body', we may easily get the impression that for Plato practically all things are divine. The reason for this variegated application of the notion of the divine lies precisely in its predicative force (Verdenius 1952: 244):

¹¹ Wilamowitz 1931: 18. A typical example is provided by the comic poet Menander (fr. 257 Kock): 'these days whatever is in power is regarded as god'. Cf. Else 1949: 31.

Frequently we cannot help but think that the 'divine' means more for Plato than 'god' – such as when he claims in the *Laws* (886d) that the heavenly bodies are 'gods and divine'. A god is a specific manifestation of the divine. The divine condenses, so to speak, into various gods. This variety, though, is relative only, for it depends on the various perspectives from which we may regard the divine. Each god stands for the divine, and is thus not just one of the gods, but the god as such. It depends on the point of view whether what comes to the foreground is a specific form of the divine or its more universal essence. For this reason the dilemma between monotheism and polytheism was certainly not as acute as some modern authors wished to believe.

Under these circumstances it is clear that not even Proclus could do with a limited group of divinities on the plane of the One, but had to be prepared, for instance, to make sense of all the passages in Plato that speak of the gods on various lower levels. The solution was easy: since each hypostasis mirrors the structure of the universe as a whole (ch. 2.3.1), there needs to exist on each level of reality a highest stratum analogous to the One and participating in it. The lower levels, however, can only relate to unity through plurality, and their divine plane will thus participate in a plurality of the henads. Proclus summarizes his conception in *ET* 139:

The sequence of principles which participate in the divine henads extends from Being to the bodily nature, since Being is the first, while body – inasmuch as we speak of heavenly or divine bodies – the last participant.

For in each class of beings – bodies, souls, intellects – the highest members belong to the gods, in order that in every rank there may be terms analogous to the gods, to maintain the secondaries in unity and preserve them in being; and that each level may have the completeness of a whole-in-the-part, embracing in itself all things and before all else the character of deity. Thus deity exists on the corporeal, the psychical, and the intellectual level – evidently by participation in each case, since deity in the primary sense is proper to the henads. The sequence, then, of principles which participate in the divine henads begins with Being and ends with the bodily nature.

To make things even more complicated, the rule of each part mirroring the whole also applies to the henadic realm. Not only does each lower level contain a special divine stratum, but the entire arrangement of reality needs to be anticipated on the plane of the henads themselves. Accordingly, the henads are organized hierarchically into several classes, each of them corresponding to a divine stratum of some lower hypostasis. Henads participated in by higher levels stand nearer to the One, those participated in by lower levels stand farther away (*ET* 136). In his simplest model Proclus divides the henads into four groups (*ET* 162–5). At the top stand the 'intelligible' henads, participated in by Being. Underneath them we have

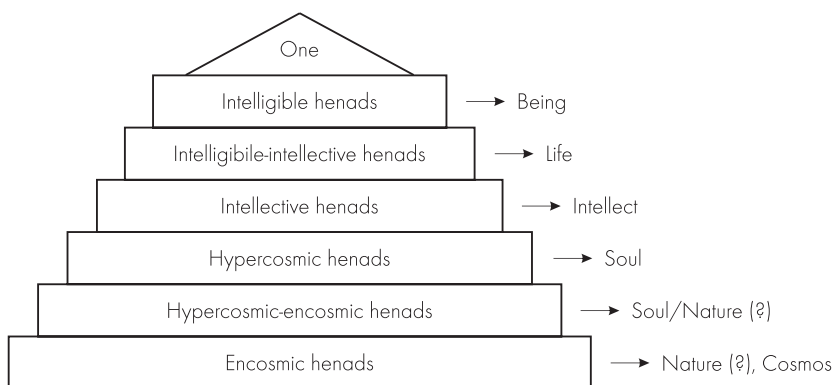


Fig. 13 Hierarchy of henads

the ‘intellective’ henads, participated in by divine Intellect. These are followed by the ‘hypercosmic’ henads, participated in by Soul, until finally, at the very bottom, we find the ‘encosmic’ henads, participated in by divine bodies. In the more complete version, as presented in the *Platonic Theology*, Proclus introduces the category of ‘intelligible-intellective’ henads, mediating between the intelligible and the intellective ones and corresponding to the divine stratum of the level of Life (*PT* IV). Similarly, between the hypercosmic and encosmic henads he inserts the ‘hypercosmic-encosmic’ ones (*PT* VI 15–24); their precise ontological associations in the hierarchy of reality are far from clear, but they certainly have to be connected either with Soul in its lower levels, or with Nature (or both).¹² The entire scheme is depicted in figure 13.

How can the henads form a hierarchy if they have no relation with one another? Proclus gives an answer in *ET* 126, explaining that a god is nearer to the one if he is more universal (*holikōteros*), i.e. if he ‘causes more numerous effects’, but stands farther away if he is more specific (*merikōteros*) and causes fewer (cf. above, p. 86). ‘Each is a henad, but the former has the greater potency’ (126.5–6). Accordingly, the hierarchy of the henads is not established by division or alteration, ‘nor are they multiplied by becoming related to one another’ (126.8–9). It is only in respect of their potency (*dynamis*) that the gods are hierarchically arranged. This, of course, is a type of distinction that can easily combine with unity, for it naturally

¹² The traditional identification with Nature, held e.g. by Rosán (1949: 171 [= 2009: 177]) or Siorvanes (1996: 137–9), is challenged by Martijn (2010: 40–3), who tentatively associates Nature with the encosmic gods, but is also open to the possibility of ranking it with the encosmic part of the hypercosmic-encosmic order.

results from the unique *individuality* that we have seen the henads' unity to be possibly grounded in: the peculiar character of each god is defined precisely in terms of the god's specific potency (*ET* 145.5; *In Crat.* 174.98.25–99.7).

It is only once the henads give rise to the rest of reality that the distinctions between them are manifested in a truly hierarchic manner. On the one hand, they are mirrored in the entire hierarchy of things as sketched above; on the other hand, each level of reality reflects this same hierarchy within itself as well. This is due to the fact that participation in the henads by the lower levels has to be mediated by all the hypostases standing between them and the One (just as we saw it in figure 5 above, p. 86). 'Every god, when participated in by beings of an order relatively near to him, is participated in directly; but when by those more remote, indirectly through a varying number of intermediate principles' (*ET* 128.1–3). It is only Being that can participate in the henads directly. As a result, each hypostasis needs to participate in not just in its own henads (Being in the intelligible ones, Intellect in the intellective ones etc.) but also in all the lower types of henads, so that it can transmit their participation to the subsequent levels.¹³ While the henads proper to each level are participated by its monadic summit, the lower henads are also participated in by it in a particular manner. The entire model of participation is hypothetically depicted in figure 14.¹⁴ We can see from it clearly that the unparticipated monad of each level is divine. It is for this reason that instead of 'metaphysics' Proclus normally speaks of 'theology' (cf. the title of his two main systematic works).¹⁵

The entire emanational unfolding of reality is thus anticipated in the henadic realm. The henads also preconceive the cooperation of Limit and the Unlimited, which governs all the subsequent emanations. As Proclus says in *ET* 159, 'every order of gods is derived from the two initial principles, Limit and the Unlimited; but some manifest predominantly the causality of Limit, others that of the Unlimited'.¹⁶ Thanks to this all the gods can be divided into three classes: those dominated by Limit, those by

¹³ It needs to be stressed, however, that despite the necessity of mediation each of the henads is still participated in by all the lower levels as a henad, 'preserving the distinctive character of its own hypostasis' (*ET* 125.3–4). It is only the non-divine members of each lower level that no longer participate in the henads themselves but in their irradiated states only. Cf. Guérard 1982: 79.

¹⁴ The figure is based on the much more simple scheme in Dodds 1933: 282 (drawing mainly on *ET* 162–5), but is highly speculative in details.

¹⁵ In this regard he follows Aristotle, who also referred to his metaphysics as 'theology' (*Met.* vi 1026a10–19; xi 1064b1–14). See Steel 2005a.

¹⁶ On the exact status of Limit and the Unlimited vis-à-vis the henads cf. the speculative accounts of van Riel 2001b and Butler 2008c: 132–7.

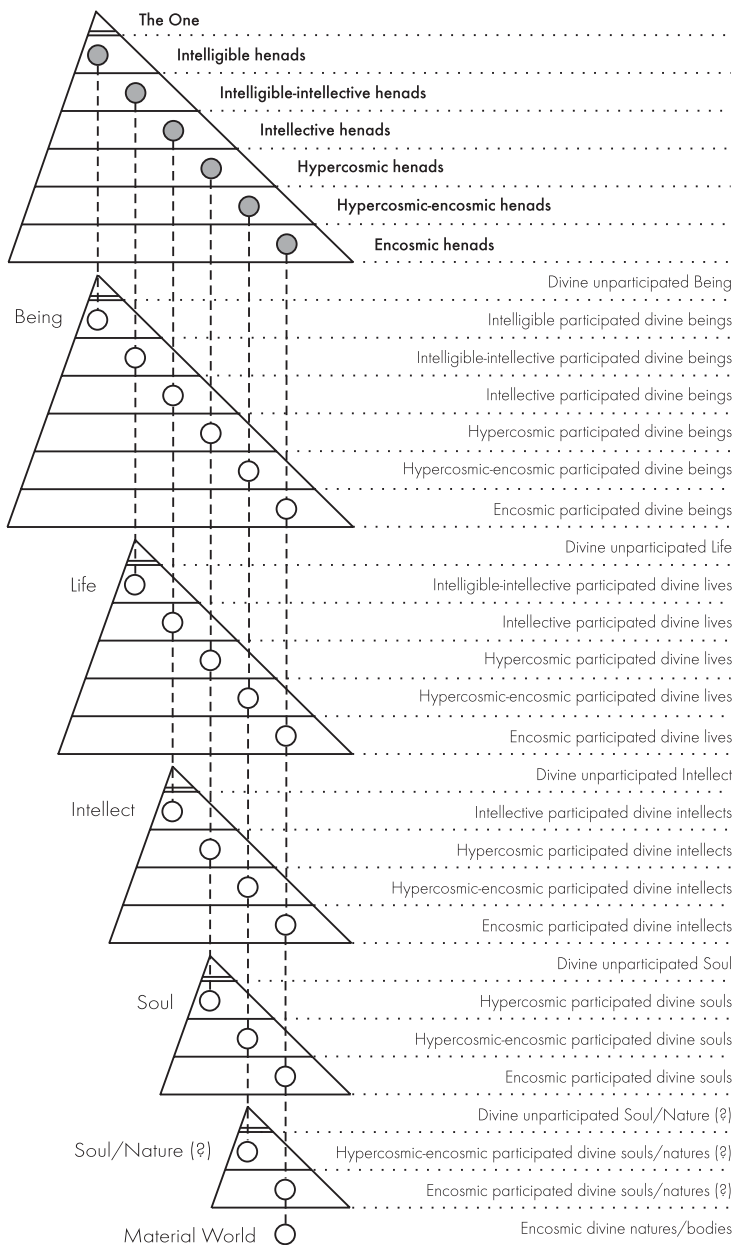


Fig. 14 Participation in the henads

the Unlimited and those by the mixture of both (ET 151–9). In this way the gods also anticipate the cycle of remaining, procession and reversion. The gods dominated by Limit are on each level the patrons of its remaining – Proclus calls them ‘paternal’ (*patrikoi*). The gods derived from the Unlimited supervise the procession of the lower levels, being referred to as ‘generative’ (*gennētikoi*). Finally, those gods who combine Limit and the Unlimited to an equal degree and are known as ‘perfective’ (*telesiourgoi*), guaranteeing all reversion.

To pursue these distinctions in greater detail would be well beyond the limit of our introductory exposition.¹⁷ While modern readers are unlikely to appreciate similar theological subtleties, it should be said in Proclus' defence that divisions of this kind do not result from an empty effort at creating formal symmetries, but have exegetical reasons in the first place. Though the *Elements of Theology* may foster the impression that Proclus is building his system solely by drawing universally valid logical consequences from a small set of abstract axioms, most of his other works show clearly that formal deductions are just one side of the coin. The other side, a no less important one, consists in culturally specific theological hermeneutics. Late Neoplatonists saw themselves as heirs to and the last protectors of the entire Greek religious and cultural tradition. Consequently, their aim was not just to construct a coherent philosophical model for understanding reality, but even more importantly to integrate into this model all the most important forms of traditional Greek religion and culture. In this regard, the most representative of Proclus' works is the *Platonic Theology*, which is precisely a grandiose attempt to harmonize Plato with Hellenic theology, achieving a balance between formal deduction and mythological revelation.

Subtle distinctions between various orders of the henads are therefore not without purpose, being drawn in order to reconcile various traditional statements concerning the gods in the works of poets or philosophers. For Proclus, this exegetical endeavour is ultimately more important than formal elegance, and he does not hesitate on its behalf to incorporate into his systems a number of elements which from the strictly systematic perspective might appear as surprising anomalies. To give an example, besides the three classes of gods mentioned above Proclus also introduces a fourth class of ‘protective’ (*phrouretikoi*) or ‘immaculate’ (*achrantoî*) gods,

¹⁷ As a sample of further possible distinctions we may note that the three classes of gods just mentioned only supervise remaining, procession and reversion at the level of *monadic summits* of each level. The remaining, procession and reversion of *particular members* of each level is superintended by three lower orders of gods subordinated to the higher ones: the ‘demiurgical’ (*dēmiourgikoi*), the ‘life-giving’ (*zōogonoi*) and the ‘elevating’ (*anagōgoi*). See ET 155–8.

which ‘preserves each principle in its proper station’ and ensures that it transcends all the subsequent levels (*ET* 154). Such a category is an unexpected departure from the otherwise strictly triadic organization, but Proclus could not do without it, for its presence in older tradition was too conspicuous: protective gods were mentioned by the *Chaldean Oracles* (fr. 82) and the division of gods into four categories was already common in fourth-century Neoplatonism.¹⁸

For exegetical reasons Proclus cannot remain content with describing general classes of gods, but needs in addition to account for all the gods as *individuals*. He needs to find a place not only for all the gods of Homer and Hesiod but also – and even more importantly, perhaps – for the divinities of the Orphic *Rhapsodies* and the *Chaldean Oracles*. The resulting hierarchy is a complicated one and modern readers may find it perhaps too baroque. Nevertheless, it is important to present it, as it may greatly facilitate the understanding of a number of passages in Proclus’ commentaries that take its knowledge for granted:¹⁹

- 1 The One: Orphic Time (Chronos)²⁰ – The henads in their aspect of Limit and the Unlimited: Orphic Ether and Chaos²¹
- 2 Being: three triads of intelligible gods²²
 - a Intelligible Being in its three modalities of limit, the unlimited and mixture: Orphic Egg / Chaldean Father
 - b Intelligible Life in its three modalities of limit, the unlimited and mixture: Orphic Tunic and Cloud, or Egg conceived and conceiving / Chaldean Potency / Platonic Eternity from *Tim.* 37d

¹⁸ Around AD 363 the Neoplatonist Sallustius (*De deis* 6) divided the gods into ‘creating’ (*poiountes*), ‘animating’ (*psychoantes*), ‘harmonizing’ (*harmozontes*) and ‘protective’ (*phrourountes*). In each group there were three gods, adding up to the traditional number of twelve Olympians. Cf. the twelve ‘detached’ gods in Proclus’ hierarchy below, level 6.

¹⁹ The most detailed modern expositions are those by Brisson 1987 and 2000; cf. more briefly Brisson 2004: 97–100, and the Appendix in Duvick’s translation of Proclus’ *Cratylus Commentary*. A number of interesting points can also be found in the extensive summary of *PT* given by Rosán 1949: 139–73 (= 2009: 135–69).

²⁰ Proclus, *PT* I 28, 121.8–9; *In Tim.* I 385.17–20; *In Remp.* II 138.8–18; Damascius, *De princ.* I 316.19–317.1.

²¹ Proclus, *In Tim.* I 176.12–13; 385.17–22; 428.4–7; *In Remp.* II 138.8–18; Damascius, *De princ.* I 316.20–317.1.

²² Proclus, *PT* III (basic structure in ch. 9). At this level the gods are not yet manifest severally according to their individual characters but only in respect of general qualities shared by each of the gods (Butler 2008a: 105). Accordingly, Proclus does not relate it to standard Hellenic divinities but just to various primordial powers known from Orphic theogonies. See *In Tim.* I 428.1–20 for the Egg, Phanes and the Living-Thing-itself. The remaining Orphic identifications are attributed to Proclus by Damascius, *De princ.* I 317.1–7 (level b is uncertain: Damascius claims that Proclus and Syrianus ‘say different things at different times about the middle level’).

- c Intelligible Intellect in its three modalities of limit, the unlimited and mixture: the Orphic triad Phanes, Erikepaios, Metis / Chaldean Intellect / Platonic Living-Thing-itself from *Tim.* 30c–d
- 3 Life: three triads of intelligible-intellective gods²³
- a Intelligible-intellective Being in its three modalities of limit, the unlimited and mixture: Orphic Night in its three manifestations / the three Chaldean Iynges / the supracestrial place from the *Phaedrus*
- b Intelligible-intellective Life in its three modalities of limit, the unlimited and mixture: Orphic Uranus in his three manifestations / the three Chaldean Connectors (*Synocheis*) / the celestial vault from the *Phaedrus*
- c Intelligible-intellective Intellect in its three modalities of limit, the unlimited and mixture: the Orphic Hundred-Handers Cottus, Briareos and Gyges / the three Chaldean Teletarchs / subcelestrial vault
- 4 Intellect: heptad of intellective gods²⁴
- a Triad of paternal gods: the Orphic triad Cronus, Rhea (Mother of the gods), Zeus / the Chaldean triad Cronus, Hecate, Zeus / Rhea as the mixing-bowl and Zeus as the Demiurge from the *Timaeus*
- b Triad of immaculate gods: the Orphic triad Athena, Kore, Curetes / the Chaldean Implacables (*ameiliktoi*)
- c Monad separating the previous gods from the lower orders: Orphic castration of Uranus by Cronus and of Cronus by Zeus / Chaldean girdling membrane of Hecate
- 5 Soul: four triads of hypercosmic gods ('leader-gods', *hēgemonikoi*)²⁵
- a Paternal/demiurgical: Zeus, Poseidon, Pluto
- b Generative/life-giving: Artemis–Hecate, Persephone, Athena
- c Perfective/elevating: Apollo–Helios in his three modalities
- d Protective/immaculate (purifying): Curetes–Corybantes

²³ Proclus, *PT* IV (basic structure in ch. 3). (a) Supracestrial place: *PT* IV 10. Nights: Hermias, *In Phaedr.* 146.24–5; 147.16–150.22. (b) Vault and Uranus: *PT* IV 5; IV 36, 107.13–23. Connectors: *In Tim.* III 174.17–175.26; *PT* IV 39. (c) Subcelestrial vault and the Teletarchs: *PT* IV 24–6. Hundred-Handers: Hermias, *In Phaedr.* 150.2–9.

²⁴ Proclus, *PT* V (basic structure in chs. 2–3). (a) Cronus: *PT* V 5–10. Rhea: *PT* V II. Mother of the gods: *In Remp.* I 137.7–138.15. Zeus: *PT* V 21–7. Hecate: Damascius, *De princ.* I 315.20–1; van den Berg 2001: 252–4. Mixing-bowl: *PT* V 30–1; *In Tim.* III 246.29–250.28. Demiurge: *PT* V 13–20; *In Tim.* I 310.3–319.21. (b) Athena and Kore: *In Tim.* I 166.2–31. Athena and Curetes: *PT* V 35. Implacables: *PT* V 3, 16.24–6; *In Tim.* I 38.18–19; III 310.25–8. (c) Castrations: *PT* V 36; membrane: *In Remp.* II 225.1–5.

²⁵ Proclus, *PT* VI 1–14. (a) *PT* VI 8–10. (b) *PT* VI II. (c) *PT* VI 12. (d) *PT* VI 13.

- 6 Soul/Nature (?): four triads of hypercosmic-encosmic gods ('detached' gods, *apolytoi*) = the twelve Olympians from the *Phaedrus*:²⁶
- a Paternal/demiurgical: Zeus, Poseidon, Hephaestus
 - b Generative/life-giving: Demeter, Hera, Artemis
 - c Perfective/elevating: Hermes, Aphrodite, Apollo
 - d Protective/immaculate (purifying): Hestia, Athena, Ares
- 7 Nature (?), Cosmos: Encosmic gods²⁷
- a Cosmic intellect (the heart of Dionysus, which in Orphic myth Athena saved from being devoured by the Titans), cosmic soul (the nurse Hippa/Hipta, who carried Dionysus on her head in a winnowing basket), and four divine elements constituting the cosmic body
 - b Sphere of the fixed stars (cycle of the Same) and sphere of the planets (cycle of the Other): higher triad Cronus (Saturn), Zeus (Jupiter), Ares (Mars); lower triad Helios (Sun), Aphrodite (Venus), Hermes (Mercury); the lowest monad Selene (Moon)
 - c Nine sublunary gods, mentioned in the *Timaeus* 40e–41a: Uranus, Gaia, Ocean, Tethys, Cronus, Rhea, Phorcys, Zeus and Hera
 - d Further terrestrial (chthonic) and subterrestrial deities

Bizarre as this complex hierarchy may seem, in Proclus' hands it works as a mighty exegetical tool, allowing the reconciliation of contradictory mythical stories by assigning each of them to a different ontological level. Thus we can see, for instance, that Zeus appears in Proclus' scheme on five different planes, which makes it possible to harmonize the Orphic myth of Zeus with Zeus's role in Homer's *Iliad* as well as with the conception of Zeus (Jupiter) in astrology.²⁸ Were the open plurality of traditional Greek religion to be incorporated in the closed ontological universe of late Neoplatonism, it could only have been achieved through a theological model as complex as the one we have just delineated.

3.3 VERTICAL CHAINS

In the previous section we have seen that in Proclus' universe the divine is not limited to the realm of the One, spreading through all the levels and

²⁶ Proclus, *PT* v1 15–24 (cf. already Sallustius, *De deis* 6). Twelve gods from the *Phaedrus*: *PT* v1 18. (a–d) *PT* v1 22.

²⁷ No general account of the encosmic gods is given by Proclus. (a) Dionysus as cosmic intellect: *In Tim.* II 145.4–146.22. Hippa as cosmic soul: *In Tim.* I 407.24–408.7. (b) General account of heavenly bodies: *In Tim.* III 53.1–96.32. Planetary gods and their spheres of influence: *In Tim.* III 69.4–27. (c)

Nine sublunary gods: *In Tim.* III 151.13–194.28. (d) Terrestrial deities: *In Tim.* III.140.11–33.

²⁸ See the list of all Zeuses in *In Tim.* III 190.19–191.5.

allowing the summit of each to participate in its henads. Not even this, however, is the end of the gods' influence. In common with Thales Proclus was convinced that 'all things are full of gods',²⁹ extending the dominance of the gods down to the lowest things (*ET* 140). If the latter cannot be divine themselves, at least they are closely linked to the gods.

As an example of this link we can take the souls. We know already that Proclus divides the souls into divine, daemonic and human. He relates this division to the *Phaedrus* myth, in which Plato describes the eleven plus one 'squadrons' of souls riding in the heaven (246e–247a): each of them is led by a god, followed by a number of daemons as well as by all other souls 'who wish and are able to'. In Proclus' interpretation this means that divine souls are permanently attended by daemonic souls, which are not divine themselves but 'are at all times in the company of gods, and are linked to the divine souls', staying attuned to them (*ET* 185.7–8). Human souls, on the other hand, are of such a nature as to be unable to keep up with the gods perpetually, falling off from time to time and turning to the world of generation (*ET* 204). Nevertheless, even after their fall they do not lose their connection to the gods altogether. They are turned away from them on the conscious level, but each soul still imitates its god unconsciously – as Plato charmingly shows in a later section of the myth (252c–253b). In consequence, all human souls may be divided into twelve groups corresponding to the gods they attended before their birth (*PT* vi 18).³⁰

The same pattern can be applied to the material world. Here the divine stratum is represented by heavenly bodies and the cosmic elements. Sub-lunary bodies in their particular identities are not divine themselves, but even they can be said in a way to attend upon the gods, and may thus be organized into divine groups. As a result, each stone, plant or animal will belong under the patronage of some encosmic god, bearing at least a faint reflection of his or her power. Yet, as we have just seen (ch. 3.2), these encosmic divine patrons will themselves be but the last members in a long series of higher divine principles. Each particular thing down to the lowest entities will thus belong to one of many divine 'series' or 'chains' (*seirai*) stretching from the One till the farthest reaches of the physical cosmos (*ET* 145; cf. *PT* vi 4):

²⁹ Thales, fr. A 22 (D–K); cf. Proclus, *PT* III 27, 98.23; *De dec. dub.* 16.10; *ET* 145.20.

³⁰ The situation is further complicated by the fact that in Plato's *Timaeus* (42d) the Demiurge sows souls into the planets, and Proclus thus needs to postulate another set of encosmic planetary patrons of human souls (e.g. *In Tim.* III 260.5–265.12; 280.19–21; *ET* 204 with Dodds's commentary). It is only through them that human souls are linked to the twelve hypercosmic-encosmic gods (*PT* vi 18, 86.4–12; *In Tim.* III 264.3–6).

The distinctive character of any divine order travels through all the derivative beings and bestows itself upon all the inferior kinds.

For if the procession of beings extends as far as do the orders of gods, the distinctive character (*idiotēs*) of the divine powers, radiating downwards, is found in every kind, since each thing obtains from its own immediate cause the distinctive character in virtue of which that cause received its being. I mean that if, for example, there is a purifying deity, then purgation is to be found in souls, in animals, in plants, and in minerals; so also if there is a protective deity, and the same if there is one charged with the conversion or the perfection or the vitalizing of things. The mineral participates in the purifying power only as bodies can; the plant in a clearer manner, that is, vitally; the animal possesses this form in an additional mode, that of appetency; a rational soul, rationally; an intellect, intellectually; the gods, supra-essentially and after the mode of unity: and the entire series possesses the same power as the result of a single divine cause. The same account applies to the other characters. For all things are dependent upon the gods, some being irradiated by one god, some by another, and the series extend downwards to the last orders of being. Some are linked with the gods immediately, others through a varying number of intermediate terms; but 'all things are full of gods', and from the gods each derives its natural attribute.

As we can see from the passage, the concept of vertical series is important for Proclus from the theurgic point of view. Since each particular thing is linked to the gods, it is possible by means of ritual manipulation with material things to evoke divine powers and establish contact with them (see below, ch. 5.2). At the same time, the entire conception is a good example of how seriously the late Neoplatonists are able to take the material world, which is divine for them not just from the perspective of the cosmic whole, but in regard to each particular thing as well. All we see around us is a manifestation of the divine and we may reach the gods by means of it.

In itself the idea of all things manifesting the divine would be but a variant of a fairly common religious sentiment, viz. the tendency to see the creator in his creations. What Proclus wishes to express by his doctrine of divine chains, however, is something more specific. The chains have little to do with the being and form of every thing, but rather with its implicit divine dimension. Proclus is convinced that deep in the core of every single thing there is to be found a 'token' (*synthēma*) or 'symbol' (*symbolon*)³¹ of

³¹ For Proclus these terms are more or less synonymous. It may be argued (cf. van Liefferinge 1999: 271–2) that *synthēmata* lay slightly greater stress on the internal and ineffable aspect, while *symbola* are more often considered as external 'symbols' of these invisible tokens; in this sense Proclus can e.g. regard a divine name as 'symbolon of the *synthēma* obtained from the Demiurge' (*In Tim.* 1 273.22–3). Nevertheless, the distinction is not strict and in most cases Proclus seems to be using both terms interchangeably.

some god, through which the entity in question is permanently linked to its divine patron (*PT* II 8, 56.16–25):

For he who has caused the universe has 'sown into all things'³² tokens (*synthēmata*) of his own perfect transcendence, and by means of these has established all things about himself: he is ineffably present to them, and yet transcends them all. Every single thing, therefore, by plunging into the ineffable zone of its own nature finds there the symbol (*symbolon*) of the Father of all. And each thing according to its own nature venerates him and unites with him through its own appropriate mystical token (*synthēma*), stripping off its own nature and longing to be nothing but his token and to participate in him.

What is important is that these symbols are not monolithic, differing precisely according to the chains that all things pertain to. For Nature, too, 'is distributed through the ranks of the gods, instilling in all the bodies the tokens of affinity to their gods: in the one case solar tokens, in another lunar, in others those of other gods' (*In Tim.* I 210.20–3). In other words, just as each mineral, plant or animal is a reflection of some Form in respect of its basic physical structure, at a deeper level of its existence it is also a manifestation of some god in whose chain it belongs. Proclus illustrates this by a series of examples in his remarkable treatise *On the Hieratic Art According to the Greeks* (= *De sacrificio et magia*), from which unfortunately we only possess a couple of pages. For his first illustration he takes flowers which incline their leaves in accordance with the movement of the Sun or Moon (*De sacr.* 148.10–18):

Why do heliotropes move together with the Sun, selenotropes with the Moon, moving around to the extent of their ability with the luminaries of the cosmos? All things pray according to their own station and sing hymns, either intellectually or rationally or naturally or sensibly, to heads of universal chains. And since the heliotrope is also moved toward that to which it readily opens, if anyone hears it striking the air as it moves about, he perceives in the sound that it offers to the King the kind of hymn that a plant can sing.

In the same manner we find other plants and minerals in the solar chain (149.12–25):

The lotus also shows this kind of sympathy. Before the Sun's rays appear, it is closed, but as the Sun first rises it is slowly unfolded, and the higher the light goes the more it is expanded, and then it is contracted again as the Sun goes down. If men open and close mouths and lips to hymn the Sun, how does this differ from the drawing-together and loosening of the lotus petals? For the petals of the lotus take the place of a mouth, and its hymn is a natural one. But why talk of plants,

³² Proclus is quoting here the *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 39; cf. fr. 108.

which have some trace of generative life? One can also see that stones inhale the influences of the luminaries, as we see the sunstone with its golden rays imitating the rays of the Sun; and the stone called Bel's eye (which should be called Sun's eye, they say) resembling the pupil of the eye and emitting a glittering light from the centre of its pupil.

On the level of animals the solar series is represented by the lion (apparently due to his mane resembling the sun) and the cock: 'it is clear that he perceives the solar orbits and sings a hymn to the luminary as it rises and moves among the other cardinal points' (150.10–12).

The *synthēmata* establish a permanent link between each material entity and its god. It is by way of them that mortal things can 'participate through their very own nature in the gods', whose 'images' the symbols are (*In Tim.* 1 139.27–9; cf. *In Alc.* 69.3–5). It is thanks to them that in the deepest core of their being all things perpetually remain in the gods and can revert to them again (*In Tim.* 1 210.12–14). The language of participation suggests that the *synthēmata* play a part analogous to that of the immanent 'forms in matter' (or *logoi*) we have encountered above (p. 73): as the latter are irradiated states of transcendent Forms, the former are immanent reflections of the gods themselves. Proclus draws this parallel himself,³³ and he strengthens it by his claim that the *synthēmata* were placed into the essences of our souls 'for the recollection (*anamnēsis*) of the gods who caused them' (*In Tim.* 1 213.16–18).

Yet, despite the parallel, the notion of *synthēmata* clearly offers an entirely different classification of reality that cannot be seen as merely an upgrade of the relation of things to the Forms. While the mechanism of participation appears similar, it is in the contents that both concepts part company. The Forms are universals,³⁴ covering general qualities, kinds or relations that individuals or particulars can be regarded as sharing or participating in. The *synthēmata* have a generalizing force too, no doubt, subsuming e.g. all cocks and lions under the general solar chain. Nevertheless, the generalization is of an entirely different kind, for it does not correspond to any obvious formal characteristics shared by particulars. From the standpoint of the Forms it makes little sense to claim that the cock, the lion and the lotus fall under the same general category.³⁵ Though Proclus presents their behaviour

³³ Proclus, *In Tim.* 1 4.32 and particularly fr. 5 from *Chal. Phil.* quoted below, p. 134. Cf. Smith 1974: 106–7.

³⁴ Strictly speaking, late Neoplatonists maintain that it is only the forms in soul that may be regarded as universals, the intelligible Forms being their transcendent causes (Simplicius, *In Cat.* 83.8–16; cf. Helmig 2008: 34). For our purposes, however, this distinction is irrelevant.

³⁵ Once the connection is established, however, it is maintained through the Forms. See *In Parm.* 903–4, where Proclus illustrates this with the Moon-chain, whose members are all said to participate

towards the Sun as a common feature shared by them all, this common element is clearly of a kind that is not likely to be taken for granted by everyone (most contemporary philosophers would probably regard it as bizarre and ungrounded).

The connections between entities belonging to the same chains were not discovered by Proclus by means of rational reasoning. They were handed down to him by the theurgic ritual tradition. We might speculate about their historical sources, finding analogies in the popular magical papyri as well as in the classification of plants and minerals within traditional cults. Be that as it may, what matters is that their ultimate source was revelation: they were discovered intuitively by ancient divinely inspired ritual experts. From the point of view of philosophical ontology this implies that the chains are arbitrary. From the perspective of Proclus' theology this means that the ground of the chains must lie beyond the domain of being in the realm of the henads. The symbolic analogies are derived from the gods' peculiar characters (*idiotētes*), which in their individual uniqueness transcend the abstract formalism of being (cf. ch. 3.1).

In this regard, the doctrine of vertical divine series is fundamental for understanding the crucial position the gods play in Proclus' system. In chapter 3.2 we have seen that the entire procession of being is organized in accordance with the individual properties of the gods as manifested in mythical narratives. Yet, when studying the grand theological model presented on pp. 125–7, readers may easily have been left with the impression that what Proclus is really doing (despite all his respect for the gods) is reducing traditional divinities to a philosophical system. After all, if all the gods featuring in myths can ultimately be identified with this or that ontological principle of reality, why use mythological language in the first place? Does Proclus gain anything substantial by his persistent effort to correlate ontology with mythology?

Proclus would sharply protest against charges of reductionism. Clearly, his emphasis on the supra-essential transcendence of the gods is meant to ensure precisely their fundamental irreducibility to ontological categories. Ontology is a science of universals and general forms, whereas the henads seem to be characterized by their unique *individuality* which can never be entirely translated into a language of universals. While a great deal of the gods' power is manifested through the process of creation, and can thus be translated into the categories of being, there is always some substantial

in the Form of the Moon. In other words, while the chains transcend the regime of being and may not be fully explained by it, they do work by its means.

part of it that remains eternally unknown to all the lesser beings (*ET* 123), and which therefore cannot be accounted for in ontological terms, being perceived as either divinely revealed or historically contingent (depending on whether we share Proclus' religion or not).

The doctrine of divine chains is precisely an area through which this unaccountable transcendent element enters Proclus' metaphysics.³⁶ It forms a parallel system to the ontological one, so to speak, providing a net of secret ineffable channels for communicating with the divine whose exact arrangement is unexplainable, mirroring the transcendent individual uniqueness of the henads. Proclus certainly does all he can to integrate the two systems, but he can never do so entirely if he is to avoid reductionism. In some ways they will always remain two different complementary orders, one being impossible without the other. The complementarity will best be seen in Proclus' epistemology: as we shall see in [chapter 5](#), the ascent of the soul is only possible by the cooperation of philosophical mysticism with theurgy.

That the gods cannot ever be fully assimilated to Proclus' ontology can be seen from the fact that they are able to penetrate through the otherwise impenetrable boundaries between the hypostases of the late Neoplatonic universe. Proclus stresses this point in a memorable passage of the *Timaeus Commentary* (1 209.13–25):

All things that exist are begotten by the gods and have their foundation in them, being brought into existence by them without intermeditation. For the procession of all things is not just completed step by step, the subsequent terms being successively set up by their immediate causes, but it is also directly from the gods themselves that all things in a sense are generated, even if they are described as being at the furthest remove from the gods, and even if you were to speak of matter itself. For the divine does not stand aloof from anything, but is present for all things alike. For this reason, even if you take the lowest levels of reality, you will find the divine present in them too. The One is in fact everywhere present, inasmuch as every single thing has been established by the gods; and even after all things have proceeded from the gods, they have not gone out from them but rather are rooted in them. Where, indeed, could they 'go out', when the gods have embraced all things and taken hold of them in advance and still retain them in themselves?

The reader may rightly ask whether Proclus does not subscribe here to the same blurring of boundaries between levels of reality that he elsewhere accuses Plotinus of (cf. ch. 1.2.2). Proclus would probably reply that he still keeps the boundaries distinct, but he regards them as existing from the ontological perspective only. The gods are beyond being and may thus

³⁶ Cf. Smith 1974: 126–7; Butler 2003: 392–4.

spread through the universe freely, for they are not bound by its constraints. As Proclus puts it further on (210.1–2), 'from their own perspective all things have proceeded from the gods (*heautois men proelēlythe*), but from the perspective of the gods they remain in them (*meni de tois theois*)'. If the categories of being are the cogs in the machine of Proclus' universe, each one in its fixed place, the gods may be imagined not just as the ultimate source of the wheels but also as the oil that flows through them, making them run smoothly and flexibly.

By not being confined to formal ontological structures, the gods are able to give our world a more individual touch. Proclus hints at this in the *Parmenides Commentary* (824–5) when discussing the question whether there might exist Forms of individuals. While Plotinus considered this idea at least as a possibility in *Enn.* v 7,³⁷ Proclus refuses it straightaway: the main reason for positing the Forms is 'that we may have one prior to the many' (825.2); but if each individual corresponded to just one Form, there would actually have to be more Forms than there are individuals at any single moment of time (for while individuals come and go, their Forms would have to exist eternally all at once). Yet, in the end even individuals have to have some causes. According to Proclus, these are the seasons, the motion of the heavens, different regions, but most importantly of all, 'the special properties (*idiotētes*) of the gods superintending these causes, who differ from one another in the shapes, colours, speech, and motions peculiar to them' (825.16–17).

That the individuality of the gods plays a crucial part in this respect becomes clear from fr. 5 of Proclus' *Chaldean Philosophy* (211.25–212.6):

And just as each soul is the sum of all the forms (*plērōma tōn eidōn*), but has been set up by one cause, in the same way it participates in all the *synthēmata*, through which it may be connected to god, but has its existence (*huparxis*) delimited by one of these *synthēmata* only which brings all the multitude within her into one summit. For it is necessary to know that each soul differs from each in specific form (*eidōs*), and the number of specific forms is equal to the number of souls.

The reference to *eidōs* at the end is slightly confusing, as this is the term Proclus normally uses for the Forms. Since we know, however, that he refuses to admit Forms of individuals, the meaning of *eidōs* needs to be different here. That this is indeed the case is confirmed by the last sentence of the fragment (212.13–16): 'From this it is apparent that even though each soul is full of the same reason-principles (*logoi*), she has obtained one

³⁷ Whether he actually admitted it in the end is far from clear. See the discussion in Blumenthal 1971, ch. 9.

specific form (*eidōs*) which distinguishes her from other souls – a solar soul being characterized by a solar form, for example, other souls by other forms.’ Clearly, the specific form derives from the vertical chain to which the soul belongs, this being the ultimate source of the soul’s individuality.³⁸

In this way, Proclus achieves what we might expect a Platonic philosopher to have a problem with, viz. to value individuality. By its focus on the ideal Forms Platonism frequently tends to pay little attention to particulars, seeing them as imperfect and worthless reflections of the pure universals. Proclus recognizes the low epistemological status of sensible particulars, but by a *tour de force* he manages to secure their worth by linking them directly to the gods, which are defined precisely by their individuality transcending the universality of Being. The link is underscored by the fact that both the gods and the sensible particulars may only be known by ‘faith’, *pistis*. That *pistis* is the imprecise mode of cognition pertaining to the sense-world was already claimed by Plato in the Divided Line simile (*Resp.* 511e). For Proclus, however, it is also *pistis* that unites the gods to one another as well as to the Good.³⁹ As Butler notes (2008a: 101), what the two kinds of *pistis* have in common is their relation to individuals. The distinction between the sensible individuality below the reach of knowledge (*epistēmē*) and the supra-essential individuality above this reach is still crucial, of course, but in some cases the latter is mysteriously manifested in the former.

What this means may perhaps best be shown on the cosmic level. In an interesting passage from the *Timaeus Commentary* (I 161.5–12) Proclus explains that the world soul does not leave the space of the cosmos uniform but imposes upon different parts of space a special symbolic affinity with different divine orders. ‘In this way the soul, who is a rational and psychic cosmos, brings to perfection this living and spatially extended cosmos of ours by means of the divine *synthēmata*.’ As Andrew Smith comments (1974: 107, note 11), the *synthēmata* here seem to ‘perfect the cosmos rather than simply enform it’. The perfection Proclus has in mind is apparently something transcending pure formal structures, amounting in this case to the singular and unpredictable ways in which the gods are present in various parts of the physical landscape. Thanks to the Forms the world is an orderly,

³⁸ Obviously this does not mean that the number of vertical chains (and by extension the gods who define them) would equal the number of individuals. As the emphasis on the seasons and the movements of the heavens in *In Parm.* 825 suggests, it is only in connection with a unique combination of cosmic factors that the individualizing function of the henads works. What Proclus has in mind is presumably something that manifests itself in the uniqueness of individual horoscopes: to say that a person is a Virgo, for instance, really means that Virgo is the dominant sign presiding over a unique constellation of all planets in relation to both Virgo and the other signs.

³⁹ Proclus, *PT* I 25, 110.6–16, quoted partly above, p. 57.

professionally crafted organism with all the right proportions. Thanks to the gods it is a place where different regions have distinct sacred histories and where human communities may worship the gods in cults that have been revealed to them as tokens of unique local bonds between them and their divine patrons. It is by conferring on the world their unaccountable individual marks that the gods turn it into a place worthy of inhabiting in spite of its imperfections.

CHAPTER 4

Epistemology

Chapters 2 and 3 have described the ‘objective’ metaphysical structure of Proclus’ universe, consisting of a hierarchy of universal principles and powers. For the Neoplatonists, however, the ontological structure of reality is not just something lying ‘out there’ as an external system of hypostases into which we are placed. It is also something to be realized subjectively within each one of us by a progressive process of cognition. The ultimate aim is to achieve full harmony between the psychic reality inside and the metaphysical reality outside: to adjust all of the motions of one’s soul to the universal streams of energy flowing ‘out there’, so that one might be able to dance with them in unison,¹ achieving what Plato famously termed ‘assimilation to god as far as possible’ (*Tht.* 176b).

We know from chapter 1.2.2 that the late Neoplatonists differ from Plotinus in their understanding of what exactly this entails. Plotinus saw human self as stretching across all the levels of reality. Accordingly, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ were but two sides of the same coin for him. Iamblichus and his followers, on the other hand, located human beings solely on the level of Soul, regarding the boundary between Soul and Intellect as impenetrable for us. Nonetheless, even on this interpretation the basic idea of agreement between the structure of external and internal universe still holds: the soul is incapable of actually ascending to the realm of Intellect, but it mirrors the entire structure of reality within itself, being thus able to at least emulate psychically the same ascent that Plotinus envisaged as taking place objectively as well.

To see how this works, we shall have to examine the ontological status of soul and its cognitive implications. We shall see what everyday embodied cognition entails for Proclus and in what way the soul may rise above

¹ The metaphor of the soul ‘dancing’ around Intellect is a favourite one with Proclus; see *In Parm.* 808.7 (quoted below, p. 140); *In Tim.* 1 248.4 (quoted below, p. 141); *PT* IV 6, 21.2; IV 13, 43.21. In *PT* I 3, 16.20–1 and *In Parm.* 1072.10 the ultimate aim of the soul is said to dance around the divine itself. Cf. Trouillard 1977.

its embodied condition and ascend to a type of discursive self-reflective knowledge that is actually proper to the psychic level. Finally, we shall survey the soul's possibilities of transcending its own discursivity and attaining at least a likeness of higher intellectual knowledge.²

4.1 THE SOUL AS A DISCURSIVE IMAGE OF INTELLECT

To understand what the soul's standard cognitive activity consists in, we need to see in what way exactly Soul differs from Intellect. For the Neoplatonists, Intellect is a divided image of the One, fragmenting the complete unity of the first principle into a multiplicity of ideal Forms. Being outside time and space, Intellect is capable of contemplating all of its Forms at once in an all-comprehensive vision which encompasses all the possible ideal patterns without blurring the distinctions between them. Its unified nature is perhaps best expressed by Plotinus (*Enn.* v 8, 4.4–12):

For all things there are transparent, and there is nothing dark or opaque; everything and all things are clear down to the innermost part of everything; for light is transparent to light. Each there has everything in itself and sees all things in every other, so that all are everywhere and each and every one is all and the glory is unbounded; for each of them is great, because even the small is great; the sun there is all the stars, and each star is the sun and all the others. A different kind of being stands out in each, but in each all are manifest.

The ability of Intellect to contain all the Forms as if in one single point is closely tied to its *eternity*. i.e. to an ontological state in which there is no sequence of before and after, all things being present simultaneously. Proclus describes this state in *ET* 52:

All that is eternal is a simultaneous whole.

Either it is eternal in its essence only, and that essence is simultaneously present in its entirety; there is not one part of it which has already emerged and another which will emerge later, but as yet is not; all that it is capable of being it already possesses in entirety, without diminution and without serial extension. Or it has its activity eternal too in addition to its essence, and this too is simultaneously entire, steadfast in an unvarying measure of completeness and as it were frozen in one unchanging outline, without movement or transition.

The distinction between eternity in 'essence' (*ousia*) and in 'activity' (*energeia*) will be interesting for us later (p. 147), but for the moment

² For a much more detailed systematic treatment of all these points see Helmig 2012, as well as the unpublished dissertation of MacIsaac 2001a. Proclus himself provides the best general overview of his entire epistemology in *De prov.* 27–32.

we may set it aside. Instead, it is useful to note that the basic conception of eternity goes back to Plato's *Timaeus* (37b–38c). In this dialogue eternity is characterized in similar terms as those used by Proclus, and is ascribed to the intelligible paradigm that the Demiurge uses as a model when creating the soul and the cosmos. As Plato explains, eternity is incommensurable with the low ontological status of our world. All the Demiurge could do was to create 'a moving image of eternity' that would circle around it, unfolding its simultaneous fullness into an ordered sequence of moments. In this way time was produced, forming a circle that is incomplete in any of its single moments but that achieves completeness when all these moments are taken together and seen as one cosmic period.

The Neoplatonists were certain that it is precisely in Soul that time starts to unfold. Plotinus already in his famous analysis defined time as 'the life of soul in a movement of passage from one way of life to another' (*Enn.* III 7, II.44). In his view, there is a certain restlessness in Soul, and while it looks back to Intellect, it cannot rest content with the abiding and self-identity of the latter, feeling the urge to bring the objects of its contemplation into motion, indulging in one activity after another. Proclus' own view is similar, though slightly more complicated: he refuses to see Soul as the original producer of time, pointing out the fact that in the *Timaeus* it is the Demiurge who creates time as an image of eternity (*In Tim.* III 3.32–4.6). Accordingly, in his meticulousness Proclus postulates on the level of Intellect an unparticipated monad of Time, which is itself atemporal and in which all temporal activities of soul participate.³ Nevertheless, he does agree that the first participant in this monad is Soul, and it is thus in the Soul's activities that time actually starts its movement.

The relation between eternity and time corresponds to that between Intellect and Soul. Just as Intellect is a fragmented copy of the One, the Soul is an image of Intellect, further fragmenting its forms. 'If Intellect is everything in concentration, the Soul is everything in dispersion' (*In Eucl.* 16.10–16). The exact nature of this relation is summarized well in the *Parmenides Commentary* (807.20–808.17):

The divine and demiurgic Intellect contains pluralities in unity, divisible things undivided and distinguishables undiscriminated. Soul is what first separates these contents that exist previously in perfect unity in that Intellect – not our soul only, but the divine Soul too. For Soul has not been granted thoughts that are established

³ Proclus, *ET* 53, and in greater detail *In Tim.* III 1.1–34.14. For a summary see Maclsaac 2001a: 217–39; Kutash 2009; O'Neill 1962; Roth 2008.

on the level of eternity, but she aims at grasping the full actuality of Intellect; and in her striving for this perfection and for the form of comprehension that belongs to that one and simple being she circles around Intellect as in a dance, and as she shifts her attention from point to point, she divides the undivided mass of the Forms, looking separately at the Form of Beauty, and separately at the Form of Justice, and separately at each of the others, thinking of them individually and not all together. For, to put it briefly, Soul is third in rank from the One and is naturally actualised in this way. For the One is one only and precedes thought, Intellect thinks all Forms as one, and Soul sees them all one by one. So division is the peculiar function of Soul, since she lacks the power of thinking all things simultaneously in unity and has been allotted the thinking of them all separately – all, because she imitates Intellect, and separately, for this is her peculiar property; for the power to divide and distribute appears first in Soul.

To express the difference between the eternal nature of intellect and the temporal nature of soul the Neoplatonists often describe the structure of the latter by means of the Greek term *logos* – a noun that is unusually rich in meaning. It designates ‘reckoning, account’ (both in the financial sense and in that of an ‘explanation’ and ‘description’), and hence it also comes to mean, among other things, (1) ‘an argument, reasoning, definition’, (2) ‘thinking’ and ‘reason’ as a mental faculty, and (3) ‘tale, speech, language, utterance’. Its polysemy made it an ideal candidate for employment in philosophy. It was first applied in a complex way in late sixth century BC by Heraclitus, who turned it into the chief organizing principle of his universe. His usage influenced the Stoics, in whose philosophy *logos* came to designate the immanent divine rational ordering of the world, one that operates through a plurality of ‘seminal reason-principles’ (*logoi spermatikoi*).

The Neoplatonists adopted the Stoic usage, but by transferring it to their more complicated scheme of reality they were able to give new subtle meanings to the term. In particular, they took advantage of the fact that while *logos* could mean ‘rational ordering’, it denoted a type of ordering that has an implicitly temporal structure, i.e. that unfolds one thing after another in a manner that on the epistemological level may be recounted in an orderly series of discursive arguments. It was precisely this that appeared to capture the manner in which Soul differs from Intellect. While Intellect in its eternal presence comprises all things at once, Soul tries to give a ‘rational account’ (*logos*) of them, recounting them one by one in a temporal sequence. Accordingly, Plotinus can claim Soul to be ‘the *logos* of Intellect’ (*Enn.* v 1, 3.8). In similar vein, Proclus sees the Soul as ‘the rational account of the intelligibles’ (*logos tōn noētōn*) which reveals the unified intelligible

cause of the Soul's own existence (*In Tim.* I 341.13–16). What he means by this is clear from the following passage (*In Tim.* I 248.1–6):

Perhaps Plato also wishes to indicate that the *logos* contemplates the intelligible object by circling around it and focusing its activity and movement as it were on a central point. Intellective knowledge (*nōēsis*) would thus know its object nondiscursively and indivisibly, whereas the *logos* dances around the essence of the intelligible in a circle and unwinds the substantial unity of all things that it possesses.

While the Soul as a whole may be seen as one complex *logos* of Intellect, more frequently the Neoplatonists focused on the Soul's multiple aspects and spoke of its essence as being constituted by a plurality of *logoi*. As Proclus explains in *ET* 194.1, 'every soul possesses all the Forms (*eidē*) which Intellect possesses in a primary manner'. The 'reflections (*emphaseis*) of the intellective Forms' that the Soul possesses in a secondary manner are precisely its 'essential *logoi*' (194.4–7), i.e. its 'reason-principles'. In this sense the Soul may be spoken of sometimes as 'the sum total of all the reason-principles' (*logōn plērōma*).⁴ In their lower aspect (viz. on the level of Nature) the *logoi* also function as the 'forming principles' that are immanent in matter, providing all things with their shape and structure.

In many passages *logos* may simply be translated as (discursive) 'reason', denoting that mental faculty of ours which epitomizes the soul's own mode of existence. In more technical discussions, however, this faculty is usually called *dianoia* – a term that captures the discursivity nicely by its prefix *dia-*, 'through, across, asunder'. A typical example is Proclus' description of different mental faculties in the *Euclid Commentary* (3.14–4.14):

It is for this reason, I think, that Plato assigned different types of knowing to the highest, the intermediate, and the lowest grades of reality. To indivisible realities he assigned intellect (*nous*), which discerns what is intelligible with simplicity and immediacy, and by its freedom from matter, its purity, and its uniform mode of coming in contact with being is superior to all other forms of knowledge. To divisible things in the lowest level of nature, that is, to all objects of sense-perception, he assigned opinion (*doxa*), which lays hold of truth obscurely, whereas to intermediates, such as the forms studied by mathematics, which fall short of indivisible but are superior to divisible nature, he assigned discursive reason (*dianoia*). Though second in rank to intellect and the highest knowledge, discursive reason is more perfect, more exact, and purer than opinion. For it

⁴ Proclus, *In Tim.* II 200.21; *In Eucl.* 55.18; *In Alc.* 187.18. At the same time, however, the Soul can also be 'the sum total of the forms' (*plērōma tōn eidōn* – *In Eucl.* 16.6; *In Parm.* 896.3–4), *eidē* here being synonymous with *logoi*. Proclus' terms are often polyvalent and their meaning needs to be deduced from context.

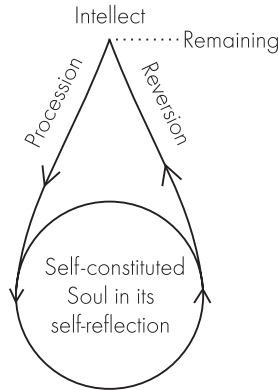


Fig. 15 Soul and its two cycles of procession and reversion

traverses and unfolds the measureless content of Intellect by making articulate its concentrated intellectual insight, and then gathers together again the things it has distinguished and refers them back to Intellect.

As we can see from the last sentence, the activity of *dianoia* consists not just in unfolding the content of Intellect and examining its aspects in a temporal sequence, but also in gathering together again the things it has distinguished and referring them back to Intellect. In other words, Intellect is the higher cause that the Soul remains in, proceeds from and reverts upon. At the same time we know from chapter 2.2.3 that the Soul also proceeds from and reverts upon itself, becoming a self-constituted entity in this manner. The two cycles of procession and reversion are complementary: it is only due to its being capable of reverting on itself that the Soul may also revert on Intellect (see fig. 15). Reversion here equals knowledge: by being able to contemplate its essential *logoi* the Soul reverts on itself; by recognizing these *logoi* as images of the Forms it reverts on Intellect.

The scheme depicted in figure 15 works smoothly and faultlessly on the level of universal Soul. The situation is more complicated with human souls, who due to their being enclosed in bodies tend to lose both their self-reflection and their participation in Intellect. Not that the soul could ever stop reverting on Intellect altogether; if it did, it would cut itself off from its source of being and cease to exist (cf. ch. 2.2.2). However, there are different levels on which reversion can take place. As we know already, 'all that exists reverts either in respect of its being only, or in respect of its life, or by the way of knowledge as well' (ET 39). All living humans revert on Intellect in respect of their life and being (otherwise they would neither

live nor exist), but comparatively few also revert by way of knowledge. Yet, it is precisely this reversion that is the most important one, for it is by means of it that we actually become human, i.e. beings who do not just live but reflect on their life too. Moreover, while life and being are gifts that the soul only transmits to us from the higher levels (see ch. 2.3.1 as well as fig. 10 on p. 98), it is rational reflection that it has as a feature of its own. In regard of its being and life the soul depends on its causes; it is only in respect of rational knowledge that it is self-constituted, this being the soul's own mode of existence (see ch. 2.2.3).⁵

It follows that self-reflection is what makes us truly human. Without it we are no longer able to exist as free and autonomous beings, i.e. to confer our own good upon ourselves and be self-sufficient. Proclus is convinced that the ability of self-motion, which is regarded by Plato as constitutive for the soul in general (*Phdr.* 245c–e), does not in fact belong to every soul but only to that which is capable of self-reversion (*ET* 17), and therefore of self-knowledge. As he stresses in the *Alcibiades Commentary* (15.12–16), the soul's self-motion goes hand in hand with its capacity for recollection (*anamnēsis*), through which we revert on ourselves and are perfected. If we fail to reflect on our own essence as well as its higher causes, and instead follow solely the impulses that come from the outside, we are no longer moved by ourselves but become enslaved by external motions. All this is due to the fact that ontologically the soul stands midway between intellect and the bodily world (*In Alc.* 106.15–107.4):

For intellect possesses its intellectual good in and of itself, and therefore it is really self-sufficient; but all body acquires its good, as also its being, from another, for it is its peculiar nature to be moved by another. For this reason the soul that is assimilated to intellect also seeks the good in itself and is genuinely self-sufficient; but the soul that resembles the body undergoes the experience of bodies and believes that its good lies in things other than itself, either in money or friends or honours or other such objects, so that it does not possess true self-sufficiency but just an illusory semblance (*phantasma*) of it.

The soul may never lose its self-motion entirely, of course. As Proclus explains further on (225.12–15), 'the soul is self-moved (*autokinētos*) in its essence, but through association with the body it has also started to share in motion from the outside (*heterokinēsia*): for just as it has bestowed on the body the ultimate image of self-motion [i.e. the illusion that a living body is able to move by itself], even so by being related to the body the soul has received from it in turn an appearance of motion from the outside'. In

⁵ More on all these points see Steel 2006; MacIsaac 2001a: 186–213.

other words, there is always some basic ontological self-motion going on in our deepest essence, but it is too weak to reach our consciousness, viz. to be turned into an epistemological self-motion, which amounts to self-reflection. The task of philosophy is to reunite ontology with epistemology, turning the unconscious self-reversion into a conscious one, in this way helping the soul to resume the self-sufficient status that properly belongs to it.

4.2 PROJECTION AND RECOLLECTION

At the heart of Proclus' epistemology stands the soul's self-reflection. To describe how it works, the Neoplatonists have developed one of the most interesting doctrines in the history of ancient philosophy: the theory of projection (*probolē*). Proclus makes extensive use of it in various contexts and he gives a particularly refined statement of it in connection with his philosophy of mathematics. Before we examine it, however, it will be useful to go back to Plotinus, with whom we find a first version of the conception.

Without using the word as such, Plotinus discusses projection in his treatise *On Nature and Contemplation and the One* (*Enn.* III 8), in which he investigates various levels of contemplation. We know already that contemplation is the basic principle around which the whole Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation revolves (ch. 2.2.1–2.2.3). The production and existence of each hypostasis entails two parallel types of contemplation: (1) the hypostasis looks back to its source, reverting upon it by imitating it; (2) it looks upon itself in self-reflection, becoming self-constituted and achieving thus a state of perfection, which automatically results in further production. Each self-constituted hypostasis overflows in its fullness, sending off an outflow of unlimited energy that becomes the nucleus of another level of being. In this way Intellect produces Soul, while Soul produces Nature.

At this point, however, things become more complicated. Nature is too weak a hypostasis already. Indeed, as we have seen (p. 75), it is a half-hypostasis only, being inseparable from bodies and incapable of self-reversion. In Plotinus' words, its capacity for contemplation is too weak, not allowing Nature a direct self-examination of its own structure (III 8, 4–5). Accordingly, Nature needs to proceed in a roundabout way: not being able to look into itself directly, it has recourse to external activity, producing material things so that it may examine them and use them as a prop for self-contemplation. To describe this process, Plotinus uses a poignant human simile (III 8, 4.31–47):

Men, too, when their power of contemplation weakens, turn to action, which is a shadow of contemplation and reasoning. Because contemplation is not enough for them, since their souls are weak and they are not able to grasp the vision sufficiently, and therefore are not filled with it, but still long to see it, they are carried into action, so as to see what they cannot see with their intellect. When they make something, then, it is because they want to see their object themselves and also because they want others to be aware of it and contemplate it . . . The duller children, too, are evidence of this, who are incapable of learning and contemplative studies and turn to crafts and manual work.

As it turns out, for Plotinus this is not just a simile. The contemplative ability of human souls immersed in matter is normally just as weak as that of Nature itself. To be sure, the ideal contemplative potential of humans is greater than that of Nature, for while the latter is the lowest offshoot of soul immanent in bodies, humans are capable of rising to the higher level of soul proper, engaging in its own type of contemplation. Nevertheless, being enclosed in mortal bodies, most people's souls are all too weak and are incapable of purer kinds of contemplation. As a result, they too need to have recourse to external actions and creations, producing bodily products and achievements in which they see themselves as in a mirror.

Plotinus elaborates this idea in chapter 6 of the treatise. He claims that each soul possesses within herself her own peculiar configuration of *logoi*. In her basic state, however, the soul is unaware of them. She has them within, but 'does not possess them primarily' (6.22–3), having them as 'lying beside her, so to speak'; it is only through contemplation that she may truly make them her own and become unified with them (6.17–18). The soul is as if pregnant with them, feeling an urge to work with them and get to know them (7.19–20). In most cases she does not realize what is going on inside her and what the aim of the process is. She can vaguely feel her *logoi* but does not see them, lacking the distance required for seeing to take place. If she is to appropriate her *logoi* and reflect them consciously, she needs to gain this distance; she needs to become different from them, so that she can examine them and recognize them as her own (6.29), reintegrating them in this way. Accordingly, the soul 'brings them forth' (*propherei*) and 'fits what she possesses to external things' (6.29–30) in order to see herself through them (6.21–5):

The soul, then, when she has become akin to and disposed according to the rational principle (*logos*), still, at the same time, brings it forth (*propherei*) and propounds it (*procheirizetai*) – for she did not possess it primarily – and learns it thoroughly and by its proposition becomes other than it, and looks at it, considering it, like one thing looking at another.

As the verb *propherein* ('bring forth', but also 'utter') used in our passage suggests, the idea of *logos* as something internal to be brought forth and uttered externally was probably suggested to Plotinus by the Stoic distinction between *logos* in the mind (*endiathetos*) and *logos* expressed in speech (*prophorikos*).⁶ No less inspiring must have been the fact that in Stoicism the unfolding of *logos* had its cosmic correlate too, all things being seen as 'growing out' of the spermatic Logos to return to its unity later upon their dissolution (*SVF* I 497). It was Plotinus' original contribution, however, to bring the physical and the mental unfolding of *logos* together, understanding it as a crucial part of the soul's self-reflection.

Later Neoplatonists followed suit, replacing the verb *propherein* by the more technical term *proballein*, 'project', and labelling the entire process as 'projection' (*probolē*).⁷ Clearly, the theory is nothing but an elaboration of Plato's concept of knowledge as 'recollection' (*anamnēsis*). Proclus draws the connection explicitly in his *Alcibiades Commentary*. As he explains (*In Alc.* 170–1), the aim of Socrates in this dialogue is to purify Alcibiades from false opinions and help him recollect the true knowledge he possesses within his soul. To achieve this, he asks dialectical questions, which do not induce knowledge from without (as rhetorical speeches do) but prompt us rather to recollect things from within. The method rests on the assumption that 'all learning is recollection' (*In Alc.* 280.19–281.6):

The fact that respondents state everything of themselves is considerable evidence for the view that souls project *logoi* from themselves, and all they required was someone to arouse them. They are not unwritten tablets receiving impressions from the outside. Rather, they are tablets ever inscribed and the writer is inside, though not all souls are able to ascertain what is written nor even that there is any writing at all, since their eyes have become clouded by the forgetfulness of the world of becoming.

The task of human soul is to know itself, for only by self-knowledge can it revert to itself, becoming a self-constituted entity moving of itself and being immune to bodily pressures. Yet, self-knowledge is unattainable by simply turning our gaze inside. Though the soul contains all the *logoi* within itself, it 'possesses them all in an essential and secret manner' (*ousiōdōs kai kryphīs* – *In Eucl.* 46.1). To see them, the soul has to project them, getting to know them in this indirect way.

⁶ See Graeser 1972: 32, 41–3; Witt 1931.

⁷ The terminology is already found in Iamblichus, *De com. math.* 11.22. On projection in Proclus see Steel 1997a.

It is for this reason that Proclus can claim in *ET* 191 that the soul is only temporal in its activity (*energeia*), but not in its essence (*ousia*). The soul's essence consists precisely of its *logoi* in their innate 'secret' state, in which they are all present together eternally (*ET* 52.1–2). In this they resemble the Forms in Intellect, for they represent the soul's remaining in Intellect, i.e. that aspect of the soul's existence in which it is like the cause it proceeds from. Unlike the Forms, however, the essential *logoi* are more divided⁸ and have a sequential structure prepared for temporal unfolding. We may perhaps imagine them as seeds containing in a nutshell a plan of the soul's development, or as the command lines of a computer programme that are atemporal and co-present in themselves, but that start to unfold in time once the programme is actually run (cf. *ET* 176.25–32). Similarly, it is only in projecting its *logoi* that the soul acts as a temporal self-moving entity unfolding its essence step by step.

Proclus gives a nice illustration of this in the *Alcibiades Commentary* again (192). Commenting on Socrates' statement that there was a time when Alcibiades thought himself ignorant of what he knows now (*Alc. I* 106e), Proclus raises the question whether this is not perhaps in conflict with Plato's claim in the *Phaedo* (75c–e) that we must always have possessed the knowledge we now have. He answers that we must distinguish between 'essential' (*kat'ousian*) and 'actualized' (*kat'energeian*) knowledge. Essential knowledge is something 'we have apprehended from eternity', consisting in the *logoi* we carry in our souls. To actualize their knowledge, however, we need to project them and reflect on them – which is something that happens at a definite moment of time.

Proclus does not wish to imply that the essential *logoi* would only exist potentially in our soul, as Aristotle would believe (*De an.* 429a27–8). Instead, he explicitly stresses (*In Parm.* 892.19–24) that they are present in soul 'in actuality' (*en energeiai*) according to the first meaning of actuality discussed by Aristotle in *De anima* II 5, viz. as latent knowledge that we possess without exercising it. 'For the soul is not like a writing-tablet without inscriptions, and it holds things buried not potentially (*dynamai*) but actually (*energeiai*)' (*In Crat.* 61, 26.26–7). It is 'a tablet that has always been inscribed and is always writing itself and being written on by Intellect' (*In Eucl.* 16.9–10). The only problem is that we are not always aware of this implicit knowledge, failing to actualize it and reflect upon it (cf. Steel 1997a: 299).

⁸ See *In Parm.* 897.28–9; *In Eucl.* 16.10–16. A good example is Proclus' claim that there are *logoi* of bodily parts, but no Forms of them (*In Parm.* 826.6–18).

4.3 OPINION AS UNREFLECTED PROJECTION

For Proclus, projection is the basic principle of all psychic activity, working at different levels. Before we take a closer look at the higher ones, it will perhaps be useful to start from the bottom and see what the most rudimentary everyday types of projection look like.

We have seen already that all souls constantly possess all the *logoi* in their essence, but do so in a secret manner, having no direct access to them. To become fully aware of them is a difficult task in which few humans succeed. Nonetheless, we all have at least a dim and unreflected notion of them (*In Alc.* 191.11–192.4):

The knowledge of souls is twofold: one is inarticulate and by mere notion (*ennoia*), the other articulate, scientific and indubitable. ‘For it is,’ as Plato says somewhere (*Pol.* 277d), ‘as if we had learned everything in a dream, but are unaware of this in our waking hours.’ In our essence we do possess the *logoi* and the knowledge of them is present in us in the manner of breathing, but we do not possess them as projected and actualized.

What this amounts to is that at some level of our being the soul is always engaged in thinking, for as an eternal entity it can have no temporal start of its activity (*ET* 55). Nevertheless, in human souls this basic level of thinking is only dim and not consciously realized. The metaphor of breathing is the key to the conception.⁹ Breathing is something we do unconsciously on an everyday basis, without reflection. In the same way we unconsciously use our innate *logoi* to form some basic ‘notions’ (*ennoiai*) which allow us to function efficiently in our corporeal lives. Yet, functional as these notions are, they are imperfect only. They make basic orientation in the world possible but reach their limits very soon. As Proclus puts it, while all people ‘possess the *logoi* of things as a sort of heartbeat’, if they fail to articulate them consciously, ‘they carry them around as if suffocating and scarcely drawing breath’ (*In Alc.* 189.6–9). Just as our bodies soon become sick if we fail to care for them and cultivate them, even so our innate *logoi* sooner or later betray us if we just let them work unconsciously, neglecting to reflect upon them. And what is more, the unreflected *logoi* can even turn positively dangerous, producing ‘deceit and the illusion of knowledge’, which men acquire due to the false impression that through their innate *logoi* they possess knowledge (189.9–12).

⁹ See Steel 1997a, and the detailed analysis by Helmig 2012: ch. 7.2, 7.3.3.1.

The faculty responsible for the spontaneous, inarticulate use of our *logoi* is elsewhere called ‘opinion’ (*doxa*).¹⁰ Proclus gives a good analysis of its functioning in the *Timaeus Commentary* (I 248.7–252.10) while commenting on *Tim.* 28a, where Plato characterizes the world of becoming as being ‘opinionable by opinion together with irrational sense-perception’.¹¹ For Proclus, sense-perception (*aisthēsis*) is our lowest cognitive faculty. Its task is to register the sensible qualities of external objects, performing this in a purely passive and mechanical way. The cognition achieved in this manner is entirely irrational, because while taking note of various qualities of any single thing perceived, sense-perception is incapable of knowing its ‘being’ (*ousia*),¹² i.e. of understanding that the fragmented qualities are all aspects of one object with a unified essence (*In Tim.* I 249.15–20):

For example, when an apple presents itself, sight knows that it is red from the affection that occurs in the eye, smell knows that it is fragrant from the affection that occurs in the nostrils, taste knows that it is sweet and touch knows that it is smooth. But what is it that tells us that this thing that is presented to us is an apple? None of the particular senses do this, for each of them is acquainted with a single one of its features and not with the whole.

Clearly, therefore, ‘there must be a faculty superior to the senses which knows the whole before the parts’ (249.23–4), connecting all the fragmented sensible qualities and recognizing the being (*ousia*) of the object in conformity with its *logos*. This faculty is opinion (*doxa*).

In the Platonic tradition, opinion is a type of knowledge that is often held in low esteem; as Proclus’ analysis shows, though, it does have its useful side too. Were it not for opinion, we would only perceive thousands of separated perceptible qualities but would not be able to make out the things they belong to and perceive them as unified entities. It is opinion that grants us meaningful everyday orientation in the world of the senses. How does it achieve this? In Proclus’ view to know the being (*ousia*) of a thing means to know its *logos*, i.e. its immanent form impressed by Nature into matter. Opinion may thus be defined as ‘cognition of the objects of sense-perception in conformity with *logos*’ (249.2–3).

To recognize the *logoi* of things, however, opinion needs to possess them beforehand (249.9), for like may only be known by like. This is made

¹⁰ On opinion see the detailed analysis by Helmig 2012: ch. 6.2.

¹¹ For an analysis of Proclus’ exposition see Lautner 2002. On sense-perception in Proclus see Blumenthal 1982 and 1999; Lautner 2004 and 2006.

¹² *Ousia* here does not refer to the true ‘essence’ of a thing, but merely to the fact that a thing is recognized as one unified entity. See Helmig (2012: ch. 6.2.2.4), who traces this meaning of *ousia* to the *Theaetetus* 186a–b.

possible by the fact that both the physical *logoi* in things and the cognitive *logoi* in human mind are derived from the same source, namely from Soul (and ultimately from Intellect). While their proper level is that of the soul's discursive reason (*dianoia*), opinion is able to see them too and to project them (251.6), 'illuminating' sense-perception in this way and making it 'logos-like' (248.28–9).¹³ It is for this reason that opinion not only puts our different sense-impressions together and organizes them meaningfully, but is even capable of correcting them, e.g. by taking account of visual perspective and telling us that objects perceived as small may actually be large but distant (249.27–31).

Opinion is the lowest cognitive faculty that may be considered rational. Nevertheless, it is an imperfect type of rationality only, for while opinion 'possesses the *logoi* that have knowledge of the being' of sense-perceptible objects, 'from another perspective we must describe it as irrational, because it is ignorant of the causes' of these objects (249.9–10). It only knows 'that' (*hoti*), but not 'why' (*dihoti*).¹⁴ What this amounts to is that opinion is incapable of self-reflection. It projects the *logoi* it possesses onto external things, but its projective capacity is too weak, the *logoi* it works with being approximate only (339.14–15). As a result, while recognizing the being of external things, opinion does not complete the full cognitive circle, failing to realize that the *logoi* it sees really mirror the soul's own internal structure. Its projection is thus inarticulate and 'unreflected' – for it only shines forth, illuminating sense-perception, but does not 'bend back' in self-reversion, so to speak.

For this reason, opinion is a highly ambivalent faculty: it allows us to settle comfortably in the sense-world and know our way around it, but precisely by doing this it is deceptive, as it easily lulls us into thinking that the sensible world is all there is, there being no higher aims for us to achieve. This explains why opinion is treated as fundamentally positive in the *Timaeus Commentary* but as dangerous in the *Alcibiades Commentary*. Opinion is useful for helping us find our way around the material world and recognize the identity of sensible things, but is incapable of getting us any further. Problems begin when the same cognitive faculty is applied to matters that transcend sensible reality, such as the problems of ethics. Since opinion does have some inarticulate access to the *logoi*, it may easily succumb to the illusion that it has knowledge of them too. In this manner, it usurps an epistemological part that does not belong to it, failing to

¹³ A similar conception of sense-perception is already envisioned by Plotinus in *Enn.* IV 6, 3.16–19; see MacIsaac (forthcoming).

¹⁴ Proclus, *In Tim.* I 248.11–15; *In Parm.* 956.30–957.8.

recognize that it is only rational self-reflection that provides access to true knowledge. In other words, correct opinion is one that recognizes its limitations, being aware of its own ignorance. False opinion, on the other hand, is one that is conceited and treats its partial unreflected insights as if they could give us ultimate criteria for judging good and evil, in this way perverting the *logoi* it projects.¹⁵ We shall discuss some of the dire consequences of this illusion below in our treatment of Proclus' ethics (ch. 8.2).

4.4 MATHEMATICS AND DIALECTIC

Thanks to opinion we are constantly engaged in unconscious and inarticulate thinking activity. To become philosophers and start the soul's ascent, we need to turn this activity into a conscious and articulate one. In other words, we need to proceed from merely recognizing the *logoi* all around us to taking account of their causes. In this section we shall briefly review the various stages this process consists in.

As we have just seen, for Proclus all sense-perception presupposes an unconscious projection of *logoi* organizing the sensible qualities we receive through the senses. It seems natural, therefore, to start the soul's self-reflection here, recognizing external things as manifestations of the soul's own reason-principles. This is what we do when forming universals on the basis of sense-perceptions – an activity Proclus discusses in detail in the *Parmenides Commentary* (892–7).¹⁶ Whereas the Aristotelians understand universals as abstractions from sense-perceptions (regarding them as 'later-born' for this reason),¹⁷ Proclus sees things the other way round:¹⁸ universals are not derived from the sense objects, but from the *logoi* in soul, which correspond to the physical forming principles (*logoi*) of sensible things.

In this regard, the formulation of universal 'notions' (*ennoēmata* – *In Parm.* 896.10) does bring us another step closer to self-reflection, though Proclus also points out the limits of this activity: important as the universals are, they might easily mislead us into thinking that by having arrived at them we have discovered the true *logoi* that the essential natures of things

¹⁵ It needs to be said that all of this is my synthetic interpretation of Proclus' scattered remarks. For a less speculative analysis of error in Proclus see Helmig 2012: ch. 7.3.3.6.

¹⁶ See Helmig 2004 and 2008 on this subject.

¹⁷ In Aristotle the term 'later-born' (*hysterogenēs*) does not yet appear in this sense (though *Met.* xiv 1091a33 comes close), but the Neoplatonists regard it as Aristotelian and it was presumably used by later Peripatetics.

¹⁸ A full summary of Proclus' arguments against induction is given by Helmig 2008, and 2012: ch. 5.2; cf. MaclaSaac 2001a: 29–43; Steel 1997a: 300–4.

consist in. In fact, this is not so. The notions are themselves but secondary images of the living ‘thoughts’ (*noēmata* – *In Parm.* 896.6) of the soul, i.e. of its essential reason-principles. It is in this sense that the universals may indeed be regarded as ‘later-born’ – not in that they would be abstracted from sense-perceptions, but in that they are secondary *logoi* projected by the soul.¹⁹ The philosopher’s task is to use these as a starting point for the more important investigation of the soul’s *logoi* proper (*In Parm.* 896.18–21):

We must then, as I have said, ascend from the reason-principles in Nature to those in Soul, and not only to the ‘later-born’, but also to the essential ones. The ‘later-born’, after all, are images of these latter, not sprung from the sensible particulars.

The examination of the soul’s essential *logoi* also needs to proceed by projection, but one that takes place on a higher level liberated from the sensibles altogether. It is this kind of projection that constitutes the basic activity of discursive reasoning (*dianoia*). Proclus gives a detailed analysis of its functioning in the *Euclid Commentary*. In this work, his aim is not just to elucidate Euclid’s theorems, but more importantly to show in a more general way how mathematics relates to philosophy and what its exact epistemological status is.²⁰ For Proclus, mathematics is a typical example of discursive thought, allowing us to see precisely how it works. Projection will turn out to be central to his conception.

To place mathematics on the scale of various levels of knowledge, Proclus refers to the famous Divided Line Plato draws in the *Republic* (509d–513e). Plato divides his line into four sections, arranged from top to bottom: (1) the objects of intellection (*noēsis*), (2) the objects of *dianoia*, (3) physical sensible things, which are the objects of faith (*pistis*), (4) and finally their images as the lowest ontological entities, being no more than objects of conjecture (*eikasia*). Since levels (3)–(4) are concerned with the world of sensible things, they cannot be the domain of mathematics, whose objects are far more precise than anything in the physical world (*In Eucl.* 12.19–23): ‘For where among sensible things do we find anything that is without parts,

¹⁹ For this reason the term ‘later-born’ *logoi* may be encountered in two seemingly incompatible senses in Proclus: in most cases they are used in the Aristotelian sense and criticized severely; less frequently they have a positive Platonic meaning. Helmig (2012: ch. 5.2.2.1) speaks of two different kinds of ‘later-born’ *logoi* in this connection, but it is perhaps better to see them as two different interpretations of one and the same phenomenon, viz. of universals – though admittedly Proclus’ universals are more pure and comprehensive than those of Aristotle (see Helmig 2008).

²⁰ For Proclus’ philosophy of mathematics see Charles-Saget 1982; Mueller 1987; O’Meara 1989: 142–209; Schmitz 1997; MacIsaac 2001a: 115–85; Lernould 2010. It should be remarked that for Proclus ‘mathematics’ is a much broader category than it is for us, comprising all kinds of exact sciences, such as astronomy, optics, geodesy or meteorology; see *In Eucl.*, ch. XIII.

or without breadth, or without depth? Where do we see the equality of the lines from centre to circumference? Where the fixed ratios of the sides? Where the rightness of angles?’

Nor can mathematics be a form of *noēsis*, for this is a type of cognition that apprehends things in a partless and indivisible manner. Mathematical objects, on the other hand, are essentially discursive, ‘imitating in their divided fashion the indivisible and in their multiform fashion the uniform patterns of being’ (4.24–5.2). It is clear, therefore, that they are objects of *dianoia* (11.10–16). In this regard, mathematics is closely tied to the mode of existence that is characteristic of soul, and some of the soul’s reason-principles have a mathematical nature. It is for this reason that in the *Timaeus* ‘Plato constructs the soul out of all the mathematical forms, divides her according to numbers, binds her together with proportions and harmonious ratios (*logoi*), deposits in her the primal principles of figures, the straight line and the circle, and sets the circles in her moving in intelligent fashion’ (16.16–22).²¹

Mathematical forms are one of the reason-principles that constitute the soul’s essence (17.6). Yet, mathematics is incapable of apprehending these principles directly. Being the prototype of discursive reasoning, it has to proceed by means of projection. The best example is geometry. In themselves the objects of geometrical knowledge are the reason-principles in the soul’s essence, which are without extension: ‘the circle in the *dianoia*²² is one and simple and unextended, and magnitude itself is without magnitude there, and figure without shape; for they are all reason-principles devoid of matter’ (54.5–8). To contemplate such principles in their purity would have been immensely difficult. To understand the nature of a circle we need to explicate it by means of various proofs and theorems – but these take it for granted, for instance, that the circle is divisible and may be bisected, or that we may have several different concentric circles differing in size (49.24–50.9; 53.1–18). It follows that geometry does not work with the unextended *logoi* directly but needs to project them into imagination (*phantasia*), which by means of its formative activity turns them into mental ‘imprinted pictures (*typoi*) that always have parts, divisible extension and shape’ (52.1).

In visibly expressing the unextended *logoi*, imagination provides them with matter: ‘for reason-principles can have magnitude, bulk and extension in general only through the matter which is their receptacle, a receptacle

²¹ More on the mathematical structure of Soul see MacIsaac 2001a: 132–52.

²² While normally *dianoia* signifies the discursive projective activity of the soul, here it is used more loosely as a synonym for the soul as such.

that accommodates indivisibles as divisible, unextended things as extended, and motionless things as moving' (49.27–50.2). It is not the same matter as that of sensible things, however, for it is far more pure, and the pictures it produces are free of the imperfections of the sensible world. Accordingly, Proclus designates it as 'intelligible matter' (*hylē noētē*), i.e. a matter that combines the spatiality of sensible matter with the purity of ideal Forms that is characteristic of the intelligible world.²³ To capture the intermediate position of imagination between the sensible and the intelligible world Proclus even calls it 'passive intellect' (*nous pathētikos*):²⁴ it is an intellect in that it allows the contemplation of ideal figures, but it is passive in that it does not have the figures from itself, receiving them from the soul's essence. Its passivity does not imply inertness, though, 'for the [passive] intellect that receives these forms from elsewhere receives them through motion' (186.8–9), actively assisting by its own 'formative movements' (46.4; 51.21) in the work of projection.²⁵

The meaning and aim of this entire process is beautifully summarized by Proclus in the following passage, which is one of the clearest statements of the doctrine of projection (*In Eucl.* 141.2–142.2):

Therefore just as Nature stands creatively above the visible figures, so the soul, exercising her capacity to know, projects on the imagination, as on a mirror, the reason-principles (*logoi*) of the figures (*schēmata*); and the imagination, receiving in pictorial form these impressions (*emphaseis*) of the reason-principles within the soul, by their means affords the soul an opportunity to turn inward from the pictures (*eidōla*) and attend to herself. It is as if a man looking at himself in a mirror and marvelling at the power of nature and at his own appearance should wish to look upon himself directly and possess such a power as would enable him to become at the same time the seer and the object seen. In the same way, when the soul is looking outside herself at the imagination, seeing the figures depicted there and being struck by their beauty and orderedness, she is admiring her own reason-principles from which they are derived; and though she adores their beauty, she dismisses it as something reflected and seeks her own beauty. She wants to penetrate within herself to see the circle and the triangle there, all things without parts and all in one another, to become one with what she sees and

²³ Proclus, *In Eucl.* 53.12–22; 78.18–25; 96.6–8. Cf. above, p. 73, n. 47, and (for the entirely different meaning of 'intelligible matter' in Plotinus) p. 76.

²⁴ Proclus, *In Eucl.* 52.3; 56.1; 56.17; 186.7; *In Tim.* I 244.20–1; III 158.8–9 (also called *nous phantastikos* – *In Remp.* II 107.17). The term as such is appropriated from Aristotle (*De an.* 430a24).

²⁵ Cf. Maclsaac 2001b: 130–2; Beierwaltes 1975: 157–62. The positive role of *phantasia* in the mathematical context might evoke the concept of creative imagination well known from modern romanticism; however, Proclus never gets this far. It is symptomatic that when describing the highest type of poetic creativity, he always speaks of 'inspiration' (*enthousiasmos*) instead of 'imagination'. See Sheppard 1995 and 1997, and ch. 6 below.

enfold their plurality, to . . . see the circle more partless than any centre, the triangle without extension, and every other object of knowledge as having come back to its unity.

In other words, projection is just one half of the cognitive process. The true aim of geometry is to come full circle and use the extended and divisible figures as props for recognizing the unextended reason-principles that lie in the soul's essence and from which all the imaginative projections are derived.

Mathematics is the clearest illustration of discursive reasoning, but it is not the only type of activity that *dianoia* indulges in. Clearly, most philosophical arguments are also discursive, and yet the nature of most of them is not mathematical. Plato already was well aware of the limitations of mathematics, and while emphasizing its importance for the study of philosophy, he saw it as incapable of fully apprehending being without the help of dialectic inquiry (*Resp.* 533b–c; 510c). As Plato explains, mathematics draws systematic conclusion from the starting points it posits, but is unable to prove the validity of these basic principles, accepting them as undemonstrated hypotheses. It is only the science of dialectic that is capable of examining the hypotheses, using them as steps for ascending to that which is unhypothetical (*Resp.* 511b; cf. Proclus, *In Eucl.* 31.11–22). For this reason, dialectic may be seen as the 'capstone' of the mathematical sciences (*Resp.* 534e) – a point that Proclus stresses himself (*In Eucl.* 42–4).²⁶

In the Divided Line simile, dialectic belongs to the first segment, that of *noēsis* (*Resp.* 511b–c). Are we to suppose that whereas mathematics represents the activity of discursive thought (*dianoia*), dialectic exemplifies the simultaneous nondiscursive knowledge pertaining to intellect (this being the standard meaning of *noēsis* in Proclus)? Such a conclusion is unlikely. It is more than clear that dialectic is itself a type of discursive thought, for it 'unfolds before the mind the whole intelligible world, making its way from Form to Form until it reaches the very first Form of all, sometimes using analysis, sometimes definition, now demonstrating, now dividing, both moving downwards from above and upwards from below' (*In Parm.* 653.17–20). Rather than representing the highest segment of the Divided Line *per se*, therefore, dialectic is a higher type of dianoetic activity, one that serves as a bridge between the first segment and the second. It is only loosely that the term *noēsis* applies to it.²⁷ Proclus describes the mediating

²⁶ On dialectic in Proclus see Lernould 1987; on the relation between mathematics and dialectic see Maclsaac 2010.

²⁷ Thus Maclsaac 2010. As we shall see in ch. 4.5, Proclus distinguishes between six different types of *noēsis*, only the first four being nondiscursive.

position of dialectic eloquently when commenting on the pseudo-Platonic claim from the *Epinomis* (991e) that dialectic is the ‘unifying bond’ of the mathematical sciences (*In Eucl.* 44.11–23):

For dialectic perfects general mathematics and sends it up towards Intellect by means of its peculiar powers, showing that it is truly a science and rendering it steadfast and irrefutable. Yet highest in rank among the unifying bonds is that very Intellect which contains in itself all dialectical resources in undifferentiated fashion, combining their variety in simplicity, their partiality in completeness of insight, their plurality in unity. Intellect, then, wraps up the developments of the dialectical methods, binds together from above all the discursiveness of mathematical reasoning, and is the perfect terminus of the upward journey and of the activity of knowing.

In other words, while Plato only finds a place for two kinds of cognition in the top half of the Divided Line, *noēsis* and *dianoia*, Proclus needs to squeeze in three kinds: *noēsis* in the true sense of the term (see ch. 4.5 below), plus two types of discursive knowledge, the lower one being represented by mathematics, the higher one by dialectic. Strictly speaking, the faculty of *dianoia* is one only, but it may turn its attention in two different directions. The difference seems to correspond to the soul’s two cycles of procession and reversion (see fig. 15 on p. 142 above). Mathematics represents the soul’s proceeding from and reverting to itself. Starting from the hypothetical ‘first principles’ (*archai*), some mathematical operations ‘develop these principles to plurality and open up the multifarious paths of speculation, while others assemble the results of these many excursions and refer them back to their native hypotheses’ (*In Eucl.* 19.6–9). The ‘first principles’ are the soul’s *logoi*, which mathematics accepts as something given, bringing them forth in order to examine them. After projecting its principles, mathematical *dianoia* must in the next step refer the projections back to their starting points, so that it might revert on itself and ‘obtain a superior vision of the partless, unextended and essential geometrical principles (*logoi*) in whose sum total the *dianoia* consists’ (55.15–18).

Dialectic continues this cognitive process on a higher level. Its task is to examine the hypotheses and use them as steps for gradually climbing up towards the unhypothetical. What this amounts to is that dialectic recognizes the soul’s *logoi* as images of the intelligible Forms, in this way allowing the soul to revert on intellect as its higher source. The procedure of dialectic is thus strictly parallel to that of mathematics. Once again, dialectic starts from its ‘first principles’, which in this case consist in

intuitive metaphysical insights.²⁸ These must also be identical with the soul's *logoi*, but this time they are *logoi* of a higher order – namely *logoi* in their aspect of being derived from and directed towards the Forms.

The aim of the dialectician is not to prove these basic intuitions but to unfold them and show what conclusions they entail. In this way, dialectic, too, indulges in projections, for it proceeds from unity toward plurality: it takes each metaphysical hypothesis and demonstrates all of its implications in relation to both itself and to other hypotheses. In this way the dialectician is able to organize all of his intuitions about a given metaphysical truth in a systematic and comprehensive manner, which in turn allows him to get better insight into the original hypothesis, i.e. to carry the projected plurality back to unity. At the same time, all the hypotheses are shown to follow from one another, all ultimately depending on the first unhypothetical principle of the One prior to the many (see *In Parm.* 655.9–656.11).

Proclus provides some rather overelaborated examples of this method in book v of the *Parmenides Commentary* (997.8–1017.30), where he tries to follow the instructions given by Plato in the *Parmenides* (136a–c).²⁹ More realistic illustrations may perhaps be found in some of Proclus' typical ways of arguing for the postulates of his metaphysics. It has been claimed plausibly by Dominic O'Meara that in fact the best exemplification of dialectic is what Proclus does in the *Elements of Theology*. Each of the propositions may be seen as a hypothesis, while the logical demonstrations that follow try to show what implications both the validity and the nonvalidity of this hypothesis would entail. At the same time, the hypotheses are arranged in an interlinked hierarchical system, at the top of which stands the unhypothetical postulate of *ET* 4: 'All that is unified is other than the One itself.'³⁰

The cooperation between dialectic and mathematics is best illustrated by the *Euclid Commentary* itself. It comments on Euclid's text, which proceeds as mathematical science should: it starts by presenting its 'starting points' or 'first principles' (*archai*), 'giving no argument for the principles but only for the theorems that are derived from them' (75.13–14). The first principles are the definitions we find at the beginning of the *Elements*:

²⁸ Proclus, *In Parm.* 980.7–982.24; 1125.9–16; *PT* 110, 45.20–46.9. Cf. the excellent analysis of O'Meara 1989: 199–204.

²⁹ See Dillon 1987b for an analysis of these examples.

³⁰ O'Meara 1989: 203–4. See *PT* 11 12, 66.1–9, where Proclus claims the very first conception (*noēma*) of metaphysical science to be the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* (137c): 'The One, if it is one, may not be many.' 'For the many,' Proclus comments, 'must participate in the One, while the One does not participate in the One but is the One itself.' Cf. Lernould 1987: 527–30.

that of a point, a straight line, a plane surface, a circle etc. From these Euclid proceeds to deduce a complex mathematical system, proceeding from the simple to what is complex. When commenting on the theorems themselves, Proclus follows the mathematical method faithfully. It is in the two Prologues and his commentary on the definitions that he works like a philosopher, attempting to do precisely what a dialectician should, viz. to give an account of the very first principles of mathematics and refer them back to the higher principles of being from which they are derived. For Proclus, these are some of the basic principles known to us from his metaphysics: the Limit, the Unlimited, the Mixed, and finally, the unhypothetical starting point of them all, the One. Thus the point, for instance, derives from Limit, while in a line the point starts to 'flow forth' in an infinite procession due to the power of the Unlimited (97–8).

The entire range of cognitive operations of *dianoia*, in which mathematics and dialectic join hands to produce a multilayered epistemological system, allows the soul to ascend gradually on the scale of reality (*In Eucl.* 19.20–20.6):

The range of this thinking extends from on high all the way down to conclusions in the sense world, where it touches on nature and cooperates with natural science in establishing many of its propositions, just as it rises up from below and nearly joins intellectual knowledge in apprehending primary principles. In its lowest applications, therefore, it projects all of mechanics, as well as optics and catoptrics and many other sciences bound up with sensible things and operative in them, while as it moves upwards it attains undivided and immaterial intellectual insights that enable it to perfect its partial judgements and the knowledge gained through discursive thought, bringing its own genera and species into conformity with those higher realities and exhibiting in its own reasonings the truth about the gods and the science of being.

4.5 BEYOND DISCURSIVITY

Discursive self-reflection is the psychic activity *par excellence*, allowing souls to exist as self-constituted entities reverting on themselves as well as on intellect. Nevertheless, it is still but a faint image of what true intellectual knowledge (*noēsis*) of Being looks like. The realm of Intellect is eternal, and as such cannot be grasped adequately by discursive reasoning. The question is, therefore, to what extent humans are capable of a higher type of nondiscursive intellectual knowledge.

Proclus faces this question in the *Timaeus Commentary* (I 243.26–246.9), commenting on Plato's claim in *Tim.* 28a that true being is to be

apprehended ‘by *noēsis* together with *logos*’. To determine the kind of *noēsis* Plato has in mind, Proclus gives an instructive list of all the degrees of *noēsis*, naming six types altogether. The highest three are those from the level of general Intellect in its three aspects of Being, Life and Intellect: (1) intelligible *noēsis* pertaining to Being, (3) intellective *noēsis* pertaining to Intellect, and (2) intelligible-intellective *noēsis* on the level of Life connecting the two extremes. In Proclus’ view, none of these ‘holistic’ *noēseis* could have been meant by Plato, ‘for they all transcend the forms of knowledge that we humans have’ (245.8–9). More important for us are the remaining three types: (4) *noēsis* of particular intellects participated in by souls, (5) discursive *noēsis* of the rational soul, and (6) imaginative *noēsis* pertaining to *phantasia* in its role of a ‘passive’ or ‘imaginative’ intellect.

Clearly, the lowest two types are *noēseis* metaphorically only. Imagination is a type of irrational knowledge bound to shapes, and as such cannot relate to true being, which is shapeless (245.1–5). Nor can Plato refer to rational intellection, ‘for it does not possess the ability to know all things at one time and is not coupled with the eternal realm, but proceeds temporally’ (245.6–7). Accordingly, it can only be the intellection of a particular intellect that Plato has in mind in our passage. Yet, are we capable of such intellection at all? We know from chapter 2.4.3 that it is divine and daemonic souls only who have intellects of their own. Proclus admits this but goes on to explain that while a particular intellect ‘is immediately and entirely participated in by other daemonic souls, it also sends its irradiation into our souls, whenever we turn towards it and we make the reason (*logos*) in us completely intellective’.³¹ Proclus finds a confirmation of this in the *Timaeus* 51e, where Plato claims that ‘it is the gods who participate in intellect, while the race of humans only does so to a small extent’. As a result, intellect is something that transcends our human essence but that we can at least ‘tune in’ to and link up with by means of our reason (245.13–17):

In fact, the particular intellect is established directly above our essential nature (*ousia*), guiding it and perfecting it. This is what we turn to when we have been purified through philosophy and have linked our own intellective power to the *noēsis* of that intellect.

To receive the influence of daemonic intellects, human soul has a special faculty which may also be referred to as ‘intellect’. It is not a self-constituted intellect of its own, though, but rather a psychic capacity to participate in the daemonic *noēsis*. As Proclus makes clear further on (246.19–22), this

³¹ Proclus, *In Tim.* I 245.23–5; cf. II 144.15–145.4.

intellect in us is really a type of *logos*. It is ‘intellective reason’ (*noeros logos*), i.e. ‘the summit of discursive reasoning’ (*to tēs dianoias akrotaton*). It is this *logos* that Plato has in mind in *Tim.* 28a when talking about ‘*noēsis* together with *logos*’ (246.29–247.1):

That which is highest in the soul³² and the part of *dianoia* which most resembles unity is established in the *noēsis* of the particular intellect and is linked to it through affinity. This, then, is the *logos* [in *Tim.* 28a], the faculty in us that knows the intelligibles, of which Socrates in the *Republic* [in the Divided Line simile, 511d] stated that it was the activity of *noēsis*.

In the *Phaedrus* (247c) Plato called this intellect the ‘pilot of the soul’, claiming that it alone knows ‘Being’, while the soul engages in contemplation together with it when she is ‘nourished with intellect and science’ (247d). By this he clearly indicated ‘that *noēsis* is prior to the soul and that that is what *noēsis* really is, but that the soul participates in it whenever its *logos* is intellectually active’ (*In Tim* I 245.25–31).

How exactly does this highest intellective type of reasoning work? Proclus gives us a hint in the following passage (247.10–15):

Indeed, whenever the soul distances itself from imagination and opinion and cognition that is variegated and indeterminate and ascends to its own partlessness, in virtue of which it has been rooted in the particular intellect, and in its ascent it connects its own activity with the *noēsis* of that intellect, it is then that, together with that intellect, it intellectually grasps eternal Being.

To understand what Proclus means, we must recall that the soul has an eternal essence which is being unfolded in the soul’s temporal projective activity. Our task is to recognize the projections as images of the soul’s essence, reverting back to it in the cycle of self-reflection. Once we attain this aim, however, we must in the next step of the soul’s ascent understand this very essence as an image of intellect. Using figure 15 again (above, p. 142), we may say that by realizing the cycle of procession from and reversion to itself the soul is also able to consciously activate the bigger cycle of proceeding from and reverting to intellect. As we have seen in the previous section, this latter achievement is the task of dialectic. If the dialectic analysis is successful, it orders the soul and prepares it for the influx of intellective light from above. In this way, the structures of being

³² Normally, we would expect the highest part of the soul to be ‘the one in us’ (see ch. 5.1), but in this case it obviously just refers to the intellect in us. Proclus’ terminology is always very context-bound, and when dealing with the relation between discursive knowledge and *noēsis*, he apparently felt no need to mention the one in the soul, as it did not concern his present topic.

that dialectic has traced discursively may come alive within us and be transformed into one complex vision of intelligible reality.

In any case, even after linking up with a daemonic intellect and turning its own *logos* intellective the soul can never leave its discursivity behind altogether. What it achieves, rather, are nondiscursive intellective visions within a discursive framework (*In Tim* 1 246.5–9):

Whenever reason (*logos*) knows eternal Being, as reason it is active discursively, but as intellect it is active with [the] simplicity [of *noēsis*]. It knows each thing at once and as something simple, but does not know all things at once. Rather, it moves from the one to the other, even though in the process it knows each object of its knowledge as a single and simple thing.

Apparently, this is as far as human intellection can get. When reverting upon its timeless centre, in which all the *logoi* are concentrated atemporally, our soul may in the next step relate these *logoi* to the Forms they proceed from, in this way catching a glimpse of the Forms in their undivided simplicity.³³ Nevertheless, it can only do so from one particular point of view at a time. It can follow one of its *logoi* to its origin and even arrive at intelligible Form of which the *logos* is an image, but it is incapable of doing this with all the *logoi* at once.

It is likely that the intellective visions achieved in this way would be very similar to those that Plotinus describes so vividly several times. We may take the following passage as an example (*Enn.* v 8, 9.7–17).

Let there be, then, in the soul a shining imagination of a sphere, having everything within it, either moving or standing still, or some things moving and others standing still. Keep this, and apprehend in your mind another, taking away the mass: take away also the places, and the mental picture of matter in yourself, and do not try to apprehend another sphere smaller in mass than the original one, but calling on the god who made that of which you have the mental picture, pray to him to come. And may he come, bringing his own universe with him, with all the gods within him, he who is one and all, and each god is all the gods coming together into one.

What Plotinus does here may easily be re-described in Proclean terms. He starts by projecting some of his soul's *logoi* into imagination (*phantasia*) in order to subsequently retrace the imagined picture to its source, purifying it of all its spatial extension and arriving at the *logoi* in their concentrated state. Apparently, this part of the meditation exercise is a tricky one, for one will have a tendency to mistake concentration for decrease in size, and

³³ See the stages of recollection as summarized by Hermias, *In Phaedr.* 171.16–30.

it is for this reason that Plotinus explicitly warns against such error. So far the entire exercise remains on the level of *dianoia*. The next task, therefore, is to turn it into an intellectual vision. To achieve this we can no longer rely on our own powers, for as humans we have no intellect of our own, depending on our supervising daemon to shed our *dianoia* with intellectual light. What Plotinus describes as the coming of 'the god who made that of which you have the mental picture' would presumably be interpreted by Proclus as the intervention of a daemon (though one that no doubt in turn derives from the god this daemon is correlated with). Thanks to him the intellectual vision finally arrives.

Yet, contrary to Plotinus Proclus would have to insist that this vision cannot capture the fullness of the true *noēsis* of Intellect, being only its psychic approximation. While the vision achieved may actually be non-discursive, it is still just a partial view of the intelligible realm, one that sees it from the perspective of the spherical *logos* we have started our exercise from. Next time we will focus on some other *logos*, obtaining a different view. It is only by adding all the different visions together and contemplating them at once that we would see reality the way Intellect does. Unfortunately, this is precisely what we cannot achieve, having no possibility but passing discursively from one non-discursive vision to another. Even so, the actual accomplishment is no doubt remarkable and worthy of human effort.

CHAPTER 5

Ways of unification

In chapter 4 we started to trace the steps that the soul needs to pass through on its upward journey. So far we have only focused on its philosophical part, which may be described in terms of increasing degrees of knowledge. For the Neoplatonists, however, the ultimate goal lies beyond the domain of 'knowledge' – if by this word we imply the orientation of a knowing subject towards an object of cognition. Plotinus already saw the highest aim in one's unification with the One, in which the distinction between subject and object melts down entirely. Late Neoplatonists followed suit, though they differed from Plotinus in their understanding of what this unification means and how exactly it is to be reached. Once again (as with the henads), we are approaching an area of Neoplatonism where philosophy passes into the realm of religion. It is for this reason that the topic deserves a chapter of its own, despite the fact that the process of unification is also closely linked with the epistemological ascent traced in the previous chapter.

5.1 THE ONE IN SOUL

For Proclus, to unify with the One does not mean to leave one's ontological station and ascend from the level of soul to that of the First Principle. As we know already, for the late Neoplatonists the boundaries between levels of reality are penetrable in one direction only: the higher levels can send their influence to the lower ones, but members of the latter are never able to abandon their proper position and rise up to the rank of the former. Nevertheless, while human soul cannot really enter the realm of the One, it can open up to the gods and act in unison with them, becoming their extension, as it were, and being filled with their power.¹ In Proclus' words (*In Tim.* I 211.24–8), unification (*henōsis*) 'establishes the unity of the soul in

¹ Cf. van den Berg 2001: 52–3.

the unity of the gods, causing there to be a single activity of us and them, in accordance with which we no longer belong to ourselves but to the gods, remaining in the divine light and encircled in its embrace'. All of this, of course, takes place 'in accordance with our rank' (*In Parm.* 1081.5). In this way Proclean unification differs substantially from that of Plotinus – though again (just as in the case of *noēsis*), it may well differ not so much in the altered states of consciousness achieved as in the way they are interpreted.

Unification is a special kind of participation in which the participating term is completely connected to the gods, being able to receive their influence to a maximum degree. The resulting state might perhaps be illustrated by an image that Plotinus uses to describe the working of sympathy between different parts of the cosmic whole (*Enn.* IV 4, 41.3–6): 'one part is in sympathetic connection with another, just as in one tense string: for if the string is plucked at the lower end, it has a vibration at the upper'. Plotinus is talking about horizontal sympathy between coordinate members of one ontological level (that of the material world), but Proclus also uses the term *sympatheia* to characterize the link that exists between members of any one of the *vertical* chains connecting things to their transcendent henads.² We may thus imagine these chains precisely as strings tuned to the same key. Unification would then correspond to a state of intense sympathetic vibration which fully connects the upper end of the string with the lower one that is located in human consciousness.

In what way is it possible for the soul to achieve unification? The basic answer is similar to that given in our account of *noēsis* (ch. 4.5). Just as the soul has a psychic intellect capable of imitating the Intellect as such, even so it has an even higher faculty that allows it to 'emulate' the One: 'As we approach Intellect by becoming intellect-like (*noeideis*), even so we rise up to unification by becoming one-like (*henoeideis*), taking up a position on the summit at our own intellect' (*Chal. phil.* 4, 209.25–7). Proclus often refers to this faculty as 'the flower of intellect'.³ The term comes from the *Chaldean Oracles* (fr. 1), and it is precisely in his fragmentarily preserved treatise *On the Chaldean Philosophy* that Proclus gives his best account of it (fr. 4, 209.7–22):

Whenever the soul situates herself at the level of her own *dianoia*, she has scientific knowledge of reality (*epistēmōn esti tōn ontōn*). Whenever she is established in the

² E.g. Proclus, *De sacr.* 149.5; 149.12; 151.10; *PT* IV 34, 101.5; *ET* 140.15.

³ See Guérard 1987; Beierwaltes 1979: 367–82; for antecedents of this conception in Plotinus and Iamblichus see Dillon 2008a.

intellective part of her own essence, she grasps all things by means of simple and undivided intellective intuitions. But when she runs up to the one [within herself], folding all her internal plurality together, then she acts in a divinely inspired way (*entheastikōs*), linking up with types of existence that transcend intellect. For like is always naturally linked to like, and it is through likeness that all knowledge binds together the known object with the knowing subject: the sense-perceptible with that which perceives, that which is grasped discursively with that which is capable of discursive thinking, that which is intelligible with that which exercises intellection. Accordingly, even before intellect there has to be the flower of intellect (*anthos tou nou*). For just as in all of reality the highest principle is not Intellect, but the cause superior to Intellect, even so in souls the first type of activity is not intellective but is more divine than intellect. And every soul and every intellect exercises two kinds of activity: those that resemble unity and are more powerful than *noēsis*, and those that are intellective.

To make matters more complicated, Proclus goes on to draw a further distinction between ‘the flower of intellect’ and ‘the flower of the whole soul’, the former being ‘the most unitary part of our intellective life’, the latter of all of our psychic faculties (fr. 4, 2II.4–13).

Since the One manifests itself in two ways within us, both (1) as the flower of the most primary of our faculties [i.e. of intellect], and (2) as the centre of our whole essence and of all the various faculties surrounding it, the former only connects us to the Father of intelligible beings; for it is a ‘one’ that is intellective and that is itself grasped intellectually by paternal Intellect in accordance with the ‘one’ in himself. It is only the ‘one’ to which all the psychic faculties converge that is naturally able to bring us towards that which transcends all things. It is this ‘one’ that unifies all of our faculties, for which reason we are deeply rooted in it with our essence.

At first sight this proliferation of one-like faculties might seem useless pedantry, but Proclus has good reasons for it. In the *Chaldean Oracles* the ‘flower of Intellect’ is described as a faculty designed for apprehending ‘the Intelligible’.⁴ In Chaldean theology this referred precisely to ‘the Father of intelligible beings’ mentioned in the passage just quoted, i.e. to the highest God of the Chaldean hierarchy, who stands at the summit of intelligible reality. In Proclus’ interpretation, however, this Father cannot be identical with the One proper – otherwise he would not be referred to as ‘intelligible’. Accordingly, Proclus regards him solely as the summit of the intelligible world, viz. as the highest paternal triad of Being.⁵ It is this level that Proclus

⁴ Fr. 1.1: ‘For there is a certain Intelligible (*esti gar ti noēton*), which you must intellectually grasp (*noein*) by means of the flower of intellect.’ Cf. Majercik 1989: 138.

⁵ See Proclus, *In Parm.* 1070.13–1071.3; *PT* III 31. The highest level of Being corresponds to level 2a in the list above, p. 125.

occasionally describes as the lower intelligible One (see above, p. 55) and that for this reason represents the 'one' in (general) Intellect. Besides being the ontological summit of Intellect, it plays an important epistemological part as well: it is, once again, 'the flower of Intellect', i.e. the most unitary cognitive faculty through which Intellect is capable of apprehending the One (*In Parm.* 1044.22–1045.19).

At the level of Intellect there is no need to distinguish between the Intellect's 'flower' and its 'one'. Once we reach the level of soul, the situation becomes more complex. In her ascent to the One the soul needs to pass through the flower of Intellect first, and needs to be endowed, therefore, with a special faculty connecting her to it. This is the 'flower of intellect', i.e. the most unitary part of the 'intellect in soul'. 'But if by means of the flower of the intellect in us,' Proclus asks (*Chal. phil.* 4, 210.12–15), 'we can intellectually apprehend this Intelligible, which is established at the top of the first intelligible triad, by what means can we be connected to the One, which is uncoordinated with anything and unparticipated in?' It follows that beyond the flower of intellect the soul has to possess a distinct faculty allowing her to intuit the One as such. This is 'the flower of the whole soul', or 'the one in soul' proper.⁶

In one way we might perhaps envisage these two flowers as concentric (thus MacIsaac 2001a: 263). If the soul's intellective essence – i.e. 'the summit of discursive reasoning' (*In Tim.* 1 246.22) – can be envisaged as a centre around which the discursive activity of *dianoia* revolves, the flower of intellect might be seen as the centre of this centre, while the flower of the soul in turn as an even more unified core of this supra-intellective centre. Nevertheless, it is not perhaps by chance that while the flower of intellect is described by Proclus as the intellect's *summit*,⁷ it is only in connection with the flower of the whole soul that the image of the soul's *centre* appears. When rising up through the summit of discursive reasoning to the summit of our intellect, we proceed on an upward path, leaving the lower faculties behind. The true unified centre of our being, however, is not placed *above* the other faculties but *in the midst* of all of them. As Andrew Smith importantly comments (1974: 121), the flower of the whole

⁶ Things are further complicated by the fact that as a third term Proclus sometimes speaks of the soul's *hyparxis*, again presenting it as a faculty for apprehending the One (e.g. *PT* 1 3, 15.1–6; *In Alc.* 247.7–248.4). In Proclus *hyparxis* designates the 'existence' of each thing in its most unitary aspect of 'remaining' in its cause. According to Guérard (1987), the *hyparxis* of the soul is a more general term comprising both the flower of intellect and the flower of the whole soul; as Steel (1994: 95–100) points out, however, Proclus' usage is ambiguous and the exact status of *hyparxis* differs from passage to passage.

⁷ See Proclus, *Chal. phil.* 4, 209.26 (quoted above, p. 164); *PT* 1 3, 15.3–6.

soul differs from other psychic summits ‘in being not a further refinement involving an even loftier part of man, but in attempting to reintegrate man as a whole. Proclus seems dissatisfied with the gradual whittling away of the individual to its “highest” element and, perhaps, wanted to restore a more realistic picture of the mystical aspirant as a conscious human being.’

If this interpretation is true, it points to an important distinction at the heart of Proclus’ epistemology. While a great deal of the journey towards the One is a Plotinus-like philosophical ascent towards increasing degrees of spiritual sublimation, the true aim of this mystical journey, the One as such, is not just a last final step on this long ladder. Rather, it is the culmination of a different religious journey that runs parallel to the philosophical one and concerns the lower psychic faculties no less than the higher ones. As we shall see in chapter 5.2, for Proclus unification is indeed something that does not just happen at the very end of a man’s ascent but needs to be effected all along at each single level of progress.

It is significant in this connection that the ‘one in soul’ is identified by Proclus with the ‘symbol’ or ‘token’ (*synthēma*) that the Father has sown in the deepest ineffable core of each being (*PT* II 8, 56.5–26). As we have seen (ch. 3.3), the *synthēmata* connect things to the henads in a way which resembles their participation in the Forms, but which at the same time represents a parallel system of classification complementary but irreducible to the ontological one. The same parallelism is even more apparent from the epistemological perspective (*Chal. phil.* 5, 211.18–25):

Philosophy says that our departure from or return to the gods is caused by our forgetting or recollection of eternal reason-principles (*logoi*); the *Chaldean Oracles*, on the other hand, claim it is caused by our forgetting or recollection of paternal *synthēmata*. However, both statements are in harmony. For the soul consists both of holy reason-principles and of divine symbols. The former have their origin in the intellectual Forms, the latter in the divine henads. And we are images of intellectual essences, but statues of the unknown *synthēmata*.

While Proclus stresses the complementarity of both types of recollection, he makes it clear at the same time that they are distinct. As we shall see, the recollection of paternal *synthēmata* is a process that builds upon the recollection of the Forms, supplementing it and bringing it to perfection.⁸

Before we see how this recollection is effected, it is useful to remark that even if we do not consciously recall our *synthēma*, it is still active in

⁸ A good example of this is Proclus’ hermeneutics of mythical symbols, which we shall consider in ch. 6 and which will turn out to be precisely a way of correlating philosophical recollection with the religious one.

us unconsciously. The situation is analogous to that we have described in chapter 4.3 in connection with the soul's *logoi*: just as the *logoi* are constantly working within each one of us, providing us with inarticulate notions that make basic orientation in the world possible, even so the *synthēma* never stops performing its rudimentary existential function of holding our soul together and providing it with its distinct individuality (cf. *ET* 13.4–5). For this reason we never lose our link with the gods entirely. Nevertheless, this does not imply that we need not strive to be united with them, for there is a crucial difference between unconscious unification and a conscious one.

Proclus expresses this nicely by distinguishing between remaining in and reverting upon the *synthēma* within each of us (*In Tim.* I 210.11–14): 'All things, therefore, both remain in and revert to the gods, receiving this ability from them and obtaining in their very essence a double *synthēma*: the one in order to remain there, the other so that what proceeds forth can return.' Proclus does not wish to claim, of course, that the two *synthēmata* would really be distinct in themselves. Ontologically speaking, the 'one in soul' can hardly be double and must no doubt correspond to one *synthēma* only. From the point of view of human experience, however, it makes a fundamental difference whether we just spontaneously remain in this *synthēma*, or whether we revert on it consciously; it is from this perspective that there appears to be a disjunction between the two processes, one that allows Proclus to speak of two different 'ones' within us.

In the rest of this chapter we shall examine the ways that Proclus used for reverting on the gods and attaining unity with them. Our chief focus of attention will be theurgy, a ritualized technique the eastern Neoplatonists used precisely for evoking the gods and unifying with them. In the subsequent chapter we shall add further interesting details by taking a special look at Proclus' approach to inspired theological poetry, which in late Neoplatonic circles was incorporated into the large complex of theurgic activities and whose philosophical exegesis seems to have performed an important part in the soul's ascent to the gods.

5.2 THEURGY

Theurgy, or 'hieratic art', as it was sometimes called, was one of the fundamental cornerstones of eastern Neoplatonism.⁹ Its importance is summarized in a memorable passage by Damascius, who claims that 'some

⁹ On theurgy see Trouillard 1972: 171–189; Smith 1974: 83–141; Lewy 1978; Nasemann 1991; Shaw 1995; van Liefferinge 1999; theurgy in Proclus: Sheppard 1982; van den Berg 2000 and 2001: 66–85.

put philosophy first, as Porphyry, Plotinus and many other philosophers, while others put greater stress on the hieratic art, as Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, and the hieratic school in general'.¹⁰ Modern scholars for a long time regarded theurgy as an aberration and a sign of decline of late Neoplatonic thought. In the eyes of E. R. Dodds it was 'the refuge of a despairing intelligentsia' and 'a retrogression to the spineless syncretism from which [Plotinus] had tried to escape' (1951: 288, 286). It was only in the last thirty years or so that scholars started to change their opinion, and nowadays few would venture to subscribe to Dodds's judgment.¹¹ Still, even today theurgy remains one of the most inaccessible areas of Neoplatonism. While philosophical doctrines may easily be written down and bequeathed to posterity, theurgy was a way of doing things rather than thinking about them, and as such is hard to transmit solely on the basis of texts. Proclus himself refers to theurgy frequently, but he never gives a systematic treatment of it and we will need to put his views together on the basis of his scattered utterances, as well as those of other Neoplatonists (particularly his former fellow student Hermias).

5.2.1 *External theurgy*

From the perspective of religious history, theurgy drew from three distinct sources, which it combined and transformed in a unique manner: (1) traditional cults, in which civic communities worshipped the divine patrons of their cities, (2) popular magical practices, which attempted to evoke divine powers and place them at the magician's service, and (3) internalized philosophical piety, which saw the aim of religion in the perfection of one's soul. The range of theurgic practices was enormous, stretching from external collective rituals to individual meditation exercises. At first sight, the external types of theurgy are more conspicuous, and it will be useful to start our investigation with them. We should keep in mind, though, that the most important hieratic processes were supposed to take place inside the human soul and that – as I shall argue – the boundary between external and internal theurgy may in fact have been more fluid than it might seem at first sight.

¹⁰ Damascius, *In Phaed.* 1 172.1–3. Damascius adds that Plato saw the importance of both approaches, regarding them as two sides of one and the same truth.

¹¹ See the highly positive approach in Shaw 1995 or van Liefferinge 1999. Free of all prejudice is already the important account of theurgy in Smith 1974: 83–141.

To understand the working of external theurgy, it is helpful to compare it with vulgar magical techniques, with which it shared a number of features. In antiquity magical practices were widespread and their efficacy was taken for granted. A thorough analysis of their functioning was offered by Plotinus, who explained them as results of cosmic sympathy: since the cosmos is an ensouled living being, all of its parts are bound by various sympathetic and antipathetic powers (*Enn.* IV 4, 32). Magicians are able to make systematic use of these powers and intensify them greatly, in this way helping to attract things or block their activity and harm them (IV 4, 40). For Plotinus, there is nothing supernatural about this: all the magician does is work with powers existing at the level of nature (*physis*). It is for this reason that the philosopher is immune to magical attacks: magic may perhaps affect the lowest bodily and irrational part of his self, which is bound to the cosmic whole, but it cannot harm his true rational and intellectual self, which stands above the cosmic level (IV 4, 43).¹²

Eastern Neoplatonists agreed with this explanation, but insisted that besides this ‘horizontal’ magic there exists a more interesting ‘vertical’ type of evocation, one that is not based on the mutual interconnections between parts of the cosmic body, but rather on sympathies that exist between things in this world and the gods – viz. on the divine ‘chains’ we have met with in chapter 3.3. We know already that in Proclus’ view every single thing hides a ‘symbol’ at its heart that links it to some specific divinity and works as its ‘token’ (*synthēma*). By bringing together things belonging to the same vertical series, the theurgist was able to concentrate their symbolic power and use it for evoking the god in question (Proclus, *De sacr.* 150.24–151.5):

The masters of hieratic art . . . have thus discovered how to gain the favour of powers above, mixing some things together and setting others apart in due order. They used mixing because they saw that each unmixed thing possesses some property of the god but is not enough to call that god forth. Therefore, by mixing many things they unified the aforementioned influences and made a unity generated from all of them similar to the whole that is prior to them all. And they often devised composite statues and fumigations, having blended separate signs together into one and having made artificially something embraced essentially by the divine through unification of many powers, the dividing of which makes each one feeble, while mixing raises it up to the form of the exemplar.

From the scattered remarks made by Proclus and other Neoplatonists we may gather that the theurgists made ritual use of various carefully selected

¹² Plotinus knew well what he was talking about: he was at one time attacked himself by a magician, but the negative power rebounded off him and harmed the magician himself. All Plotinus felt were cramps all over his body (see Porphyry, *Vita Plot.* 10).

stones, plants and objects, adding prayers and incantations. It is likely that in many respects they were inspired by popular magic as we know it from the magical papyri. At the same time, they incorporated many elements from traditional civic cults: they used statues, sang hymns and performed animal sacrifices.¹³ Indeed, as we shall see (ch. 9.1), in one of its dimensions theurgy was meant to revitalize traditional ritual forms by adjusting them to the new conditions that prevailed from the fourth century on, when the old cults suffered decline and were being replaced by Christianity. Since the old cults could no longer be fully revived, their philosophical adherents had no option but to experiment with new religious forms, behaving as courageous ‘hackers of the supernatural’.¹⁴ The realm of magic was no doubt seen as a rich reservoir of innovative ritual procedures easy to be adapted and used to reform traditional forms of worship.

The effects of external theurgy were fairly utilitarian: the aim was to achieve various material benefits, such as health and prosperity. Its good characteristics are given by Hermias, who studied under Syrianus together with Proclus, and whose only preserved treatise is a record of Syrianus’ lectures on the *Phaedrus*, and may thus be taken as a fairly reliable witness of the views prevalent in the Athenian school at the beginning of Proclus’ career. According to Hermias, external theurgy is an indispensable counterpart to the internal one (*In Phaedr.* 96.4–8): ‘Just as internal theurgy made our soul perfect and complete, helping it actualize all of its psychic capacities, even so external theurgy frees our soul and body and external possessions from troubling difficulties, so that it might make our life prosperous and blessed.’ Good examples are provided by Marinus (*Vita Procli* 28), who tells us that at one time Proclus ‘released Attica from a baneful drought and caused rains by an apposite use of an *iyinx*’,¹⁵ while on other occasion he ‘laid down defences against earthquakes’.

In working on the material cosmos, external theurgy has a lot in common with popular magic analysed by Plotinus, though it clearly differs in two regards. (1) Unlike vulgar magicians, the theurgists use their art for socially acceptable purposes only, often working on behalf of entire cities. (2) Even

¹³ For a theurgic justification of animal sacrifice see Iamblichus, *De myst.* v. It was only during sacrifices that Proclus was willing to break his vegetarianism and taste the victim symbolically at least (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 19).

¹⁴ The phrase has been suggested to me by Peter Brown in a personal letter from June 2011.

¹⁵ *Iyinx* was a magical tool already popular in the Classical period. It was a spoked wheel or a disc with two holes on either side of the centre, through which a cord was passed. When holding the loop of the cord in one hand and the two ends in the other one could twist and untwist the cord, so that the wheel was made to revolve rapidly in alternate directions. For a description and pictures see Gow 1934.

more importantly, the theurgists do not operate by rousing horizontal sympathies between different parts of the cosmic whole, but by plucking the vertical ‘strings’ that connect all things to their specific gods. For Iamblichus, horizontal sympathy plays an auxiliary part only (*De myst.* v 7); the true causality is the vertical ‘friendship’ (*philia*) that binds the gods with their creations (*De myst.* v 9).

What this amounts to is that the attitude of the theurgist is greatly different from that of the vulgar magician. The task of theurgy is to attune the practitioner to the gods rather than manipulate them and make them work for the individual. Iamblichus puts great stress on the fact that the gods manifest themselves to the theurgists of their own will, bringing us into harmony with themselves rather than being influenced by us in any way (*De myst.* I 11–14). It is in this sense that he understands the word *theourgia*. Etymologically it combines the substantive *theos*, ‘god’, with the root *erg-* that we can hear e.g. in the noun *ergon*, ‘work, deed, action’. *Theourgia* could thus either imply working *on* the gods, or an activity exercised *by* the gods. Iamblichus strongly defends the second alternative, emphasizing that ‘the successful accomplishment of divine works is granted only by the gods’ (*De myst.* III 20, 149.13–14).

Whether we regard theurgy as religion or as white magic depends on how we define these terms. If we follow James Frazer and see the essence of religion in the impulse to abase oneself before higher powers whose will is inscrutable and whom we can only beseech in humbleness without being able to foresee their reaction, theurgy will fall squarely on the side of magic, for it conceives divine order as regular, attempting to get on its wavelength on a more or less ‘technical’ basis (thus e.g. Dillon 2007b). On this criterion, though, a number of traditional religions or their aspects all over the world would have to be classified as magic. It seems more practical, therefore, to understand religion more generally as any systematic contact with powers transcending the boundaries of human worlds. Within this broad category of religion we are able to distinguish various attitudes, which may easily pass into one another. In this regard, theurgy, vulgar magic and traditional ritualism of Greek cities stand for three different religious stances forming a triangle: theurgy shares with vulgar magic its belief in a regular divine order that one may work with ritually, but in common with traditional cults it strives to subordinate the individual to something that transcends him. Vulgar magic in a sense may be considered as a lower, uncultivated form of theurgy, but it has the same relation towards religion, which in its popular forms had strongly magical features too (see Fowler 1995).

It is important in this respect that the eastern Neoplatonists themselves saw no essential difference between theurgy and traditional civic religion. Hermias regards civic cults as a subtype of theurgy: it is ‘human and technical theurgy’ (as opposed to the ‘inspired’ one) ‘that is also used by priests, who are responsible for the cult of statues in accordance with the law of the city and with traditional local customs’ (*In Phaedr.* 99.14–16). In Marinus’ description of Proclus’ piety theurgic and traditional elements mix freely and form a compact whole: Chaldean and Orphic purifications are smoothly combined with scrupulous observation of ancestral rites and festivals of different peoples (*Vita Procli* 18–19). What Marinus describes as a miraculous theurgic cure of a friend’s daughter was effected by Proclus solely by his praying in the temple of Asclepius ‘in the ancient manner’ (29.22). From the historical perspective theurgy was not meant to replace old ritualistic worship but to carry it on under new conditions.

5.2.2 *Levels of internal theurgy*

Conspicuous as the external theurgic operations might have been, for the Neoplatonists they were the less significant part of their hieratic art. Its main function was transformative and initiatory. Theurgy played a part in the ascent of the soul, allowing the induction of higher states of consciousness unattainable by pure philosophy. *The locus classicus* in this regard is an impressive passage in Iamblichus’ *On the Mysteries* (II II, 96.13–97.6):

For it is not pure thought that unites theurgists to the gods. Indeed, if it were, what would hinder those who are theoretical philosophers from enjoying a theurgic union with the gods? But the situation is not so: it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of the unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union. Hence, we do not bring about these things by intellection alone; for thus their efficacy would be intellectual, and dependent upon us. But neither assumption is true. For even when we are not engaged in intellection, the symbols themselves, by themselves, perform their appropriate work, and the ineffable power of the gods, to whom these symbols relate, itself recognises the proper images of itself, not through being aroused by our thought.

Modern scholars used to see a sign of intellectual decline in these words, and it was in reference to them that E. R. Dodds (1951: 287) labelled *On the Mysteries* as ‘a manifesto of irrationalism’, incommensurable with the philosophical grandeur of Plotinus. Yet, as recent scholars have noted, the basic idea is in fact not as foreign to Plotinus’ approach as it might seem at

first.¹⁶ Plotinus certainly was not a pure rationalist hoping to reach the One solely by intellectual means. In his view, thought implies the duality of the thinking subject and the object of thought. The One is beyond duality, and may thus only be attained if we transcend all thought. Intellectual work is a ladder allowing us to ascend high indeed, but not to the very top. At the last rung we need to close our eyes, so to speak, and take a leap into the night. This final step is characterized by passivity and powerlessness of the contemplating philosopher. Plotinus repeatedly asserts that the final unification may never be attained by our own effort. Rather, we must wait for the One to appear of itself unexpectedly:

But one should not enquire whence it comes, for there is no 'whence': for it does not really come or go away anywhere, but appears or does not appear. So one must not chase after it, but wait quietly till it appears, preparing oneself to contemplate it, as the eye awaits the rising of the sun.¹⁷

The approach of the eastern Neoplatonists is similar in many regards. Iamblichus agrees that 'effective union certainly never takes place without knowledge' (*De myst.* II II, 98.8–9), but he is well aware of its limits, regarding it as one of indispensable 'auxiliary causes' (*ibid.*, 97.15) insufficient in themselves. In this respect, he comes close to Plotinus, though he differs from him in the methods employed for evoking the One: whereas Plotinus tried to get beyond intellect by following its own speculations to their ultimate limits, Iamblichus attempts to achieve the same effect by means of theurgic practices. Curious as such a procedure might appear, in the history of Western spirituality it is not without parallels. Jean Trouillard (2003: 404–5) appropriately compares it to the catholic Eucharist: it too evokes the unspeakable communion with God by means of ritual action which precisely by its non-intellectual nature allows one to establish a link with what transcends intellectual understanding. It is significant that Dionysius the Areopagite found it easy to translate theurgy into Christian terms, founding upon it his conception of liturgy and sacramental acts, without which union with the divine was unattainable.¹⁸

In addition to the method used there is another crucial difference between Plotinus and the eastern Neoplatonists. For Plotinus, unification was the ultimate aim waiting for the philosopher at the very top of

¹⁶ See Bussanich 2002; Rappe 2000: 15; Narbonne 2002.

¹⁷ Plotinus, *Enn.* v 5, 8.1–5; cf. vi 7, 34.12–14.

¹⁸ See Wear and Dillon 2007, ch. 7: 'Hierourgia and Theourgia in Sacramental Activity'. Dionysius draws a strict distinction between *theurgy* as activity of God and *hierurgy* as the human ritual enactment of this divine activity (a similar distinction may already be traced in Iamblichus).

his ascent. Theurgic unification, by contrast, takes place by degrees. As we know already (ch. 3.3), Proclus' universe consists of two parallel systems that cooperate but are not fully reducible to each other: that of philosophical metaphysics, and that of divine powers unaccountable by rational means and revealed and handed down through the unique religious tradition of Hellenism. The meeting point of the two systems is the unitary top of each ontological level: it is here that the gods manifest their presence, acting as the unitary centre of this level (cf. ch. 5.1). As a result, the philosophical epistemological journey traced in chapter 4 needs at each step to be complemented by a parallel religious journey. We have seen above (pp. 135–6) that at the cosmic level the task of the gods is to bring the cosmos to perfection by conferring on it their unique individual marks. Their role in the soul's ascent may be understood in similar terms: they are meant to bring to perfection each cognitive stage achieved, infusing it with their divine power.

The best testimony to this multilevel process is to be found in Hermias again, who recounts some of Syrianus' views on theurgy in connection with the four types of madness that Plato discusses in the *Phaedrus* (244b–245b, 265b). Syrianus explains that the madness Plato speaks about is inspiration (*enthousiasmos*) which illuminates the soul with divine light. There are different levels of inspiration, however, depending on the part of soul that the light falls upon: it may affect the one in soul, the soul's intellect, discursive thought or irrational parts (*In Phaedr.* 89.1–17). Poetic madness corresponds to the lowest of these illuminations, harmonizing discordant parts of the soul (89.20–2). The second place belongs to 'initiatory' (*telestikē*) madness, which illuminates the soul in its proper discursive essence, thereby helping it to bring its discursivity to perfection and transcend it: 'it actualizes the entire soul and makes it complete, so that even its intellectual part may be active' (89.24–5). Prophetic madness illuminates the soul's intellect, allowing it to get beyond itself and revert upon the one in soul (89.32–3). 'Finally, erotic madness takes over the soul in its unified state and connects the one in soul to the gods and to intelligible beauty' (90.1–2).

It is important to stress that while all these types of madness bring about important effects inside the soul, they are certainly not confined to the sphere of internal theurgy, all of them having corresponding external effects as well (91.17–92.6). Poetic madness produces music, dance and poetry, introducing order and harmony into our external movements no less than into those within the soul. The art of initiations drives away all that is foreign and harmful, making our lives sound and healthy. Prophetic art helps to join the past and the future with the present, integrating our

lives externally just as it unifies them internally. ‘And erotic madness turns young people towards us and makes them fond of us, in this way educating them too and leading them from sensible beauty towards that of our soul; and from this point it sends them upward towards intelligible beauty, just as it internally connects the one in soul to the gods’ (92.2–6).

Unfortunately, it is far from clear how these four types of divine madness were induced and to what extent they involved external ritual performances. In an influential paper, Ann Sheppard has argued for a substantial distinction between the two lower and the two higher types of madness, regarding the latter as pure from ritual activity, and in effect little different from the kind of philosophically induced mystical contemplation we know from Plotinus.¹⁹ Sheppard has pointed out that in late Neoplatonism one of the standard designations of theurgy was *telestikē*,²⁰ which in Syrianus’ scheme was ranked below prophetic and erotic madness. It follows for Sheppard that engaging in ritual operations is only something done at a relatively low level of one’s progress, having a purificatory function at the most. The highest stages of the soul’s ascent are entirely spiritual.

Yet, it is questionable whether the account of Hermias bears this ‘dualistic’ interpretation.²¹ Interestingly for us, the exact status of *telestikē* already troubled young Proclus at the time of Syrianus’ *Phaedrus* lecture, and he started to inquire into the matter in the seminary discussion, as Hermias faithfully reports (92.10–13): “How is it possible,” Proclus said, “that we now make the art of initiations inferior to both prophetic and erotic madness, though otherwise we always rank it above all our other activities, claiming that it even surpasses human philosophy?” Syrianus replies that *telestikē* indeed ‘has a priority in the affairs of human life, not however also in the affairs of the soul taken by itself’ (92.13–15). As Syrianus goes on to explain, it is in the sphere of external ritual activity that *telestikē* ‘is ranked above all the other types of madness in that in a sense it also comprises all the others in itself – including theology, philosophy and indeed all erotics’ (92.18–20). What this amounts to, presumably, is that there are different senses in which ‘theurgy’ is talked about. In a specialized sense it designates a set of ritual practices that include especially ritual purifications (87.6; 96.29–30). In a more general sense it refers to all external ritual, which makes use of all four types of inspired madness, but in which the

¹⁹ Sheppard 1982. In this regard Sheppard builds on the earlier interpretations of Lewy (1978: 462–3) and Smith (1974: 89–91, 111–21).

²⁰ See e.g. Proclus, *In Crat.* 71, 32.29–30; 51, 19.12–15; *In Tim.* 1 140.26–7.

²¹ In what follows I draw heavily on the excellent re-examination of the subject by Helmig and Vargas (forthcoming), whose reading of Hermias diverges greatly from that of Sheppard.

initiatory aspect is seen as predominant. It is for this reason that further on (97.23–5) Syrianus reformulates the distinction by calling the first type of theurgy ‘purifications’ (*katharmoi*) and the second one ‘initiations’ (*teletai*), explaining that ‘the former only free us from all that is external, while the latter set us actually among the gods’.

A similar difference in usage may also be traced in Proclus. On the one hand, he claims that ‘the power of theurgy (*theourgikē dynamis*) is superior to all human self-control and knowledge, for it comprises all the benefits of prophecy, all the purificatory powers of the art of initiations, as well as all the effects of divine inspiration’.²² On the other hand, in the *Cratylus Commentary* (§ 113) he maintains that theurgy only reaches up to the boundary that joins the intelligible gods (i.e. those from the level of Being) to the intelligible-intellective ones (i.e. those from the level of Life), for it is only up to this point that the gods are nameable. In this case, apparently, Proclus follows Syrianus and uses the word ‘theurgy’ in the narrow sense of a technique that taken by itself only helps to unify the soul at the level of its discursivity and join it to intellect, but not to achieve the highest types of unification.

In any case, the distinction hardly implies that ‘theurgy’ in the more general sense would designate a spiritual technique free from ritual, as Sheppard believes. Rather, it designates external ritual in a more comprehensive sense that makes all the types of madness interconnected in harmony. True, there still are the prophetic and the erotic types of madness, whose *internal* effects stand above those of *telestikē*, and which – as we shall see in a moment – seem to have been induced by special contemplative techniques. Nevertheless, there is no reason to see these as sharply distinguished from external ritual operations. A more appropriate image, perhaps, is that of a final stage of the mysteries, when all ritual activities stop and the initiate contemplates the ultimate revelation in motionless amazement, transcending the previous stages of the rite and yet leaning firmly upon them.

Despite the interpenetration of internal and external effects of all kinds of divine madness, it still seems useful to distinguish between unifying techniques mainly designed to take effect inside the soul and those directed outwardly. As for the former, the lowest kind of them corresponded to ‘poetic madness’, and we may guess that it might have involved systematic exegesis of mythical symbols (more on this below, ch. 6). The second one was ‘theurgy’ in the narrow sense of the term, which helped to unify the

²² Proclus, *PT* 1 25, 113,7–10. The reference is to the four types of madness in the *Phaedrus* again.

soul with its own intellect. Its initiatory nature makes it likely to involve a remarkable secret initiation ritual of the theurgists in which the initiate is buried in the ground except for his head, and which Proclus connects with the ‘peeping out’ of souls into the supracelestial intelligible sphere from the *Phaedrus* (247b–e).²³ Moreover, as we have just seen, the power of this kind of theurgy only reaches those gods who are nameable, which implies the use of divine names. It is to this level, therefore, that van den Berg assigns the singing of Proclus’ hymns, which typically invoke precisely the gods standing at the interface between Soul and Intellect.²⁴ Last but not least, we may perhaps assign to this level of theurgy the magical work with numbers, which according to Proclus ‘in the most sublime theurgic operations’ is capable of ‘bringing about grand effects that cannot be expressed in words’.²⁵

Far more difficult to assess are the techniques used to induce the highest types of unity: ‘prophetic madness’, which allows the soul’s intellect to revert upon the one in soul, and ‘erotic madness’, which connects the one in soul to the gods. Their details are hard for us to figure out, no doubt due to the fact that, as John Dillon remarks (2002: 291), it is ‘an aspect of the Platonist experience that can only be performed, not talked about’. A couple of hints, though, may be found in the preserved excerpts from Proclus’ *Chaldean Philosophy*. From fragment 2 we learn (207.17–208.6):

The hymn to the Father does not consist in articulated words nor in the performance of ritual acts (*ergōn kataskēuē*). Since the Father is the only one who is imperishable, he receives no perishable hymn. Let us not hope, therefore, that by a vain whirl of words or by ritual acts adorned by imaginative artfulness we may persuade the one who is the master of true utterances. God is fond of beautiful shapes without embellishment. Let us then dedicate to him a hymn of such sort. Let us leave behind the fluid essence. Let us ascend to the true aim, which is an assimilation to him. Let us recognize our Lord, let us feel love for the Father. Let us hearken to his call. Let us run towards warmth, escaping from the cold. Let us become fire. Let us pass through fire. The road to ascent is open. The Father guides us, having opened the paths of fire.

In this passage Proclus makes it clear that the highest type of unity is achieved incorporeally, without the help of words or external ritual acts. How was it induced, then? The answer to this question may only be guessed hypothetically. An interesting attempt at imaginative reconstruction has

²³ Proclus, *PT* IV 9, 30.17–19; more on this rite see van Liefferinge 1999: 265–8.

²⁴ van den Berg 2001: 79, 86–III. For gods in Proclus’ hymns see *ibid.*, 40–3.

²⁵ Proclus, *PT* IV 34, 101.1–4. On the theurgy of numbers in Iamblichus see the detailed, though inevitably speculative account of Shaw 1995: 189–215, as well as Rappe 2000: 131–42.

been offered by John Dillon, who sees theurgy as a distant relative of transcendental meditation techniques known from Eastern religions. As he has noticed, a crucial part seems to have been played by light, which was visualized as illuminating the soul from all about, filling it with fire and uniting it to the light of the gods.²⁶ We may thus expect the basic procedure to revolve around ‘a series of spiritual exercises based on the contemplation of images of light’ (Dillon 2002: 291), possibly accompanied by appropriate bodily techniques, such as a special style of breathing (for which, however, we have no Neoplatonic evidence).

If this is correct, we might of course rightly ask to what extent Proclus’ mental ‘theurgy’ actually differs from the spiritual exercises used by Plotinus. After all, in his descriptions of the ultimate ascent to the One Plotinus frequently speaks of the soul being illuminated by light and becoming entirely filled with it.²⁷ Does not Proclus just pursue Plotinian mystical contemplation, which is only referred to as ‘theurgy’ in a metaphorical sense?²⁸ While the similarity of highest theurgic techniques with Plotinian mysticism seems likely indeed, there are signs that do suggest some differences. We have seen (ch. 2.1.2) that whereas Plotinus is ready to verbalize his spiritual ascent to a high degree, Proclus does not make the slightest effort to induce contemplation of the One by means of philosophical reflections, insisting instead on its ineffability. A similar approach would be hard to account for if his methods for reaching the One were in fact identical to those of Plotinus. It suggests, rather, that though Proclus’ ascent was also accomplished by a kind of internal contemplation, in details his methods differed from those of Plotinus, being more ritualized and resembling actions more than thoughts.

It is useful to remark in this connection that contemporary anthropologists of religion do not usually define ritual by what one does but by the particular stance one takes vis-à-vis one’s activity, regardless of whether this activity takes place inside or outside oneself. For Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 89), for instance, a crucial feature of ritual activity is that the ‘celebrants’ acts appear, even to themselves, as “external”, as not of their own making. Such acts are perceived as discrete, named entities, with their own characters and histories, and it is for this reason that we call such acts elemental or archetypal’. In a similar vein, Bloch (1974) defines ritual speech as one that is highly formalized in that it tends to repeat set formulas and arrange statements into fixed sequences which are perceived

²⁶ Proclus, *Chal. phil.* 1, 206.6–11; *In Tim.* 1 211.27–8; cf. Iamblichus, *De myst.* 111 6.

²⁷ See e.g. *Enn.* v 3, 17, 28–38; v 5, 7; v1 7, 36.15–27. ²⁸ Thus Sheppard 1982: 221, 224.

by the speaker as traditionally given and not to be disputed. According to Bloch, this entirely changes the function of speech: it no longer reports facts but acquires greater performative and evocative power, its role being to change the way we perceive things.

Once we look at Neoplatonism from this point of view, it becomes obvious that even the spiritual exercises of Plotinus were ritualized in one regard, namely in that they had a strong performative dimension. The vivid images and metaphors used by him apparently did not just act as illustrations of mental concepts, but served rather to attune the mind to nondiscursive modes of grasping reality.²⁹ In this respect, Plotinus' techniques of ascent were probably related to the highest types of theurgy. Still, considering the different philosophical style of eastern Neoplatonists, we might expect Proclean theurgic visualizations to lay much greater stress on the 'archetypal' aspect in the sense of the above-quoted passage from Humphrey and Laidlaw. On the lower levels of theurgy, this consisted in systematic work with symbolic acts and substances according to fixed ritual rules. It is likely, therefore, that the even higher luminous visualizations would have been much more formalized. Whereas Plotinus seems to have been creating his performative visions ever anew, those used by Proclus would presumably be perceived as pre-existing and traditionally given 'archetypal' tokens (*synthēmata*).³⁰ The light that was the object of the theurgist's contemplation would probably assume a more specific form than it did in the meditations of Plotinus, conforming to some standard symbolic patterns.³¹ Last but not least, in view of Proclus' henadology we may presume that the unique individuality of each of the gods would also have played its part, each vision being coloured according to the attributes of the particular divinity worshipped (cf. Butler 2007). Indeed, since the inborn *synthēma* that each soul is supposed to present to the Father is unique for each individual, depending on the divine chain to which he or she belongs (cf. above, p. 134), it is probable that the exact visions used would differ from person to person.

Be this as it may, it is useful to stress again (see above, pp. 175–6), that each type of madness, including the highest, produces both internal and

²⁹ See Rappe 2000: 91–114. For similar 'ritualization of language' in the Greek *Hermetica* cf. Chlup 2007.

³⁰ We know that even at the highest stage the soul of the theurgist was supposed to 'set forth ineffable *synthēmata* of the Father and present them to the Father – those symbols which the Father implanted in it on its first entry into existence' (*Chal. phil.* 1, 206.21–2).

³¹ In *In Crat.* 71, 31.6–8 Proclus speaks of 'figures of light' (*hoi tou phōtos charaktēres*) as the most powerful and ineffable divine *synthēmata* whose efficacy transcends all intellectual insight. For an illustration of the different forms luminous visions may take see *Chald. Or.* fr. 146.

external effects. A good illustration of this has been provided by van den Berg's analysis of Proclus' hymns. While these express the hope that they would help to induce intellectual illumination, they also contain practical requests for health (*H.* I 42; VI 5–6; VII 43–6) and prosperity (*H.* VI 4–5; VII 48), which fall in the field of external theurgy (van den Berg 2001: 111). The hymns are related to the lower stages of the soul's ascent, being mainly addressed to various divinities standing at the interface between Soul and Intellect, and it is likely that in their case the external effects are meant to have a protective function: they take care that humans are in harmony with the cosmos and will not be distracted by bodily problems in the course of their upward journey. We may perhaps guess that at the highest level the relation will be just the reverse, external effects functioning not as a support but rather as manifestations of the theurgist's power and of his willingness to share his perfection with other inhabitants of the cosmos.³² It seems to have been in this spirit that Proclus generously performed theurgic miracles on behalf of his friends and fellow-citizens.

From the perspective of Proclus' general worldview it is significant that the higher levels of theurgy always presuppose the lower ones, building upon their achievements and pushing them another step further. In this regard, Proclus' ascent to the One differs significantly from that of Plotinus in that it never loses touch with the lower levels, remaining firmly rooted in them. While the Plotinian sage on his upward journey experiences divine power as coming down on him, Proclus experiences it not just as descending but at the same time as gradually rising up from below. He first establishes contact with the gods on the corporeal level, proceeding slowly step by step to the intelligible gods and beyond. The higher steps of progress lean on the lower ones, growing out of them, so to speak. If Plotinus' ascent resembles climbing a rope that is hung from above in the open space, freely fluttering at its lower end, Proclus' ascent is rather like climbing a rock, which combines the upward pull of one's rope with the ability to use the rock as a firm earth-based support to lean upon with one's feet.

The need to base all the higher steps on the lower ones is well reflected by Iamblichus, who stresses that ascent to higher divinities is only possible through the lower ones:

Prior to the appearance of the gods, then, all the powers subordinated to them are set in motion, and, when the former are about to proceed to earth, the latter

³² For this crucial 'providential' aspect of Proclus' ethics see below, pp. 243–7. In connection with theurgy it is analysed by Helmig and Vargas (*forthcoming*).

go ahead of them and escort them. For this reason, anyone who fails to allot to all powers their due and welcome each of them with suitable honour will end up unsatisfied and deprived of any share in communication with the gods. He, on the other hand, who has propitiated all, and rendered to each power the gifts that are pleasing to it and that resemble it to the greatest extent, remains always on safe ground and never stumbles, for he has nobly performed, in perfection and integrity, the reception of the whole divine choir.³³

Iamblichus does allow for a small group of hieratic virtuosos who – mostly towards the end of their life³⁴ – are altogether freed from matter and perform incorporeal ritual only. Not even these, however, may do without firm lower-level foundations; rather than ignoring all the subordinate powers they are on such good terms with them that they no longer need to worship them one by one: ‘The highest type of the hieratic art ascends to the One, which is supreme master of the whole multiplicity of divinities, and worships in it all the other essences and principles together.’³⁵ If the perfect sage has no need of corporeal ritual, this does not imply that he would neglect the lower powers, but rather that he has already achieved sufficient unification with them. The basic idea goes back to Iamblichus’ conception of the soul: since the soul’s task is to mediate between the intelligible and the corporeal (see above, p. 29), it should never rise above the cosmos altogether (see *De myst.* v 20).

Gregory Shaw draws an interesting contrast between the approach of Iamblichus and that of Porphyry, who categorically refused to sacrifice to the lower daemons, regarding their worship as appropriate for common folks only (see below, p. 262). Significantly, though Porphyry did achieve union with the One once in his life, on other occasions he suffered from depression and even thought of suicide.³⁶ Shaw (1995: 155–6) reads this from a theurgic perspective as the situation of an immature intellectual who attempts to ascend to the One without first coming to terms with the lower powers which eventually caused his depression. In climbing up to the higher levels, Porphyry lacked a proper ‘basis’ that his intellectual activity might lean upon.

No such thing may certainly be said of Proclus. When Marinus in the *Life of Proclus* tries to present him as a perfect sage, he depicts the hierarchy of his virtues in the step-like manner just described.³⁷ He starts from his

³³ Iamblichus, *De myst.* v 21, 228.16–229.7; cf. v 14, 217.4–11, and in general Shaw 1995, ch. 14.

³⁴ Iamblichus, *De myst.* v 22, 230.18–231.1; cf. v 15. ³⁵ Iamblichus, *De myst.* v 22, 230.15–17.

³⁶ Porphyry, *Vita Plot.* 11.11–19; 23.12–14.

³⁷ For the details of the late Neoplatonic hierarchy of virtues see below, ch. 8.1.

inborn ‘natural’ virtues, praising his keenness of sense, strength of body, physical beauty, good health, as well as his splendid psychic and mental dispositions (§ 3–5). He recounts his ‘civic’ virtues and social engagement (§ 14–17), tells of his ‘purificatory’ virtues, which allowed him to separate the soul from corporeal temptations (§ 18–21), and passes at last to his ‘contemplative’ virtues, which were manifested in his untiring intellectual activity (§ 22–5). All of these correspond to the different steps of the soul’s ascent. Marinus’ account culminates with ‘theurgic’ virtues (§ 26–33). Yet, while these are introduced as the highest type of Proclus’ perfections, their specification makes it clear that they do not just represent the last final step but have in fact been present all along from the beginning. Most theurgic operations mentioned by Marinus concern the bodily level: healing friends (§ 17, 29), causing rain, diverting an earthquake (§ 28). Theurgic rituals were no less important in the purificatory stage, e.g. in the form of ritual fasts and sea baths, as well as other lustratory and apotropaic ceremonies (§ 18–19). The contemplative stage was in turn accompanied by the composition and singing of hymns (§ 24).

Far from representing merely the ultimate goal of philosophical life, theurgy thus functioned as an indispensable complement of one’s entire journey. It is probably for this reason that, unlike Porphyry, Marinus never attempts to count the occasions on which his master achieved union with the One. While some interpreters took this as a sign of Proclus’ weak mystical abilities,³⁸ it is more likely that it testifies to a different conception of mysticism. John Bussanich speaks appropriately of “progressive unification” where the soul gradually intensifies and consolidates its higher states of awareness as it comes closer and closer to the One.³⁹ In effect, Proclean ‘mysticism’ was much more routine and predictable than the breathtaking mystical trips of Plotinus. The difference seems to correspond nicely to the contrast of the philosophical styles of Plotinus and the eastern Neoplatonists (see above, ch. 1.2): where the former took the path of unique personal intellectual and religious experience, the latter opted for a ‘technical’ and systematically standardized approach to both philosophy and religion. The results may have been less impressive at first sight, but they were no less

³⁸ E.g. Rist 1967: 192–3, and 1964a: 220 (‘where Plotinus is a mystic, Proclus seems to know only a theory of Mysticism’); Dodds 1933: xxiii; Cleary 2000: 87.

³⁹ Bussanich 2000: 306. He is convinced that this is also true of Plotinus, and Porphyry’s crude counting of his master’s unifications should not be taken at face value, for ‘in living spiritual traditions like Neoplatonism ecstatic states and visionary experiences are not necessary conditions for living the mystical life’ (ibid.). This is no doubt true, but even so there does seem to be a significant difference between the approach of Plotinus and the eastern Neoplatonists.

substantial, and had besides the crucial advantage of being repeatable and easy to transmit from teacher to pupil. It is for this reason that the theurgic tradition flourished for almost three hundred years, representing the last stronghold of paganism amidst the increasingly Christian world of late antiquity.

CHAPTER 6

Inspired poetry and its symbols

While most aspects of Proclus' philosophy have failed in modern times to arouse substantial interest beyond a fairly small circle of specialists in Neoplatonism, there is one exceptional area of his thought that has fared slightly better: Proclus' studies of poetry and its symbols. In recent decades, Proclus has found a place in a canon of ancient literary critics, and the number of academic studies on this topic has been growing constantly.¹ Proclus' approach to poetry was revolutionary in many regards, and has even exercised a significant impact in later times: it seems to have influenced the Romantics, whose conception shows some interesting affinities with Proclus.² At the same time it must be stressed that for Proclus the study of poetry is not just an academic exercise in literary criticism. As I shall argue, it should rather be seen as a part of his larger theurgic project. Mythic and poetic symbols are not studied by him out of intellectual curiosity, but for the initiatory effect they have on one's soul. The present chapter should thus be read in close association with the previous one, offering a unique opportunity to catch a glimpse of what one of Proclus' lower methods of unification might have looked like.

6.1 IN DEFENCE OF MYTHICAL OBSCENITY

Ancient Platonists had always been cautious in their approach to poetry, regarding the poets as rather dangerous competitors in the quest for knowledge and the right interpretation of reality. Proclus shared the Platonic distrust of poetry himself to a large extent, but he was ready to make

¹ See Dillon 1975; Coulter 1976; Sheppard 1980; Lambertson 1986; Kuisma 1996 and 2009; Rangos 1999; van Liefferinge 1999; van den Berg 2001; Struck 2004.

² See Struck 2004: 272–6. Proclus was studied by Hegel, Schelling and Creuzer in Germany (see Beierwaltes 1972: 104–5, 154–87), and independently also by Coleridge in England, who could read Proclus' treatises in Thomas Taylor's translations (including *On the Objections of Plato against Homer and the Art of Poetry*).

exceptions. His more lenient approach was due to his fundamental interest in traditional religion. Late Neoplatonists were in a special historical position in that they became the last guardians of old Hellenic religion, assuming the role of priests and theologians besides that of philosophers (see ch. 1.2.3). At the same time, they saw the endangered Hellenic cultural tradition as something to be treasured and admired, and had a corresponding tendency to exalt some of its most important accomplishments into sacred objects of reverence. As we have seen (ch. 1.3.2), this led to a new approach to ancient texts, of which some were now turned into a sacred canon. Plato and Homer were among the cornerstones of this canon, and they were both taken as divine authorities not to be challenged.

Needless to say a veneration of Homer involved a Platonist philosopher in great difficulties. Had not Plato shown forcefully in the *Republic* that the Homeric poems were dangerous reading for philosophers? Proclus was aware of this problem and he decided to deal with it in detail in a separate treatise, *On the Objections of Plato against Homer and the Art of Poetry*, which we now possess as the sixth essay of his *Republic Commentary*. His task was to show that if read correctly, Homer's poems are in fact in perfect harmony with Plato's philosophy. Plato's criticism is to be understood in the educational context of the ideal city: he does not wish to condemn Homer altogether but merely to claim that his works are not good for educating the young in his city. In themselves, these points were hardly original, having behind them a long tradition of allegorical interpretations of Homeric poems, whose aim was precisely to reconcile poetry with philosophy.³ Nevertheless, Proclus differed from most of his predecessors in that he attempted a thorough methodological justification of this approach, providing a detailed examination of poetry and of its relation to philosophy. The resulting analysis is one of the most interesting of its kind preserved from antiquity, and has recently justly caught the attention of a number of modern scholars.

To defend Homer from Plato's attacks, Proclus first of all needs to introduce a clear distinction between Homeric poems and a lower kind of poetry. In effect, he divides poetry into three types: inspired, didactic and mimetic. Mimetic poetry is the one that Plato criticizes in book 10 of the *Republic*. Its principle is the imitation of the material world and the lower parts of soul immersed in it. In its better forms (called 'eicastic' by Proclus – *In Remp.* I 179.29–31) the poet imitates the world faithfully, providing neutral descriptive images of it, such as we find in a number

³ See Lamberton 1986.

of passages of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Most poets, however, in imitating things tend to distort them, e.g. 'by blowing up small emotions out of all proportion in order to amaze the audience' (179.20–1). A typical example are the tragedies, which do nothing but 'incite the imagination, trying to enchant the souls of the masses'.⁴ It is only this lowest kind of mimetic poetry (called 'fantastic' – 179.31–2) that is duly condemned by Proclus.

Didactic poetry is that written by intellectuals. It 'provides knowledge of the essence of things and is fond of contemplating beautiful moral deeds and words . . . being full of admonitions and good advice, and brimming over with intellectual self-control' (179.6–12). As examples Proclus gives the lyric poets Theognis and Tyrtaeus (referring to Plato's *Laws* 629e–630c), who in their poems exhort to virtue and whose elegies have a strong pedagogical dimension. It is likely that he would also include in this category the philosophical poetry of Parmenides or Empedocles.

For our subject, the most interesting type of poetry is the highest one. In characterizing it Proclus follows the famous praise of madness in Plato's *Phaedrus*. According to Plato, erotic madness raises humans to a divine level of consciousness they would never attain by reason only. Inspired poetry is a typical instance, for 'whoever comes to the doors of poetry without the madness of the Muses, convinced that he will be a good poet solely by skill, will fail, and the poetry of the sane man is eclipsed by that of the inspired madmen' (*Phdr.* 245a). Proclus fully agrees, regarding Homer as the chief representative of this kind of poetry.

The important thing is that these three types of poetry correspond to three states of the soul. The lowest one goes hand in hand with life governed by the lower psychic faculties: opinion, imagination and sense-perception. The 'eicastic' subtype works at the level of correct opinions, the 'fantastic' one accords with the life of pleasure dominated by irrationality (178.2–5; 179.15–32). The intermediate kind is based on rational understanding or intellectual insight, having intellect as its guiding principle (177.23–178.2). The highest type belongs to the one in soul (177.15–23):

The best and most perfect type of poetry is that in which the soul is linked to the gods and lives a life that is most akin and unified to them by means of its maximal similarity. In this type of life the soul belongs not to herself but to the gods. She has surpassed her own intellect and has awakened the ineffable token (*synthēma*) of the unitary subsistence of the gods, having joined like to like – her own light to the light *there* and the most one-like part of her essence and life to the One that is beyond all life and essence.

⁴ Proclus, *In Remp.* 1 195.22–3; cf. in greater detail *In Remp.* 1 49.13 ff.

In this state of consciousness the soul is able to overcome the duality of knowing subject and known object, being filled with ‘divine madness which is more powerful than self-control’ – a phrase Proclus borrows from Plato’s *Phaedrus*.⁵ Inspired poetry is a reflection of this divine state, capturing reality in ways that transcend intellectual insights, and producing all the myths that traditional Hellenic religion leaned upon.

How do inspired poets manage to convey their ineffable insights and express them in words? The answer to this question is connected with possibly the most fascinating aspect of Proclus’ literary theory: his conception of poetic symbols. As Proclus explains, it is crucial to distinguish between an ‘image’ (*eikōn*) and a ‘symbol’.⁶ Images are based on the principle of *mimēsis*: their task is to *imitate* their models. Symbols, on the other hand, are related to their referents by means of *analogy*. The difference can perhaps best be explained by considering the field of myth-making (which is itself a form of poetry) and comparing the myths of Homer to those of Plato. When Plato tells mythical stories, he takes care that they comply with the criteria of correct poetry outlined in books 2–3 of the *Republic*. He only uses images that resemble the gods in their perfection, avoiding all those that might allow the audience to form a misguided idea of them. In consequence, his myths are well adapted for educational purposes, being morally harmless. As Proclus puts it (84.2–5), ‘myths that contribute to the education of the young use more probable motifs, are more acceptable in the external form of their mythical figures, and are altogether free from all verbal expressions that would contradict the true nature of the gods’.

While pedagogical myths try to imitate the gods, inspired myths attempt no such thing. Instead of *images*, which relate to their referents in a mimetic way, they use *symbols*, which do not need to resemble the referents at all, being related to them by *analogy* (86.15–18):

For whenever the authors of myths work with fantasies of this kind, they indicate some things by means of others, but not as using images in order to signify their models; rather, they use symbols that are in sympathy with their referents by means of analogy.⁷

⁵ Proclus, *In Remp.* 1 84.16–7; 178.24–5; Plato, *Phdr.* 244d.

⁶ See in detail Dillon 1975; Coulter 1976: 32–72; van den Berg 2001: 119–36.

⁷ Sheppard (1980: 197) construes this sentence differently, arguing unconvincingly that analogy pertains to images, and not to symbols: ‘in *analogia* like is shown through like while in symbolism opposite may be shown through opposite’. Yet, in *In Remp.* 1 84.7 inspired myths are clearly said to be linked to the gods ‘by mere analogy’; cf. *In Crat.* 56 and *In Remp.* 11 151.6–21. It is true that analogy and mimetic likeness are sometimes connected (e.g. *In Remp.* 1 275.10–12); in Proclus, however, the meaning of words is always context-bound and it cannot be expected that such general terms as ‘likeness’ or ‘analogy’ would always be used in exactly the same sense.

The reason why Proclus needs to introduce this distinction is the frequent obscene or otherwise shocking content of myths. If myths were to be seen as imitations of the gods, all such elements would be out of place. Yet, this would mean that a number of myths told by Homer or Hesiod are false – a conclusion that Proclus cannot accept. The only way out of the dilemma is to postulate *analogy* as a more complex relation between symbols and their referents, one that does not primarily work by likeness and is capable of linking the signifier with the signified in a looser and less conspicuous manner, the decoding of which requires considerable hermeneutic skill. It is precisely by being pronounced as non-mimetic that Homer's poems may be freed from the criticism launched at them by Plato (198.13–19):

For how could we label as mimetic the type of poetry that expounds the divine to us by means of symbols? For symbols are not imitations of the things they symbolize. For nothing can ever be an imitation of its own opposite: a shameful thing cannot imitate a noble one, and what is contrary to nature could never be the imitation of what is natural. But the symbolic mode is able to indicate the nature of things even through their extreme opposites.

Proclus does not wish to claim, of course, that symbols would necessarily have to be entirely opposed to their referents.⁸ No doubt there needs to exist some degree of likeness between both,⁹ but it is likeness in a more abstract and far less obvious sense than the one we see in mimetic representations. It is precisely this nontrivial likeness that Proclus calls 'analogy'.

Why 'symbols' do not need to resemble their referents can easily be understood if we consider the original meaning of the term.¹⁰ Originally, *symbolon* was an 'identification mark', typically a small object (e.g. a piece of wood or pottery) which any two contracting parties broke between them, each party keeping one piece as a proof of their identity to be presented at a later time. Naturally, the main thing to be examined on the presentation of such a *symbolon* was whether it *fits* the other half rather than to what extent it is *like* it. The non-mimetic relation became even more obvious

⁸ This is rightly emphasized by van den Berg 2001: 124–5, who unfortunately slides into the other extreme, concluding that likeness or unlikeness play no part whatsoever in the distinction between images and symbols, the latter being distinguished from the former solely by the fact that they are capable of uniting us with the gods (ibid., 134–5). As we shall see below, Proclus does actually see the unlikeness of some of the myths as their crucial quality, though he does not regard it as indispensable for all symbols in general.

⁹ See e.g. *In Parm.* 847.20–3; *In Remp.* 1 84.5–6; 177.19–21. The truth is that the mimetic idiom was so deeply rooted in Greek thought that Proclus is never able to leave it behind entirely and keeps on returning to it even in positively anti-mimetic passages (e.g. *In Remp.* 1 77.13–24). Cf. Halliwell 2002: 331–4.

¹⁰ See the excellent historical account in Struck 2004: 77–110.

when the word started to designate not just a concrete thing broken in two, but any agreed signal or password whatsoever. In this sense it was even used in mystery cults, giving the initiates access to extraordinary planes or reality inaccessible to the uninitiated.¹¹ It was undoubtedly this usage that the Neoplatonists were most influenced by in their treatments of symbols as secret passwords allowing mystical access to the gods.

There was another traditional meaning of the word *symbolon* that must have been inspiring for Proclus, that of an omen to be interpreted by divination.¹² Typically, omens were events that deviated from the usual course of events, causing surprise and inciting humans into a search for a hidden connection with another event in the social world. The same element of provocativeness was also an important connotation of symbols, which were seen as hiding a deeper meaning to be searched for. It was precisely due to their non-mimetic nature that symbols could be seen as particularly inciting: since their referents were not directly represented by them, they needed to be looked for. This aspect of symbolism is nicely captured by John Dillon (1975: 250), who gives the figure of Cinderella as an example: while a mimetic *image* of Cinderella would be her picture, a *symbol* of Cinderella is her slipper. The slipper does not resemble Cinderella in any way, but it is associated with her, and what is more important, by its 'suggestive incompleteness'¹³ it *provokes* the prince into searching for the girl it belongs to.

Homeric myths with their shameful stories about the gods had exactly the same effect on Proclus. By manifestly failing to represent the divine in a decent way, they incited the philosophers to look for deeper meanings behind them (85.16–86.4):

And it seems to me that this tragic, monstrous and unnatural element in poetic creations provokes the audience in various ways into searching for truth. It attracts us towards secret knowledge and does not allow us to rest satisfied with superficial conceptions on account of their apparent verisimilitude, but compels us to penetrate into the interior of myths and to explore the meaning that was hidden in myths by their authors. It forces us to survey what natures and powers they included into the meaning of myth, indicating them to posterity by means of these symbols. Myths of this kind, therefore, arouse in talented listeners a desire for their secret message, and through their apparent absurdity they stimulate them to investigate the truth located in the inner sanctuary, while preventing the uninitiated from accessing that which is not lawful for them to touch.

¹¹ Thus already Aristophanes, *Plutus* 278; *Aves* 1214. Cf. Struck 2004: 104–7.

¹² Thus e.g. Pindar, *Ol.* xii 7–8. Cf. Struck 2004: 90–6. In *In Remp.* ii 151.6–21 Proclus gives divinatory signs as a typical example of the signification by analogy which is typical of symbols.

¹³ A pregnant phrase used in this connection by Coulter 1976: 44; cf. Struck 2004: 79.

Artificial as this explanation may seem at first sight, its implications for the philosophical evaluations of myths are groundbreaking.¹⁴ For hundreds of years Greek philosophers tried to ethicize the gods and turn them into paragons of virtue. Luckily, traditional religion proved strong enough to be immune to these attempts and kept its obscene myths alive despite the criticism. Even the intellectuals could not help being fascinated by these stories, as we can see from their constant attempts to read them allegorically. Proclus' approach is in many respects similar, but unlike most of his predecessors he tries to reflect on the methodological principles of the whole allegorical enterprise, reaching the conclusion that the shameful-ness of myths is deliberate, after all, being a way to signify transcendence (77.22–8):

Authors of myths imitate the transcendent power of the models by those things which are entirely opposite to the gods and are furthest removed from them: that which surpasses nature is represented by things contrary to nature; that which is more divine than all reason, by the irrational; that which transcends in simplicity all fragmented beauty, by things that appear as ugly and obscene. It seems likely, therefore, that they do all this in order to make us recall the transcending superiority of the gods.

In other words, the frequent monstrosity of mythology follows naturally from the fact that what the myths try to express is fundamentally different from how things function in this world. To draw our attention to this essential otherness of the divine, myths have recourse to various drastic or shameful images which often go well beyond anything humans would ever be capable of. In this way we are reminded that the story is not to be read literally, that the monstrous incidents serve to express the incomparable power of the gods, their transcendence.

As a hermeneutic strategy, Proclus' reading of obscene myths is stimulating and has some interesting parallels in contemporary religious studies.¹⁵ It is important to point out, though, that for Proclus it is much more than an exegetical device allowing him to defend traditional myths and reconcile them with Plato. For him, myths are not just interesting stories to be analysed with detachment in one's armchair. They are symbols that work,

¹⁴ Proclus is not its inventor, though; cf. already Julian, *In Matrem deorum* 170a–b.

¹⁵ A number of contemporary scholars of religion define the gods by their essentially antistructural position. A typical example is Redfield (1990), who sees the gods as always standing at the boundaries of the human worlds so that they may be able 'to secure the moral order without themselves being moral beings' (133). Their function is to introduce flexibility into the rigid system of classifications that every culture is bound to create, and to mediate the contradictions that every cultural world entails. It is for this reason that myths and rituals play with chaos and reversals of normal relations so often (cf. Chlup 2008). From this perspective Proclus' position makes perfect sense.

having the same kind of performative power as the symbols of theurgy. It is not by chance that Proclus uses the same term (*symbolon/synthēma*) in both contexts, and though he rarely discusses these two phenomena together, a close reading of the *Republic Commentary* reveals that he indeed sees them as related.¹⁶ Like the *synthēmata* manipulated by theurgists, poetic symbols transport us into a state of mind that cannot be achieved by ordinary means: poetry ‘installs the soul in the causes of all things, and by some sort of ineffable unification it makes the one that is being filled identical to the one that is filling. . . setting up a unifying mixture and a single divine bond between the participant and the participated’ (178.12–20).

It is not surprising that rituals frequently make use of myths too, combining all types of symbols to achieve their effect. Myths have an influence similar to that of ‘sacred doctrines’ revealed during the mysteries: on the one hand they induce in us ‘an ineffable sympathy required for our participation in the gods’ (84.1–2), on the other they make the gods themselves willing to open up to us, giving us a share of their divinity (83.18–22): ‘For the gods rejoice whenever they hear these symbols, and they readily listen to those who evoke them, revealing their own specific individuality through these tokens (*synthēmata*), since they regard them as especially familiar and appropriate to themselves.’

A good example of this are Proclus’ hymns. As van den Berg has shown (2001: 98–101), the mythological references that Proclus fills his hymns with have precisely a theurgic function. Let us consider the first fifteen verses of his hymn to Athena (in van den Berg’s translation):

Hearken to me, child of aegis-bearing Zeus, sprung forth
 from the paternal source and from the top of your series,
 male-spirited, shield-bearing, of great strength, from a mighty sire,
 Pallas, Tritogeneia, lance-brandisher, golden-helmeted,
 hearken; accept this hymn, mistress, with a kind spirit,
 do not just leave my words at the mercy of the winds,
 you, who opened the gates of wisdom trodden by the gods,
 and overcame the tribe of the earthly Giants which fought the gods;
 you, who guarded the unconquerable girdle of your virginity
 by fleeing the desire of the amorous Hephaestus;
 you, who saved the heart, as yet unchopped,
 of lord Bacchus in the vault of heaven, when he was once divided up
 by the hands of the Titans, and brought it to his father,
 in order that, through the ineffable wishes of his begetter,
 a new Dionysus would grow again from Semele around the cosmos.

¹⁶ See esp. *In Remp.* 1 83.12–84.2; 1 78.18–79.2. Cf. Sheppard 1980: 145–61, Struck 2004: 243–51, and the excellent analysis of van den Berg 2001: 93–101.

As we can see, the hymn is brimming with mythological allusions: it refers to the myth of Athena's birth from Zeus's head, her victory over the Giants, her warding off the amorous attack of Hephaestus, as well as her saving the heart of Dionysus after he was torn by the Titans. In what follows, Proclus goes on to recount Athena's victory over Poseidon in their dispute over the patronage of Athens, and after mentioning all these stories, he adds: 'give my soul holy light from your sacred myths' (v. 33). The verse makes it clear that the mythical incidents were not just meant to please the goddess but had a theurgic function, being able to evoke Athena's divine presence in the soul of the worshipper.

Judging from the power that Proclus ascribes to myths in ritual contexts, we may surmise that even in his allegorical exegesis there will be more at issue than just getting the meaning right – that myths worked with the Neoplatonic interpreter no less than he worked with them. To explore this conjecture, we will have to take a closer look at the role inspired poetry played in Proclus' programme of philosophical education.

6.2 PHILOSOPHY AS SYMBOLIC EXEGESIS

We have seen that Proclus regards inspired poetry as capturing reality in a higher and more divine manner than philosophy is ever capable of. Does this mean that for Proclus poetry is superior to philosophy? The answer to this question cannot take a simple yes or no form, requiring a more subtle examination of Proclus' position. Its outcome will be important, for it will throw some light on the relation between philosophy and religion in Proclus' thought in general.

The best starting point is the sixteenth essay of the *Republic Commentary*, in which Proclus comments on the Myth of Er from book 10 of the *Republic*. When dealing with the souls' choice of lives, Proclus has to explain a passage in which Plato depicts the soul of Orpheus as selecting the life of a swan (*Resp.* 620a). In the eyes of Proclus, Orpheus is a divine authority comparable to Homer, and his downgrade to the level of an irrational animal thus appears as undignified. To save the day, Proclus explains that Plato's reference to Orpheus is not to be taken literally, but merely as signifying one of the possible 'types of life', namely the life of an inspired poet. The crucial thing is that even as venerable a kind of life as this one may actually prove harmful for the soul, if she fails to combine it with philosophy (*In Remp.* II 316.12–25):

For even when some art seems to be of divine origin, without the help of philosophy it cannot save the soul. For it is only philosophy that is capable of purifying man's life from affections, while a life in the service of the Muses or Eros, or any other

life whatsoever, can easily partake of affections, and may thus bring the soul into irrationality. As a proof we may adduce that no irrational living creature is capable of philosophical thought, while musical gift can also be seen in animals, of whom some pride themselves on their song much more than humans. For even irrational creatures use sense-perception, and musical and erotic art works precisely with the most sublime of our senses. But philosophy has always been critical of all kinds of sense-perception, showing and testifying that we neither hear nor see anything precise, and persuading us that we should take reason and intellect as our sole leader. Naturally, therefore, it is only philosophy that is able to protect us from roads leading to irrationality.

Clearly, Proclus' approach here has a lot in common with that of Plato, who is often critical of divine inspiration, despite the respect he pays to it in the *Phaedrus*. As he puts it in the *Apology* (22c), though the poets 'say many fine things, they have no knowledge of anything they say'.¹⁷ While recognizing that inspiration provides access to something essential, Plato insists that it only proves its worth when we are able to give an account of it. The ambivalence of inspiration seems to stem precisely from the fact that it is a type of erotic madness. As the *Phaedrus* myth shows all too clearly, Eros is a double-faced power. He drives us towards beauty, but it depends on the steering ability of our reason whether his passionate urge is managed correctly. In himself Eros only presents a fundamental demand we are faced with, but he does not guarantee the right reaction; it is the task of philosophy to do that. Similarly, divine inspiration is only valuable when combined with philosophy. It is symptomatic that in the classification of lives in the *Phaedrus* (248d–e) the poet is awarded a deplorable sixth place, the first one being reserved for the philosopher.

Proclus would apparently agree with this judgment, but he draws different consequences from it. Plato did not trust poets and was convinced that in their hands inspiration might easily be misused; instead, their role was to be taken over by philosophers, who are able to communicate with the Muses in their own way. Plato himself tried to show the way, combining in his treatises the approach of the philosopher with that of an artist. Proclus is no longer so self-confident. Living in the last days of Hellenic culture, he respected its ancient religious heritage and did not feel entitled to replace it by inspired insights of his own. Where Plato worked as a radical cultural reformer, Proclus behaved as a responsible conservative guardian of the old world. Rather than rejecting traditional myths and inventing new ones, he saw his task in looking for ways to make the old myths continue to work in the new situation. To claim his own inspiration as a ground for

¹⁷ See also *Meno* 99c–d, and the entire dialogue *Ion*. Cf. Asmis 1992; Partee 1971.

overturning the symbols of old would now doubt have seemed to him as hubris.

Despite this difference, Proclus remains enough of a Platonist to wish to keep the poets under his philosophical supervision. Not that he would want to censor their poems as Plato did. His approach is rather to respect the inspired images in all of their occasional monstrosity, but turn them from amusing public stories into esoteric symbols to be manipulated with care. It is from this perspective that he defends Homer against Plato's criticism: in his view, Plato did not mean to reject Homer completely, but merely to refuse him a part in his system of education. Proclus finds a proof in the *Republic* 378a, where Socrates claims that obscene myths 'should be listened to as a holy secret by as few people as possible who would first have to sacrifice not a pig, but some huge and unprocurable victim'. The sacrifice of a pig refers to the Eleusinian Mysteries, and Proclus accordingly sees the role of myths as analogous to that of sacred visions that the initiates were allowed to see during the rites after a period of preparation.¹⁸ In his eyes, the reading of Homer was equal to a mystic climax to be reached by the student only after a long period of preliminary philosophical training. His poems were not pedagogical but 'initiatory' (*In Remp.* 1 81.14), and their perusal was only suitable for 'those who have been led correctly through all the previous steps of education, so to speak, and who long to use the intellect of their soul as a kind of mystic organ and establish it in the study of myths of this type'.¹⁹ In this sense, philosophy corresponded to the Lesser Mysteries one had to go through in order to be prepared for the real initiation. Young people unformed by philosophy should ideally be prevented from any contact with Homeric poems whatsoever.

It might come as a surprise that the most widely read of all the Greek poems, which had long been used as a school text, was to become in the fifth century AD an esoteric text to be studied by a small circle of intellectuals. In Proclus' defence it might be said that it is far from clear how much we should take him at his word here. In the *Republic Commentary* the view just summarized is presented strictly within the educational context of Plato's ideal city, which is not considered by Proclus as a realistic constitution at all, being interpreted by him as a 'cosmic' polity whose three classes of

¹⁸ Proclus, *In Remp.* 1 80.13–23. Plato himself probably implied no such thing, wishing simply to stress that if myths of this kind existed at all, they should be guarded against listeners even more than mystery secrets (thus e.g. Murray 2001: 139).

¹⁹ Proclus, *In Remp.* 1 79.15–18. Proclus elaborates this point in detail in 79.18–81.27.

citizens correspond to the gods, daemons and humans.²⁰ In a number of passages of the commentary Proclus makes it clear that the high standards presented in the *Republic* are not applicable to ordinary people who 'live a mortal life' in a 'lower city'.²¹

What all of this amounts to in regard to Proclus' own times and society is far from clear. According to Marinus (*Vita Procli* 38.15–20), Proclus did actually claim that if he had the power, of all the books of the ancients he would have only the *Chaldean Oracles* and the *Timaeus* survive, and all the rest he would 'conceal from the men of the present, since they have even caused harm to some of those who approached them in a casual and uncritical manner'. To some extent this was no doubt a hyperbole not to be taken literally (it is hard to believe that precisely the *Chaldean Oracles* – a text of cardinal initiatory importance – would have seemed to our thinker safe enough to circulate among the masses). Nevertheless, it does seem to reflect something of the elitist ethos of the Athenian Neoplatonic community, which did attempt to capture at least a distant reflection of the ideal cosmic constitution. It is likely, however, that for the non-philosophical society Proclus had other standards to apply and would have no substantial objections against the reading of Homer.

Be that as it may, it is more interesting for us to consider the general consequences Proclus' approach has for the relation between philosophy and religion. In the first place, his conception of inspired poetry throws an interesting light on the practice of allegorical exegesis. In modern readers allegorical interpretations are bound to raise suspicions, as they seem to turn the poets into crypto-philosophers who for some obscure reason decided to veil their metaphysical insights in colourful images. Proclus allows us to reverse the perspective. In his view, the poet and the philosopher have different aims and methods: the former attempts to capture the unity of the gods by means of symbolic images, the latter strives to understand the ontological structure of reality by means of rational analysis and intellective insight. To some extent, these are two different things, but they are interconnected. As we have seen in chapter 3.2, the entire procession of reality is anticipated in the henadic realm. Whatever the poet sees, therefore, should have its appropriate ontological correlate, corresponding to some aspect of the hierarchy of being.

²⁰ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 16.15–24; II 98.1 ff.; 325.22–326.2. It was only the second-best constitution presented by Plato in the *Laws* that the Neoplatonists saw as realistically applicable; see O'Meara 2003, ch. 8.

²¹ Proclus, *In Remp.* I 146.4–5, and in greater detail I 47.26–48.26.

Accordingly, whenever Proclus interprets this or that mythical image as a 'symbol' of some philosophical conception, what he really seems to be doing is looking for meaningful metaphysical analogies to poetic symbols, ones that exhibit roughly the same basic structure at a different level. When these are discovered, the symbols are not thereby replaced by them, for they actually pertain to a different, religious order of reality which is parallel but irreducible to the ontological one. While Proclus frequently talks for simplicity's sake of the ontological structure of things being indicated *through* symbols, we should read this as shorthand for a far more complex relation of two analogous spheres of reality complementing each other.

Furthermore, though in most exegetic passages Proclus speaks of symbols as if they were simple signs referring to a divine signified, in his more theurgically inclined moments he stresses the *evocative* power of symbols rather than their referential aspect: they are used by the theurgists to 'call forth the ungrudging goodness of the gods' to illuminate cultic statues (*PT* I 29, 124.23–5), in mysteries they 'make the initiands more fit and better attuned to the entire initiation' (*In Alc.* 142.5–7), the gods have implanted them in all things in order to 'establish them in themselves' (*In Crat.* 71, 31.4–5). All of this suggests that the relation of symbols to the gods is not really that of a sign to its referent. Rather, the symbols *re-present* the gods in the sense of making their power immediately present to those capable of participating in it.²² What this seems to imply is that symbols are not just linguistic tools to be thrown away after reaching the true meaning behind them. Indeed, as the function of symbols is to unify the knower with the known, there is strictly speaking no 'behind' that might apply to them.²³ Symbols are a function of the 'one in soul', expressing reality in the most direct and unified way possible. It is only in philosophical discourse that this unity is divided and the distinction between the signifier and the signified becomes possible.

From this perspective, philosophical interpretations of myths have a lower epistemological status than the myths themselves. Yet, without them

²² In modern terms, they have a 'performative force' (*to drastērion* – *In Crat.* 71, 31.7; *In Remp.* I 83.23), their function being not to describe reality but to set it up and evoke it.

²³ It is of some historical interest that this aspect of symbols is largely eliminated by Dionysius the Areopagite, who in other respects is strongly influenced by Proclus' defence of inspired poetry (for an account of this influence see Wear and Dillon 2007: 85–97). According to Dionysius, symbols do reveal divine truth indeed, but on the way to God they are mere tools which in the last stage 'it is necessary to remove, so that we may contemplate the divine mysteries in themselves in a naked and pure state' (*Ep.* IX 1). For Proclus, I believe, this would be unacceptable. In this regard he foreshadows the Romantics and their 'tautegorical' (self-referential) conception of symbols, though he fails to develop it in a fully consistent manner, constantly slipping into the traditional mimetic discourse.

we cannot enjoy the symbolic illuminations properly. The reason lies in the fact that in Proclus' view all knowledge has to be built up from below. While symbols are capable of illuminating us with divine light that transcends all other forms of cognition, they can only bestow their gifts on the soul when finding in us a proper foundation upon which to land. As we have seen in chapter 5.2.2, unification has different levels, taking place at the summit of each step of the soul's ascent. What benefits we are able to receive from symbols depends precisely on the level at which we stand. Proclus expresses this nicely in the following passage (*In Remp.* II 108.17–24):

That myths exercise their effect even on ordinary people is clear from mystery initiations. For these too make use of myths, on the one hand in order to preserve the secrecy of the ineffable truth concerning the gods, but on the other hand so that the myths may establish for the souls a sympathy with the ongoing ritual in a divine way that is incomprehensible to us. The result is that some of the initiates, filled with divine terror, are astounded, while others are brought into accord with the holy symbols and, stepping out of themselves, are completely established in the gods and inspired by them.

What we see here are precisely the different effects the same set of symbols may have depending on the fitness of their recipients. Ordinary people receive their influence too, but having no rational knowledge to offer as its receptacle, they can only absorb it at the level of their irrational soul. The resulting effect is presumably also a kind of unification, but one that is taking place at an irrational level, amounting to a state of emotional ecstasy. The philosophers, on the other hand, offer a more elaborate basis for the reception of divine illumination, achieving a state of unity that is far more sublime.

It is for this reason that allegorical exegesis is a crucial activity for the Neoplatonic philosopher. Its function is not apologetic but mystical. It is something to be done not at the beginning of one's philosophical journey, but in its more progressive stages. For Proclus, the aim of philosophy is to make us aware of the internal constitution of our soul as well as of the structure of the higher noetic levels of which the soul is a reflection. It is not enough, however, to reflect on each of these levels. Every single step in this ascent needs also to be perfected by its own version of unification, receiving an inflow of divine light that makes the soul's cognitive achievements truly alive. It is probably at this perfecting stage that one should indulge in allegorical exegesis. Its aim may be described by an image that Proclus uses in the context of external theurgy but that seems to apply to the higher levels of ascent equally well (*De sacr.* 149.1–11):

If, for example, one first heats up a wick and then holds it under the light of a lamp not far from the flame, he will see it lit though it be untouched by the flame, and the lighting proceeds from above downwards. By analogy, then, understand the preparatory heating as like the sympathy of lower things for those above; the bringing near and the proper placement as like the use made in the priestly art of material things, at the right moment and in the appropriate manner; the communication of the fire as like the coming of the divine light to what is capable of sharing it; and the lighting as like the divinization of mortal entities and the illumination of what is implicated in matter, which things then are moved toward the others above insofar as they share in the divine seed, like the light of the wick when it is lit.

We may imagine that the same process is going on within the soul as well. Even the soul needs to be prepared and ‘heated up’ first, in order to receive divine illumination. While in Proclus’ example the ‘heat’ (i.e. the sympathy) is present in material things automatically, on the psychic level it needs to be awakened first and brought to consciousness. This is partly done by philosophy, which allows the soul to be purified from lower admixtures and to turn inward and reflect its own essence. In this way, the psychic ‘knot’ is made firm and suitable for usage, but it needs to be ‘heated up’ in the next stage. We may suppose that this is done precisely by the practice of allegorical interpretation. Once the students reach a certain stage of their intellectual progress, they are to apply the knowledge they have to the study of mythical symbols, circling around them in their thoughts and searching for ways to bring their fascinating images in harmony with philosophical insights. In this way a sympathetic link is gradually being built up between thinking and symbols, and the myths ‘in a preliminary manner prepare for us the ineffable sympathy required for our participation in the gods’ (*In Remp.* I 83.30–84.2). Only now the soul is ready to draw near the divine flame (by means of further theurgic meditation techniques, presumably), hoping to attract its light and be divinized at its momentary level of progress.

Homer himself would no doubt have been astonished at this way of integrating his poems into philosophical education. Still, it needs to be acknowledged that in the context of ancient thought Proclus’ attempt at reconciling myths with philosophy is probably the most successful one. Not only has he managed to avoid reductionism, allowing for an essential aspect of mythical symbolism that may never be translated into rational concepts. Even more importantly, his reflection of the uneasy relation between philosophy and poetry seems actually quite penetrating in many regards. The enormous effort invested by Greek philosophers throughout

antiquity into allegorical interpretations of myths testifies to a fundamental need to keep the link between intellectual speculations and traditional mythical images constantly alive. Philosophers were fascinated by symbols, and perceived them as an important reservoir of power that they wished to tap into and appropriate. Proclus' theory of poetry was one of the very few open reflections of this process, endeavouring to identify the ground of symbolic power and the reasons for the philosophers' attraction to it.²⁴ Apparently, it was only as the Hellenic religious tradition was approaching its end that philosophers finally became able to fully reflect on how fundamental and stimulating its myths and symbols had been for them right from the beginning.

²⁴ An interesting modern parallel may be found in Paul Ricoeur, who postulated a similar dialectic of symbols and thought to the one we have found in Proclus. For Ricoeur (1967: 347–57), the symbol gives rise to thought, and provides philosophy with a deeper existential dimension, connecting us to the sacred and representing 'an index of the situation of man at the heart of being' (*ibid.*, 356). Accordingly, philosophy should not consist in abstract self-reflection of a Cartesian type, but should amount to culturally specific thinking on the basis of symbols.

Evil and theodicy

One of the most interesting aspects of Proclus' thought is his theory of evil. Proclus presented it in a special treatise, *On the Existence of Evil* – the most elaborate discussion of the subject that has been preserved to us from antiquity, a thorough analysis of how evil fits into the scheme of things, how its existence squares with the omnipotence and all-pervading presence of the Good, how it comes about and what its ontological status is. In his other two popular treatises, *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence* and *On Providence and Fate and On That Which Belongs to Us*, Proclus further examined how evil fits in the workings of divine providence and how it relates to the free choice that humans possess. All of these topics will be our concern in this chapter.¹

Proclus' theory of evil has behind it a long tradition of philosophical discussions of this subject.² Greek philosophers dealt with the problem of evil in various ways, but in all of them a number of common features can be discerned. The main one follows from the concept of the divine. While in details each school conceived of the gods differently, they all agreed on a number of basic conditions that a thing must fulfil to count as divine: a god needs to be perfect, permanent, self-sufficient, unchangeable and good. For most schools, the basic manifestation of this kind of divinity in our world is *order* and *form* (despite the fact that in some conceptions god as such may transcend all form). Evil, on the other hand, implies *problems with order and form*, amounting to immoderation and formlessness. From these propositions there follows an important conclusion that all Greek philosophers agree upon: evil cannot come from the gods, who are altogether good and perfect.

¹ In my presentation of Proclus' theory of evil I will lean heavily on Chlup 2009, and some parts of this chapter will be taken over verbatim from that paper.

² For a brief overview of previous approaches see Opsomer and Steel 1999; a more comprehensive analysis is offered by Phillips 2007.

Where does evil come from, then? In this point various schools differ greatly, but in principle their answers stretch between two extreme poles. (1) At one pole we find the attempts to explain evil away by referring to the entire economy of the universe and the needs and requirements of the world as a whole. Evil is only evil from the point of view of the individual, being non-existent from the perspective of the divine whole. This approach is embraced by the Stoics, whose pantheistic identification of god with the cosmos leaves space for no other explanation.³ (2) At the other pole we find those who see evil as an entirely real power having an autonomous origin of its own, independent from the gods. The usual starting point for this view are some passages in Plato, who in the *Laws* talks about an 'evil soul' opposing the good one,⁴ while in the *Timaeus* he introduces the image of a primordial disorder whose erratic motions are taken up and organized by the Demiurge at the creation of the world.⁵ From this several Middle Platonists inferred that the source of evil is either a disorderly soul independent from god,⁶ or the Indefinite Dyad as an eternal ontological principle existing on its own.⁷

The Neoplatonists try to avoid both extremes. While taking seriously the reality of evil, they refuse to grant it an autonomous origin independent from the gods. Accordingly, there is one solution left for them only: to say that all divine powers are good and orderly, but at the lowest levels of reality they sometimes give rise to darkness and disorder. In this way the problem of evil shifts from the divine realm, becoming solely a problem of our world. It is due to its ontological imperfection that divine powers, originally good and beneficent, may lead to results which are contrary to the true nature of divinity. How exactly this happens, however, is not easy to explain and the Neoplatonists themselves are at variance in this regard.

7.1 PROCLUS' CRITICISM OF PLOTINUS

To appreciate the complexity of Proclus' theory of evil, let us first briefly look at the simpler conception of Plotinus, whom Proclus saw as his chief

³ See Long 1968; Opsomer and Steel 1999: 241–3.

⁴ Plato, *Leges* 896e5–6, 897b3–4, 897d1, 898c4–5.

⁵ Plato, *Tim.* 30a3–5, 52b–53d. Most ancient Platonists were convinced that the image is not to be taken literally and Plato only used it to show how unordered the material world would be on its own, without postulating an ontologically independent disorderly power prior to the creation of the cosmos. Cf. Proclus' discussion of various interpretations, *In Tim.* 381.26–383.22.

⁶ Thus in the second century AD Atticus (fr. 10–11 from Iamblichus, *De anima*, fr. 23, 28) and Plutarch (see Dillon 1996a: 202–8, 253–4), who was not quite consistent in this point, though (see Chlup 2000).

⁷ Thus in the second century AD Numenius (see fr. 52 from Calcidius, *In Tim.* 295–9; and Dillon 1996a: 373–4). According to Aristotle (*Met.* 1 988a) this was already the interpretation of Plato.

rival. We will base our account on Plotinus' essay *On What Are and Whence Come Evils* (*Enn.* 1 8), which together with Proclus' *On the Existence of Evils* is the only other systematic treatise on evil preserved from antiquity.

Plotinus starts his analysis by asking what evil actually is, only to conclude immediately that to answer this question is immensely difficult. Evil appears as impossible to grasp, and we can only approach it through its opposite, viz. the Good. In Plotinus' view, the Good is 'that on which all things depend and to which all aspire, for they have it as their principle and need it; but the Good itself is without need, sufficient to itself, lacks nothing, and is the measure and bound of all things' (*Enn.* 1 8, 2.2–5). It follows that evil is to be seen as the antipode of all these properties (3.12–16):

At this point one might be able to arrive at some conception of evil as a kind of unmeasuredness in relation to measure, and unboundedness in relation to limit, and formlessness in relation to formative principle, and perpetual neediness in relation to what is self-sufficient; always undefined, nowhere stable, subject to every sort of influence, insatiate, complete poverty.⁸

According to Plotinus, evil is a 'privation of good' (*sterēsis tou agathou*).⁹ The underlying assumption of this famous conception is that if all things come from the gods, and these are good and orderly in their nature, evil cannot be a positive power opposing the good, for such a power would have nowhere to originate from. Evil can only arise when defects and failures start to appear in the divine order of the universe. Accordingly, evil must be of a strictly negative nature. It has no essence of its own (i.e. has no autonomous source of power independent from the Good) and may only be defined negatively as a lack of good.

Up to this point all Neoplatonists would agree. The moot point remains what these unpleasant failures of the good are caused by. Plotinus' answer is simple: they are brought about by matter.¹⁰ As we have seen (ch. 2.2.3), in the view of ancient Platonists bodies consist of form and matter. Form derives from above, being responsible for all the positive features and properties that characterize the body in question. Matter is the cause of all the problems that these properties may be beset by; it is responsible for the fact that forms can only be realized in bodies approximately. For this reason it is easy to see it as the source of all evil. Were it not for matter, no

⁸ 'Poverty' refers to the myth of the birth of Eros in Plato, *Symp.* 203b–c.

⁹ Plotinus, *Enn.* 1 8, 11.15–16; 1 8, 12.1–2. The conception was possibly inspired by Aristotle's analysis of privation in the *Metaphysics*, which the Neoplatonists transferred to their own different metaphysical framework. See Menn 1999: 103–9; Philips 2007: 19.

¹⁰ The simplicity of this answer is deceptive, of course, for in the next step we are bound to ask what the nature of matter is and how it can derive from the higher levels. See my account in the rest of this section.

deformations would take place. Moreover, matter as such is no concrete thing but rather an empty medium which in itself is passive and free from qualities – all the more reason to regard it as a pure privation. Plotinus thus feels free to call matter pure and absolute Evil,¹¹ insisting that of all things matter is the only one with no share in the good whatsoever (1 8, 5.9).

The eastern Neoplatonists have a more positive approach to the material world. We have seen in chapter 2.2.4 that Proclus does not see a sharp break between matter and the higher levels, regarding it as the lowest member in a gradually declining scale of passive potency. Moreover, he is aware that the good is more than form, and the absence of form is thus not enough to disqualify matter and turn it into a wholly destructive factor (see above, pp. 88–90). For all these reasons Proclus refuses to identify matter with evil. Matter cannot be evil, for it exists necessarily, being produced by the Good. Matter is the inevitable final stage of a universal process of emanation that makes all the levels of reality proceed from the Good (see ch. 2.2.3). The emanation needs to continue until the potency coming out of the Good becomes completely empty and passive, reaching a bottom that is so weak as not to be able to produce anything further. This bottom is precisely matter, without whose presence the universe would be incomplete (*De mal.* 32.1–9):

If, however, matter is necessary to the universe, and the world, this absolutely great and ‘blessed god’ (*Tim.* 34b), would not exist in the absence of matter, how can one still refer the nature of evil to matter? For evil is one thing, but the necessary is something else; the necessary is that without which it is impossible to be, whereas evil is the privation of being itself. If, then, matter offers itself to be used in the fabrication of the whole world, and has been produced primarily for the sake of being ‘the receptacle of generation, and as it were a wet-nurse’ (*Tim.* 49a) and ‘mother’ (*Tim.* 50d, 51a), how can it still be said to be evil, and even the primary evil?¹²

Interestingly enough, the necessity of the existence of matter as an indispensable component of the world as well as the ontological ‘bottom’ of reality is also recognized by Plotinus (*Enn.* 1 8, 7). The conclusions he draws from this, however, are entirely different. In his eyes it only confirms the fundamental evil of matter (1 8, 7.17–23):

¹¹ Plotinus, *Enn.* 1 8, 3.39–40. In 8.42 and 13.9 he even speaks of it as ‘Evil as such’ (*autokakon*). We shall see below, though (p. 207), that this extreme view is but one side of the coin; in other contexts Plotinus is ready to speak of matter more neutrally, never quite managing to reconcile the two perspectives.

¹² For the same reason the identification of matter with evil was already criticized by Plutarch in the first to second centuries AD in *De an. procr.* 1015D–E.

Since not only the Good exists, there must be the last end to the process of going out past it, or if one prefers to put it like this, descending or going away: and this last, after which nothing else can come into being, is evil. Now it is necessary that what comes after the First exists, and therefore that the Last should exist; and this is matter, which possesses nothing at all of the Good. And in this way too evil is necessary.

The strikingly different conclusions reached by the two thinkers from the same metaphysical conceptions show clearly that the problem of evil cannot really be decided by means of logical arguments. Its solution depends rather on the general 'worldview' held by each of the philosophers (cf. above, pp. 3–5). Plotinus sees the material world as a priori troublesome, locating the true place of man on the higher levels to which we must ascend as quickly as possible. Eastern Neoplatonists have a more benevolent approach to the world of matter and are slightly more inclined to put up with human existence in it (see below, ch. 8.1). It is through the prism of these worldview preferences that our philosophers consider their logical arguments, drawing different conclusions from them.

Proclus agrees with Plotinus that matter is characterized by its fundamental indeterminacy, but refuses to regard it as an opponent of the Good on this account. If matter were a rival of the Good, it would have to offer resistance to it. Yet, even if matter were capable of any fight against the Good (which it is not), it would never attempt it – for it actually needs the Good and longs for it (*De mal.* 32.9–19; 36.25). For the same reason Proclus rejects the crucial thesis of Plotinus which sees matter as pure privation (*sterēsis*), i.e. as something that principally opposes all form and measure (see *Enn.* II 4, 16). According to Proclus, matter can never be identical with privation (*De mal.* 32.15–19),¹³

because privation does not exist when measure and limit are present, whereas matter keeps existing and bearing their impression. Hence the unlimitedness and measurelessness of matter must consist in the need for measure and limit. But how could the need for limit and measure be the contrary of limit and measure? How can that which is in need of the good still be evil?

Plotinus knows equally well that matter coexists with forms as their substrate, but unlike Proclus he sees no reason why privation should cease to exist in the presence of that of which it is privation (*Enn.* II 4, 16.4–16). Similarly, he agrees with Proclus that matter lacks the Good, but whereas Proclus interprets this lack as *desire*, and thus a positive relation to the

¹³ In this regards, Proclus holds to the position of Aristotle (*Phys.* I 9, 192a3–25); see Opsomer 2001: 162–3.

Good, Plotinus understands it inversely as *privation*, and thus a negative relation.¹⁴ Once again we see how more or less the same Platonic principles may be viewed from inverse angles and used for the construction of different metaphysical systems depending on the basic worldview perspective peculiar to each philosopher. The situation recalls the well-known black-and-white image that according to the viewpoint adopted may be interpreted as either two faces or a cup. Both perspectives are correct and it is up to the thinker's general worldview preferences which one he chooses to cling to.

An enormous problem for Plotinus is, of course, how to reconcile his conception of matter as absolute evil with Neoplatonic monism, which should see all things – including matter – as begotten by the Good. May the Good ultimately produce its own opposite? Plotinus' answer to this question is not entirely clear, but he seems to grant (in common with Proclus) that in the end matter is the final link in a long causal chain whose beginning lies in the Good.¹⁵ It was begotten in a paradoxical way, though, which has made the emergence of evil possible. It was the lowest offshoot of soul (i.e. Nature) which produced matter (*Enn.* v 2, 1.21), but at first it did so in all innocence. Just as on all the higher levels, the production took place automatically: soul has generated matter as its image unwittingly when reverting on itself (*Enn.* III 9, 3.9–11). In its lowest form, however, soul only has minimal perfection, and the product thus lacks perfection entirely, being pure darkness and indeterminacy. In this regard it already is a principle of evil, but due to its weakness it has no possibility of actually harming anyone. If soul took no notice of its product, evil would have remained an unrealized potentiality. Alas, the soul makes the fundamental mistake of expressing interest in what it has produced: 'but when it looks at the image again, as it were directing its attention to it, it forms it and goes into it rejoicing' (*Enn.* III 9, 3.15–16). Only now does evil actually come alive. Matter has managed to persuade soul that by its means it will have an opportunity to fully realize its potentiality – though in fact the very opposite was true (*Enn.* I 8, 14.44–54):

This is the fall of the soul, to come in this way to matter and to become weak, because all its powers do not come into action; matter hinders them from coming by occupying the place which soul holds and producing a kind of cramped condition and making evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft – until soul manages

¹⁴ Plotinus, *Enn.* II 4, 16.16–17: 'Is matter, then, also evil because it participates in the good? Rather, because it lacks it; for this means that it does not have it.'

¹⁵ The topic is controversial, but together with Opsomer and Steel I follow the influential interpretation of O'Brien 1971 and 1999.

to escape back to its higher state. So matter is the cause of the soul's weakness and vice: it is then itself evil before soul and is primary evil. Even if soul had produced matter, being affected in some way, and had become evil by communicating with it, matter would have been the cause by its presence: soul would not have come to it unless its presence had given soul the occasion of coming to birth.

Thanks to this subtle argumentation Plotinus is able to maintain a monistic position, but at the same time speak of matter as an independent principle of evil opposing the higher levels. The production of matter is good in itself, but once matter is produced and the soul turns towards it, evil comes into being. Needless to say the soul bears its own responsibility for its 'fall': no one has forced it to pay attention to matter and become its slave. A proof can be seen in the heavenly bodies, which have their matter fully under their control, being therefore quite untouched by evil.¹⁶

Despite this subtlety, in the eyes of Proclus the conception smacks of dualism all the same. The problem lies in the very idea of a *principle* of absolute evil, which surely implies some kind of dualism, indicating that the Good has no full control over the bottom of the universe. Absolute evil would have to be the opposite of absolute Good. But in fact, the Good is beyond all oppositions.¹⁷ Moreover, if matter is the principle of evil, it follows that evil has its place in the general structure of reality, whose lowest level matter is. Proclus rejects any such idea, being convinced that evil only exists from the perspective of parts, but not that of the whole (e.g. *De mal.* 27.3–19; *In Tim.* I 380.26–7). It is remarkable that Plotinus raises a similar objection in his polemic against the Gnostics. Unlike them he refuses to see the world as evil, stressing the essential goodness and beauty of the cosmos as a whole. He presents the declining hierarchy of being as necessary and correct, taking care not to denigrate the lower levels. He even claims that instead of 'evil' we should speak of 'a lesser good', which only appears as 'evil' in comparison with the higher levels, while in fact being required for the completion of the universe and finding itself in the best state possible (*Enn.* II 9, 13). Such an approach is clearly in tension with the conception of matter as a principle of evil, testifying to the fact that Plotinus' solution was far from unequivocal.

In Plotinus' defence it should be said that he could hardly have avoided similar contradictions. To explain the existence of evil in a monistic system is only possible at the cost of paradox. As we shall see, not even Proclus'

¹⁶ Plotinus, *Enn.* I 8, 5.30–4; cf. O'Brien 1971: 129–30. It should be said that this detail had escaped Proclus, who attacked Plotinus' theory precisely by pointing out that some souls do not succumb to evil (*De mal.* 33).

¹⁷ Proclus, *De mal.* 37; cf. Opsomer 2001: 160–1.

conception is free from paradoxes, despite being more systematic. The important thing is how exactly the paradox is accommodated by each system and how one's worldview is affected by this. Rather than judging different solutions by their logical coherence (which is ultimately unattainable), we should focus precisely on their worldview impact. The basic difference seems clear in this case: Plotinus' universe is bipolar, and the task of man is to keep as close as possible to the higher pole, distrusting the lower one and guarding against its traps. Porphyry's statement (*Vita Plot.* 1.1–2) that Plotinus 'seemed ashamed of being in the body' is symptomatic in this regard. Proclus' universe, on the other hand, may be imagined as a closed whole fully controlled by the gods at all of its levels. Even here there are many dangers lurking around, but evil has a strictly partial nature, is nowhere to be seen concentrated and has its boundaries clearly set at all times.

7.2 EVIL AS FALLING SHORT OF ONE'S NATURE

Let us now examine Proclus' own conception. After ruling out matter as a source of evil, Proclus starts looking for other possible culprits. An obvious candidate is the individual soul, which – unlike the cosmic soul – certainly does cause evil frequently. May we consider it perhaps as the true source of evil? In Proclus' view not quite. Evil is only caused by the individual soul insofar as it often results from its erroneous decisions. Yet, the soul is not a cause of evil in that it would primarily wish to produce evil or in that evil would follow from the soul's nature (*De mal.* 46).

In this respect, Proclus follows the classic Socratic axiom that no one does evil willingly.¹⁸ As we have seen (ch. 2.1.1), Platonists see the good as the aim of all activity: whatever we do, we do because we desire the good. Strangely enough, even criminals relate to the good, for they would never voluntarily engage in their wicked activities if they did not find them 'good' in some way. The 'good' is not of a moral kind here, of course: most criminals probably understand that their deeds are morally evil, yet they still regard them as 'good' in the sense that they satisfy some important desire dominating the life of the criminal. Needless to say, from a Platonic perspective they are terribly mistaken: their injustice is not good for them at all. For Plato, unjust persons are poor creatures who should be pitied for having become slaves of their own passions. Unfortunately, this is something the criminal fails to understand. If he knew and realized clearly

¹⁸ For a classic formulation of this principle see Plato, *Prot.* 345d–e.

that by his unjust activities he is doing harm not just to others but mainly and first of all to himself, he would never be able to indulge in them.¹⁹

It follows from these considerations that the soul causes evil inadvertently, and even if it does contribute to its emergence, we cannot regard it as its source. The true source of evil would have to be an entity or power that would actually *want* to do evil. In Proclus' view, however, no such entity can exist – for all that exists originates from the Good and longs to revert on it. No existing thing can desire evil. Proclus reviews one level of reality after another, showing that each of them is fundamentally good; if it does produce evil sometimes, it only does so secondarily and unintentionally. Even matter desires the good, and it is due to this desire that it keeps on giving rise to sensible things – though it does so in a manner that ontologically speaking is far from excellent (*De mal.* 36).

If this is the case, where does evil come from and what does it consist in? Proclus' basic answer to the latter question is clear: evil arises whenever a being *falls short of its nature*. Every being has its own natural 'perfection' or 'virtue' (*aretē*), the ideal aim and function it strives to realize in its existence. Evil is committed by this being when it fails to achieve this perfection (*De mal.* 25):

Evil . . . consists in lacking the appropriate virtue . . . And as for virtue, it does not exist in the same way in all beings; in one case it is by possessing the virtue of a horse that one has the good of one's nature, in another case by possessing the virtue of a lion, or that of another animal . . . But if an animal becomes a fox instead of a lion, slackening its virile and haughty nature, or if it becomes cowardly instead of bellicose, or if another assumes any other type of life, abandoning the virtue that is naturally fitting to it, they give evidence that in these beings, too, there is evil.

This criterion allows Proclus to exclude evil from a number of domains that at first sight might indeed appear as evil. A nice example is his analysis of 'evil' daemons. Proclus admits that there are daemons who harm humans in a certain sense, dragging them down towards matter and arousing passions in them. Nevertheless, in Proclus' view the daemons only do this with people who deserve it for some reason and who by their own miserable state require to be immersed in matter and carried off by passions (see below, ch. 7.7). And what is most important, in all such cases daemons only exercise their natural function which has been allotted to them in the order of reality. In other words, they only do what is natural for them, never falling short of their proper virtue. Therefore they cannot be evil, for evil only arises where the natural order breaks down. We must view their

¹⁹ Plato, *Meno* 77b–78a, and *Gorg.*, *passim*.

activity as we do that of a lion devouring a sheep: from the point of view of the shepherd the devouring is evil, yet the lion can hardly be blamed for its behaviour, having only done what is natural for it. The situation would be entirely different if the sheep were stolen and eaten by a human thief: his activity would certainly count as evil, for as a human he is reasonable by nature and it is unnatural for him to steal other people's sheep.²⁰

The inevitable upshot is that evil has no positive existence of itself. Evil is a failure, a deviation – but as such it has no reality of its own, being but an incidental perversion of something good. To capture its particular mode of existence, Proclus uses the term *parhypostasis*, 'parasitic existence'. Whenever a thing exists properly (*kyriōs*), its has an antecedent cause and an aim of its own. A 'parasitic existence', on the other hand, is one that applies when an existing thing fails to reach its natural aim.²¹ Proclus summarizes his conception as follows:

Existence (*to hyphistasthai*) belongs to those beings that proceed from causes towards a goal, but parasitic existence (*to parhyphistasthai*) to beings that neither appear through causes in accordance with nature nor result in a definite end. Evils, then, do not have a principal cause (*probēgoumenēn aitian*) for their generation, a so-called efficient cause – for neither is nature the cause of what happens contrary to nature, nor is reason the cause of what happens contrary to reason – nor do evils attain the final goal, for the sake of which everything that comes about exists. Therefore it is appropriate to call such generation a parasitic existence (*parhypostasis*), in that it is without end and unintended, uncaused in a way and indefinite . . . Everything that is produced, is produced for the sake of the good; but evil, coming from outside and being adventitious consists in the non-attainment of that which is the appropriate goal of each thing. The non-attainment is due to the weakness of the agent, since the agent has received a nature of such a kind that a part of it is better, a part worse.²²

Proclus does not wish to claim, of course, that evil would be caused by nothing. What he means is, as Dirk Baltzly (2009: 272) puts it, 'that evil has only the kind of accidental cause that chance events have. Since nothing in nature brings a chance event regularly (else it wouldn't be chance), there is no *per se* cause of evil analogous to the way in which the doctor is the *per se* cause of health.' Unlike Plotinus Proclus does not try to solve the problem of evil by identifying a single origin (*archē*) of evil. In his view, evil is too complicated a phenomenon to be given a unitary explanation.

²⁰ Proclus, *De mal.* 18; the sheep illustration is my own, Proclus gives the less colourful example of rage, which 'in the case of lions and leopards one would not consider to be something evil, but one would do so in the case of human beings, for whom reason is the best' (18.22–3).

²¹ Proclus, *De mal.* 49–50. Cf. Opsomer and Steel 1999: 249–50.

²² Proclus, *De mal.* 50.23–37. Cf. *De mal.* 49, and Opsomer and Steel 1999: 249–50.

It is caused by the interplay of several factors, none of which bears the sole responsibility.

7.3 EVIL AS A DISTORTION OF VERTICAL HIERARCHY

If evil consists in an unintentional failure, it is appropriate to ask how and why such failures arise at all. In Proclus' view, the reason lies in the existence of various components of which mortal beings are made up. Since each of them tends to follow its own aims, it may easily happen that they fail to cooperate, distorting their mutual symmetry. It is this that gives rise to evil (*In Remp.* I 38.9–15):

In general we may say that the body has a share in evil because there are various components in it, and when these lose their mutual symmetry as each attempts to dominate, disease results as a by-product. And similarly, the soul shares in evil because in it too there are different kinds of life contrary somehow to one another, and when these start to fight, each pursuing its own interests, evil creeps in as a result of their strife.

A classic example of this kind of loss of symmetry is the soul with its different parts. In themselves, all the parts are good and useful, but they only reach their proper perfection when they cooperate in the right hierarchy, i.e. with reason controlling the irrational parts. Unfortunately, the irrational parts have a tendency to overstep the boundaries proper to them, chasing blindly after all they like. It is therefore more than difficult to tame them and keep them within their bounds. In many cases we succumb to irrational emotions, being overruled by them. Whenever this happens, our natural hierarchy is reversed and evil comes into being. It might seem that in these cases the lower parts are the obvious culprits, but Proclus rejects such an easy solution. The irrational parts are not guilty of overturning the hierarchy, for they only do what is natural to them. It is reason that bears responsibility for the situation, for it was its task to have a firm grip of the emotions. Yet, not even reason may be seen as a true cause of evil, for it has only caused it negatively, by failing to do what it should. Accordingly, evil cannot be derived from any single level, arising in the distorted *relation* between these levels. The same holds for evil on the bodily level. Here, too, it consists in a breakdown of symmetrical relations between the body's components, each of them being good and useful in itself (*In Remp.* I 38.15–22):

But it is necessary that the body should consist of conflicting parts in this manner, so that something perishable might exist in order that the cosmos might be

constituted as a complete whole comprising all parts. And similarly the soul must be mixed from various components down here: for rational creatures could not have been missing among the living beings in this world, but rational life cannot be connected with bodies without some mediating term, which is why these souls must do and experience the same things as irrational beings: have desires, and use sense-perception and imagination. All these things were required for mortal beings, were they to survive but for a brief stretch of time.

Significantly, in the eyes of Proclus the main part is played by *vertical* symmetry. The failure to attain one's appropriate goal 'is due to the weakness of the agent, since the agent has received a nature of such a kind that a part of it is better, a part worse' (*De mal.* 50.37–8). It is precisely the vertical relation between a lower and a higher part that plays a decisive role in the generation of evil. In the end, evil only arises in three types of entities, corresponding to three kinds of vertical asymmetry (*De mal.* 55–7): (1) In the particular rational soul which has lost its participation in intellect due to being overwhelmed by sense-impressions,²³ (2) in a particular irrational soul which has rebelled against the rational one, and (3) in a particular body which has deviated from its own nature, having become a monster or having decomposed and perished. In none of these cases is evil brought about by any of the components involved, arising always on account of their twisted vertical symmetry. Proclus sums up his conception succinctly in the *Timaeus Commentary* (1 380.24–381.6):

In a word we may say that evil is not to be found in the intellectual realm, for all intellectual genera are free of evil. Nor is it to be found in universal souls or in universal bodies,²⁴ for all that is universal is free of evil, being eternal and always in accordance with nature. It remains that it is to be located in partial souls or partial bodies. But in this case it cannot lie in their essence, for all essences come from the gods. Nor does it lie in their powers, for these are in accordance with nature. It remains that it has to exist in their activities. But it cannot exist in rational activities, for these all strive for the good, nor in irrational ones, for these too work in accordance with nature. Accordingly, it needs to be found in their mutual asymmetry. And in bodies evil can exist neither in form, for form wants to control matter, nor in matter itself, for it longs to be ordered. It follows then that it is to be found in the lack of symmetry between form and matter.

This vertical description does not imply that there are no horizontal asymmetries involved in the production of evil. The lack of vertical symmetry often goes hand in hand with a horizontal disturbance – e.g. in

²³ See above, p. 110. This type always goes hand in hand with type (2), i.e. with the conflict between rational and irrational soul, which distracts the rational soul and makes it impossible for it to maintain its participation in intellect.

²⁴ I.e. in bodies which have a cosmic status, such as the cosmic elements or the heavenly bodies.

bodily diseases, in which parts of the organism stop cooperating. Nevertheless, each such disease necessarily has a vertical dimension too, for it means that the form of the living being is 'overcome by what is inferior'.²⁵

7.4 EVIL IN SOULS AND IN BODIES

In Proclus' view, evil can only arise in individual bodies or souls; it is to be found nowhere else. In *On the Existence of Evils* evil in souls and in bodies is treated as essentially similar. True, psychic evil is deemed worse, for while bodily evil sooner or later destroys its subject, the soul is indestructible, becoming simply worse and worse as a result of its depravity. This shows that malice in souls is more troublesome than corporeal evil: 'For corporeal evil when it intensifies leads to non-existence, whereas evil of the soul leads to an evil existence.'²⁶ Nevertheless, there seems to be no principal difference between psychic and bodily evil, the gravity of the former being just a matter of degree.

Ontologically, this is understandable, for it is undoubtedly true that the *parhypostasis* principle works equally well for souls and bodies. In both cases, evil is accidental, having no antecedent cause and resulting from an asymmetry between various causes. Still, we may wonder whether this is all Proclus has to say on this subject. Is committing a crime really evil in the same sense as getting sick or disabled? In some of his other treatises Proclus is indeed aware that the difference between psychic and bodily evil may be more substantial. The clearest reflection of this is to be found in the sixth essay of the *Republic Commentary*, whose task is to defend Homer against the charges raised by Plato in the *Republic* (cf. above, ch. 6). One of Plato's objections concerns the classic image of two jars standing on Zeus's threshold, 'one full of the evil gifts that he gives, the other full of the good ones' (*Il.* xxiv 528). Plato complains that in these verses Homer is turning Zeus into a cause of evil. In his reply, Proclus relates the two jars to the basic principles of Limit and the Unlimited that stretch from the top of things to the very bottom, dividing each level of reality into two complementary sets. Once we understand the jars in this way, it becomes obvious that 'evil' is meant here in a loose sense of the word only (*In Remp.* I 97.5–17):

Now, since all things are of necessity divided in the manner just mentioned, the ancients had a habit of designating those that belong to the better portion simply as 'good', while those of the contrary portion as 'evil'. However, they are surely not

²⁵ Proclus, *De mal.* 28.10. For the disease of bodies see *De mal.* 56.15–17, 60.21–32.

²⁶ Proclus, *De mal.* 39.41–2. Cf. *In Remp.* II 89.25–90.1, and Plato, *Resp.* 609b–610e.

using the word 'evil' here in the same sense as when we all agree to call 'evil' the unjust and intemperate state of the soul. No, by 'evil' they mean the impediments of our activities, and all that stands in the way of our natural disposition, disturbing the easiness with which the soul takes care of human affairs. It is these things that they admit to be 'evil' – which is a different concept of evil from the one we apply to the soul. In this sense they were even wont to count as 'evil' sickness, powerlessness, and life lacking in basic necessities.

Metaphysically speaking, 'all that stands in the way of our natural disposition' (i.e. all corporeal evil consisting in external 'horizontal' events pressing upon us and blocking our activities) is no doubt just as evil as depravity of the soul. Nevertheless, in the ethical context of educating young people (which is a perspective that Proclus pays great attention to in this essay) it is better to use a more neutral word, reserving the category of 'evil' for the injustice of the soul. Corporeal distortions are unpleasant, but if the soul does not give in to them, it suffers no more harm from them than the sun when it is being eclipsed by the moon (see *In Tim.* III 330.9–24).

Proclus is well aware, therefore, that from the ethical perspective the distinction between the seeming evil of bodies and the true evil of souls is fundamental. Is he able to provide an ontological ground for this ethical distinction? An answer is provided by a passage of the *Timaean Commentary* (I 375.6–381.21), in which Proclus gives yet another summary of his theory of evil. Once again, he distinguishes between psychic and bodily evils, but this time he expresses the difference between them by two kinds of motion. (1) Bodily evils concern entities that are 'moved by others' (*heterokinēta*), being transposed by them as required and depending on their providence. For these things evil is necessary as a result of the unavoidable cycle of generation and corruption by which the material world is sustained (376.25–377.7). (2) Psychic evils pertain to entities that are 'moved by themselves' (*autokinēta*), having the choice (*hairesis*) to become good or bad. Such beings are not just passive victims of evil but are capable of causing it themselves. In the end, it is only the self-moved choosing soul that Proclus explicitly calls 'a maleficent cause' (*kakopoion aition* – *In Tim.* I 378.23).

In this connection, it is important to remember that for Proclus self-motion is not an empirical category, but a metaphysical one. As we learn from *ET* 14–20, self-motion implies self-reversion, and therefore self-constitution as well (see *ET* 42–3). In other words, it is just the rational soul that is self-moved – and in the context of our passage the human soul only, for no other rational souls are capable of rising up and falling down

in consequence of their choices (*ET* 184). Empirically, the animals may seem to move by themselves too, but metaphysically they do not, for they only have the irrational soul which is essentially tied to the body, sharing its dependent status (see ch. 2.4.3). Of rational souls, however, it is only the souls of humans that are capable of choosing, for neither divine nor daemonic souls are allowed to change their natural state. It follows that the only active producer of evil is human soul.²⁷

Let us try to take up these thoughts of Proclus and pursue them still further. As we remember, for Proclus all evil arises as a result of a *vertical asymmetry* between various levels of reality. In case of bodies, this means a clash between matter and form. Taking the simple example of a tree, its evil consists in a failure to develop its natural form properly – e.g. in its inability to grow normally and bear fruit as a result of drought or sickness. What is the reason for this failure? Clearly, it is not a result of the tree's inner weakness or insufficient effort, but rather of some wider cosmic context in which the tree is set. The tree becomes impotent 'on account of the power of the contraries surrounding it on all sides, for many are the forces that are external and hostile to mortal nature' (*De mal.* 27.27–9). Its failure is the outcome of a conflict between the tree's body and other bodies surrounding it, each trying to realize its natural form. In the fight between a cherry tree, the greenflies eating it, and the ladybird devouring them, all the members of this food chain behave quite naturally, and if any one of them wins over the other, it is neither's fault. The destruction of one body is necessary for the existence of another, the whole process being good and beneficent for the totality of the cosmos.²⁸ If a body fails to reach its proper aim, it is not evil for it in the strong, evaluative sense, but merely in the sense of being a necessary by-product of the imperfection of all bodily reality. Matter is a receptacle that in principle cannot hold all the bodies at once, and if it is to give an impartial chance to them all, there must exist the endless cycle of generation and corruption, old forms constantly giving way to new ones.

In other words, while corporeal evil strictly speaking results from a vertical conflict between the body and its form, in actuality it is rather the *horizontal* relation of that body to other bodies that appears to be crucial. This is very much different from what we see in case of souls. These too

²⁷ In question 7 of *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence* Proclus considers the possibility of animals also having a 'trace of self-moved life' in themselves, being thus capable of moral choices (43.17; cf. ch. 44). In the end, however, he seems to rule out this alternative, though he is rather evasive on the issue and his actual standpoint is not quite obvious. In any case, he normally treats animal souls as essentially distinct from the souls of humans – see Opsomer 2006: 138–140, and n. 40 on p. 252 below.

²⁸ Proclus, *De mal.* 5; *De dec. dub.* 28; *In Tim.* I 379.11–21.

are exposed to a pressure of external circumstances, but unlike plants they have the power to resist them. Proclus discusses this in detail in question six of *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence*. Commenting on the injustice that seems to rule in the world, the good ones being poor and oppressed, while the bad ones flourish and prosper, he explains it as a sophisticated educational scheme devised by divine providence. By confronting good people with misery and distress, the gods teach them to be independent of external circumstances, looking down on worldly gifts and seeing virtue of the soul as the only true good (34.1–11):

The lack of seemingly good things contributes to the striving of worthy men for virtue, for it provokes them to despise these things, training them by means of external circumstances. It makes them used to thinking slightly of bodies, leading them away from the excitements of the phenomenal world. At the same time, it reveals to others in a more efficient way the magnitude of virtue and its true essence. Stripping it from the things that are deemed good by ordinary people, it provides opportunity for those capable of seeing to behold true beauty in itself – a noble beauty which transcends all that is admired by the majority. For we do not admire the pilot's art when the sea and the air are calm, but in tempest and storm. Nor do we praise virtue when human affairs run smoothly, but when it remains unshaken amidst the blows of fortune.

Proclus' position here is very similar to that of Epictetus. In agreement with him, he treats external circumstances as morally indifferent. Worldly pressures can damage our body, but they can never force us to become evil – for it is always our choice that gives moral quality to life. Quantitatively, most aspects of our life are not determined by us. We are a part of the cosmic whole, being greatly dependent on it. Yet, while the power of our choice might appear slight, it is actually of crucial importance, being the source of moral value, having the power to make things good or evil.²⁹ External influences only concern our body and the irrational soul immersed in it, but they cannot affect the vertical relation between the irrational faculties and reason, which is the only criterion of good and evil. As long as we keep our internal vertical hierarchy intact, we will be good under all circumstances.

In this connection it is important to stress that for the Neoplatonists in general human choice is an essentially *vertical* faculty: 'For every choice either elevates the soul, or drags it down' (*In Tim.* I 378.12–13). To make a decision does not mean to choose between various equivalent alternatives placed on the same horizontal level, but to choose between the soul's ascent

²⁹ Proclus, *De prov.* 35.8–13; 36.8–11 (all passages quoted below, p. 231). Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* II 3, 13; III 2, 17.

and descent, between the rule of reason and emotions. ‘To sum up, choice is a rational appetitive faculty that strives for some good, either true or apparent, and leads the soul towards both. Through this faculty the soul ascends and descends, does wrong and does right.’³⁰ In fact, it is precisely its essential moral ambivalence that distinguishes choice (*prohairesis*) from will (*boulēsis*), the latter being always directed to the good, the former choosing between good and evil (*De prov.* 57.6–9).

To modern readers, the idea of choice as something essentially vertical might appear as counterintuitive, but it makes good sense when read in the light of ancient discussions on freedom and determinism.³¹ A crucial part in them was played by the Stoics, whose rigorous analyses of causality made all subsequent defences of human freedom to choose immensely difficult.³² After Chrysippus it was no longer possible for a serious philosopher to argue simply that we are free to choose from different alternatives; it became necessary to demonstrate what exactly this power of choice is based on and in what sense the choice is liberated from the all-encompassing causal network of the universe. The Neoplatonic answer was simple: they fully acknowledged the existence of a universal causal nexus, but were able to escape its rigidity by postulating another ontological level above the cosmos that is independent of it, being a causal system in its own right. This higher intelligible order is of course no less deterministic than the lower, cosmic one, being always in the best state possible. Nonetheless, since actual events in our world result from the interaction of two distinct deterministic orders,³³ the ensuing causal mixture is non-deterministic. Its precise shape depends on the extent in which our souls yield to cosmic causality, becoming its slaves, or resist it, retaining their own freedom and self-control.³⁴

The soul’s choice thus resembles a mercury column in a thermometer that can only rise up or sink down, having no possibility of digressing horizontally. It is a matter of our internal strength or weakness, consisting

³⁰ *De prov.* 59.1–3. The conflicts of two equally reasonable principles that we know well from our everyday lives would thus presumably be explained by Proclus as being due to the limitations of our human knowledge. From a universal point of view one of the alternatives would have to appear as definitely better.

³¹ For their slightly more extended (though still very compressed) analysis see Chlup 2009: 41–5.

³² For an authoritative review of Stoic arguments see Frede 2003, and in greater detail Bobzien 1998.

³³ These were usually conceptualized as fate (*heimarmenē*) and providence (*pronoia*). Thus in detail Proclus, *De prov.* 3–14; cf. already pseudo-Plutarch, *De fato* 572F–573B; Calcidius, *In Tim.* 176–7; Plotinus, *Enn.* III 3, 5.14–16. The Platonic prototype of this distinction may be found in the relation between Necessity and Intellect in the *Timaeus* (Proclus draws this parallel explicitly in *De prov.* 13); cf. Chlup 1997.

³⁴ Proclus, *De prov.* 20; 24–5; cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* III 1, 8–10.

in the ability to keep up the right vertical tension between the various levels of our soul. The choosing of evil amounts to *slackening* and succumbing to our lower nature – for to slide down to a lower level is always easy, while living up to higher standards requires sustained effort and self-cultivation.

7.5 EVIL AS PERVERSION OF THE GOOD

For modern readers the idea of evil as resulting from the soul's weakness and slackening might appear as strongly counter-intuitive. Do we not experience evil as something extremely forceful and intense – in fact, far more intense than the good? Does not Proclus simply close his eyes to the harsh reality that evil consists in? Objections such as these result from an essential misunderstanding. To conceive of evil as privation of good certainly does not mean to deny its strength. Proclus does admit that manifestations of evil are strong indeed; he is convinced, however, that all the strength they possess is really borrowed from the good and spoiled. To claim that evil is a *privation of good* amounts to saying that it is a *perversion of good*. Evil arises when we desire the good but try to realize this desire in a way that violates our natural vertical hierarchy. The longing for the good is what makes the evil activity strong; but being perverted, strength becomes deformed and convulsive. That is why evil may even appear as stronger than the good. Its power is unmeasured, and thus fierce and violent. Nevertheless, *violence* should not be confused with *power*. Violence pretends to be strong, but is really a mark of weakness and of the inability to control oneself. True power consists in keeping the right form and symmetry. It has no need of vehemence, beaming with calmness and elegance. The good is invisible. It resembles bodily health, which we only become aware of once we fall sick, i.e. when our body starts to struggle with its own form. As long as the form is managed with ease, we hardly notice its existence. And yet it is precisely this inconspicuous easiness that is the sign of the greatest power.

The conception of evil as borrowing all its strength from the good has several interesting implications. First, it explains why evil can never prevail over the good. As Proclus remarks, evil is in the paradoxical situation of constantly fighting against the source of its nourishment (*De mal.* 52). It resembles a disease which steals more and more of the body's strength, until it becomes more powerful than the physical organism. Yet, once this happens, the organism dies – and with it the disease dies too, having nothing to live from. Today we might perhaps use the fitting image of a parasite, who always needs to be weaker than its host – otherwise it would

saw off the branch it is sitting on. By the same token, evil can only prosper when it is weaker than the good. Proclus refers to Plato, who propounds a similar idea in the *Republic* (325c–d): if an unjust man commits a crime, he cannot be altogether unjust but must still possess some small portion of justice which allows him to act at all; were he entirely unjust, his soul would be so disintegrated as not to be capable of any action.

Another interesting consequence of the parasitic conception of evil is that lesser vices are more dangerous than greater ones, having greater power at their disposal (*De mal.* 52.21–6):

Therefore, in souls, too, greater effects are produced from lesser vices, and lesser from greater. For when a vice becomes isolated from its contrary, it increases in ugliness and deformity, but diminishes in strength and activity, becoming weak and ineffectual. For a vice does not have power from itself – such that an increase in power would be a transition to more – but derives power from the presence of its contrary.

Most evil acts are usually not committed by ugly villains whose depravity is obvious to all, but by someone who ‘means well’, appears trustworthy and is capable of persuading a mass of people of the ‘goodness’ of his or her intentions. The worst evils are perpetrated in the name of the good, resembling it strikingly, being but a small, and yet substantial deformation of it. Scoundrels striving for total destruction are relatively harmless compared to the ‘perpetrators of good’.

Last but not least, it follows from Proclus’ theory that the Good has no absolute contrary to itself. There is no primal unmixed evil, for such an evil would have nothing to draw its power from. Evil is always good in some regard (*De mal.* 37 and 42). ‘Indeed, there is no form of life so bad that the power of the reason-principle (*logos*) is completely extinguished. Some reason-principle remains inside, expressing itself feebly, though surrounded by all kinds of passions’ (*De mal.* 7.42–3).

7.6 WHY DOES EVIL EXIST?

To conclude our discussion of Proclus’ theory of evil, let us go back to a more general metaphysical level and once again ask the key question: where exactly does evil come from? As we have seen, for the Neoplatonists this was an acute problem indeed, for they needed to reconcile the existence of evil with their monism. Proclus finds such a reconciliation easy in the case of bodily evils. These arise in consequence of the imperfection of the corporeal world, which by its very nature is incapable of containing

the fullness of reality all at once. Diseases, deformations and dissolutions of bodies are an unavoidable consequence of the striving of all forms to assert themselves in the limited spatial framework of matter. Each shape struggles to achieve an adequate corporeal expression, but as the material environment is too weak to allow for this, the effort frequently ends up in failure and a collision of different forms. Matter itself can hardly be blamed for this. If it could, it would gladly let all forms attain their realization; unfortunately, its imperfection prevents this. In this regard it would actually be more appropriate to speak not of 'evils' on the bodily level but rather of 'imperfections', which are unpleasant and yet cannot be avoided. Their presence in the universe is thus easily excusable.

With psychic evils the situation is more complicated. As we have seen, soul is a cause of evils in a much stronger sense, in that by its wrong choices it can actively bring them about. But why does the soul take wrong decisions in the first place? At first sight it might seem that it does so on account of its irrational impulses, which lead our reason astray. Proclus, however, refuses to draw this conclusion. The irrational drives are not to be blamed for they are only exercising their natural function.³⁵ If they lead the rational soul astray, it is its fault, not theirs. Indeed, since they are not self-constituted, they are incapable of correcting themselves, having all goodness 'as something from the outside', i.e. from the rational soul.³⁶ Accordingly, it is reason that bears responsibility for the irrational parts running wild. It is here that the faculty of choice is located, and we know already that it is of their own choice that rational souls become vicious, prior to any influence from the lower levels (see *De mal.* 46.1–7). In this sense the rational soul may be seen as an 'efficient cause' of evil, for it is through its agency that evil comes about.

Nevertheless, reason is not a cause in the strict sense of the term, not being a 'principal cause' (*aitia probēgoumenē*), i.e. a cause from which its effects would follow by necessity on account of its nature.³⁷ It is inadvertently only, due to its ignorance, that reason makes mistakes – by its own nature it wants to produce good effects only. The cause of evil is thus not the rational soul as such, but its weakness and impotence (*De mal.* 48.). Evil is an inadvertent by-product, which does not exist in itself. We might well ask whether this solution is metaphysically plausible and whether Proclus is not really avoiding the answer instead of providing it. Does he not introduce in

³⁵ See Proclus, *In Remp.* 1 38.15–22, quoted above, pp. 211–12.

³⁶ Proclus, *De mal.* 45.23–7 (cf. Steel's note ad loc.).

³⁷ Proclus, *De mal.* 50.23–36; 50.3; 49.7. Cf. Opsomer and Steel 1999: 249–52.

this way a motion without a cause, whose existence he elsewhere denies?³⁸ Proclus would probably reply that evil does not amount to a new motion that would require a cause of its own. All the motions that keep evil going are good in themselves. Evil originates when they collide with one another, irrational motions blocking the rational ones. In other words, evil consists in an inappropriate *relation* rather than an inappropriate *motion*.

The problem remains that even this defective relationship must be caused by something. Proclus locates its 'cause' in the weakness and impotence that embodied souls tend to succumb to. Where does this weakness come from? Plotinus had an easy answer, putting the blame on matter. Proclus refuses this solution. Even he admits that the weakness is somehow connected with matter,³⁹ for it can only be understood relationally: to be weak for the soul means to bend down to something lower. Yet, unlike Plotinus he refuses to see matter as the main culprit, situating the origin of evil *in-between* soul and matter.⁴⁰

The descent into matter is not troublesome for the soul on account of the evil of matter, but rather on account of the fact that the soul due to its embodiment is forced to exist on two planes of reality at the same time, maintaining the proper symmetrical relation between them. The embodied soul stands with one foot on the level of reason and with the other on that of the body, mediating between them. Its task is to be active 'according to both kinds of life' (*De mal.* 23.18), bringing the lower into accord with the higher. This 'amphibiousness'⁴¹ is a source of tension that is difficult to manage. Divine and daemonic souls succeed perfectly in this task, for they are firmly anchored in the intelligible realm and constantly participate in intellect, which acts as a kind of lifebuoy for them.⁴² Human soul has no such advantage. At its upper end it is not attached permanently but needs to hold fast by its own continuous effort. It is not surprising that it occasionally fails, its internal tension goes flat and reason succumbs to corporeal pressures.

³⁸ Proclus, *De mal.* 50.7–8: 'without a cause it is impossible for anything to come about' (cf. Plato, *Tim.* 28a4–6). For the problem of motion without a cause see Opsomer and Steel 1999: 255–60; Baltzly 2009: 272.

³⁹ See e.g. *De mal.* 24.33–5, which without its proper context might easily be mistaken for a Plotinian text.

⁴⁰ To use O'Brien's (1971: 140–1) fitting analogy, while for Plotinus the soul only succumbs to the malicious talk of matter because of her own willingness to listen to it, in Proclus soul and matter originally approach each other with best intentions, and it is only when their conversation unexpectedly gets out of hand that they *both* start to talk maliciously.

⁴¹ The souls are termed 'amphibious' by Plotinus, *Enn.* IV 8, 4.32.

⁴² Proclus, *De mal.* 16–20. Cf. above, ch. 2.4.3, pp. 109–10.

One might rightly ask why the gods have allowed such a dangerously free-floating soul to arise in the first place. Would not the world be a better place if every single soul were firmly attached to intellect and so the possibility of wrong choices would not exist? Proclus could hardly give a positive answer to this question, for by doing so he would contest the absolute control of the Good over all things. In his view, the existence of a choosing soul was required in order to preserve continuity in the process of emanation (*In Tim.* I 378.22–379.9):

If some people wonder why a maleficent cause has been produced in the first place, even if it is not one of the wholes but only a particular, one should point out to them that the procession of things is continuous and no void has been left in the spectrum of beings . . . And how will the continuity of things be preserved if beings which are whole and self-moved and those which are partial and moved by another already exist, but we get rid of what comes between them, namely things which are self-moved but nevertheless particular? . . . It is therefore necessary for this form of life to exist as well to serve as the middle term in the spectrum of things and as the link between classes ranked in opposition, so to speak, to one another. But the fact that this form of life by its essence disposes of choices does not mean that evil is natural to it.

Divine and daemonic souls act always in the best way possible and are incapable of choosing on account of their perfection. Irrational souls, on the other hand, are incapable of choosing on account of their imperfection, for they have the status of irradiated psychic states immanent to bodies, being thus altogether dependent on external circumstances. Human soul is a necessary middle term between these extremes: it is more perfect than the irrational soul, being capable of setting itself into motion; yet it is less perfect than divine and daemonic souls, for it makes mistakes – which is another way of saying that it makes choices. It follows that the existence of errant choosing agents could not have been avoided in the best possible plan of the universe.

One may object that all such arguments are really but a complicated way of evading the problem of evil. In Proclus' thought evil becomes nothing but a weak mistake without a clear source of its own. Its existence is unavoidable, yet it is no more than an unplanned error. This error has no positive source, has not been created by anyone, but still it influences the run of worldly events in a significant way. Does it not become in this way an all too paradoxical factor that slips through one's fingers at each attempt at clear intellectual grasp?

Proclus would possibly reply that it is precisely this incomprehensibility of evil that may be seen as an advantage of his theory. Evil does indeed come

‘out of nothing’ and without a cause in a sense – no other solution would be possible within the framework of a monistic, and yet non-deterministic system. The challenge for monistic thinkers is how to incorporate this ‘nothing’ into their system. Plotinus located it in matter as the sphere of non-being; by doing this, however, he turned matter into an adversary of the Good, dangerously approaching a dualist stance. Proclus’ approach is more sophisticated. He admits that matter is a kind of non-being, but refuses to see this non-being as dangerous in itself. Non-being for him is connected with potentiality in the broad sense of the term (cf. ch. 2.2.4); it is the necessary ‘vacuum’ element that in each level of reality incites the desire to revert upon one’s cause. It follows that non-being is to be found on all planes of reality, matter being but its lowest and most passive expression.⁴³ Contrary to this, evil is a privation of good, and cannot therefore amount to simple non-being (for even the Good itself is beyond being), but needs to stand even ‘beyond non-being’; evidence is to be found in the fact that on behalf of the good one sometimes chooses to die, considering non-being better than being in an evil state (*De mal.* 3).

It might seem that by shifting evil not just beyond the realm of being but even beyond non-being, Proclus turns it into a truly ungraspable abstraction with no link to reality. The opposite is true, however. Evil does indeed cease to be something one can point one’s finger at, but only to become all the more insidious. To understand its ontological status we need to draw a distinction between privation of good and of form. ‘Whereas privations of forms, being complete privations, are mere absences of dispositions, and do not actively oppose them, privations of goods actively oppose the corresponding dispositions and are somehow contrary to them.’⁴⁴ As an example we can take the lack of reason in a wolf and in man. In case of the wolf it is a privation of form, which is a harmless neutral absence. On the other hand, if reason is lacking in a man, who should have it, it is a privation of good, and thus evil. In other words, while in the former case we are dealing with an *absence* of form, in the latter we have to do with its *perversion*. If we bring this Proclean distinction to its conclusion, we may say that the good is connected with the right position in the system which evil disrupts. The good is not one of beings but corresponds rather to correct relations between beings. Evil amounts to a breakdown of relational functionality.

⁴³ For a hierarchy of different kinds of non-being see Proclus, *In Parm.* 999.16–31.

⁴⁴ Proclus, *De mal.* 52.5–8; cf. *ibid.*, 7.39–42; 38.13–25.

Needless to say a clear answer to the question of evil's origin is not really given in this way. Why exactly it is that some souls manage to keep the vertical tension between their different parts, while others do not, is a mystery that can never be adequately resolved in a monistic framework. Nonetheless, Proclus is at least able to elucidate the ontological conditions of all such lapses. He offers a model of the universe in which all is good and in its place, but which leaves room for failures and mistakes too.⁴⁵

7.7 EVIL AND PROVIDENCE: PROCLUS' THEODICY

So far it might seem that evil represents the susceptibility of things in our world to break down, which is not governed by anyone and is only kept within acceptable limits by self-regulation, excessive multiplication of evil always leading to its automatic reduction. This description, however, is just one side of the coin. From another perspective Proclus insists that evil is carefully watched and controlled by the gods. Such a claim might come as a surprise. How can the perfectly good gods control something that happens to be a privation of good? Proclus' first answer to this question is based on the parasitic nature of evil (*De mal.* 42.7–9):

Evil is not unmixed evil, as we have said repeatedly, but it is evil in one respect and good in another. And insofar as it is good, it is from the gods; but insofar as it is evil, it is from another, impotent, cause.

Evil amounts to disorder and unmeasuredness, but it always feeds on order and measure – and it is precisely this measured order that the gods have command of. Thanks to this they also control evils and are able to turn them to good use in the perfect whole of the universe (*In Remp.* I 38.22–7) :

Accordingly, evils accompany the primal activities of certain beings as their parasitic by-products, and all this happens for no other reason than on account of the good. And as soon as evils arise in this parasitic way, the universe uses them for its own purposes and by its ability to make proper use of them it actually makes them good. For this reason evil is never pure but is always taking part in some trace of the good. *So that even evil comes from the gods, but it comes from them as good of some sort.*

The last sentence of the passage just quoted is crucial. In Proclus' view all that goes on in the world must have its ultimate source in the gods and the energy springing from them and spreading spontaneously down to

⁴⁵ Moreover, in ch. 7.7 we shall see that the Good has even these mistakes under its control.

the very bottom of things. All that there is proceeds from the Good, and reverts on it again by imitating it. If a thing or a being stopped imitating the Good for just a small moment, its cycle of procession and reversion would be interrupted and it would cease to exist. As a result, even ungodly acts must ultimately depend on the gods, being an imitation of something divine and good (*De mal.* 61.5–18):

For it is not possible that evil exists without taking the appearance of its contrary, the good, since everything is for the sake of the good, even evil itself. But then all things are for the sake of the good, and divinity is not the cause of evils. For never is evil *qua* evil derived from there; it stems from other causes, which, as we have said, are able to be productive not on account of power but on account of weakness . . . Therefore the gods also produce evil, but *qua* good.

As Proclus stresses in *In Remp.* 1 105.9–10, ‘all things are moved by the gods, but always in ways to which they are fit’. If the recipient is weak and deformed, the divine emanation will be distorted too and the resulting imitation of the Good will be inadequate. The point had been well put by Plotinus already:

We must consider, too, that what comes from the stars will not reach the recipients in the same state in which it left them. If it is fire, for instance, the fire down here is dim [by comparison with that of the stars], and if it is a loving disposition it becomes weak in the recipient and produces a rather unpleasant kind of loving; and manly spirit, when the receiver does not take it in due measure so as to become brave, produces violent temper or spiritlessness; and that which belongs to honour in love and is concerned with beauty produces desire of what only seems beautiful, and the efflux of intellect produces knavery; for knavery wants to be intellect, only it is unable to attain what it aims at. So all these things become evil in us, though they are not so up in heaven.⁴⁶

In all this Proclus would agree with Plotinus; but in fact, he goes much further. For Plotinus the gods help to produce human actions only insofar as these resemble the higher causes, i.e. insofar as they are good. The deformity and dissimilarity of evil actions is purely our creation having nothing to do with divinity. Proclus fears that such a view might lead to dualism, i.e. to introducing in our world an independent power that offers resistance to the gods. To avoid this, he derives from the gods not just the positive form of evil acts but also the human failures that bring about a distortion of this form. As a strict monist Proclus maintains that the gods produce all things down to the very bottom of things – and must

⁴⁶ Plotinus *Enn.* 11 3, 11.1–11. Plotinus speaks of heavenly gods only, but Proclus applies the passage to gods in general in *In Remp.* 1 105.1–5.

therefore produce all the privations too. Since evil is always a deformation, it can never be caused by Intellect, which takes charge of all the forms in their ideal perfection. The Good, however, is beyond form, and may thus penetrate even to that which has no form itself (*ET* 57.14–16):

What is caused by Intellect is also caused by the Good, but not the other way round. For even privation of form is from the Good, for all things stem from there; but Intellect, being form, cannot give rise to privation.

Proclus does not wish to claim, of course, that the gods would be responsible for evil. The gods only give rise to privations in that they guarantee their (parasitic) existence, not in that they would actively produce them. The gods bring about all deformations, but the responsibility for them is ours only. The gods cannot be blamed for our depravity – but whenever we succumb to it, they help to accomplish this too.

The relation of gods to evil may be fittingly compared to a related problem that ancient Platonists had to deal with, namely the ability of gods to foreknow particular and contingent events. The Middle Platonists agreed with the Peripatetics that contingent events depending on human decisions can only be cognized by the gods *as contingent*, without the gods foreknowing the actual outcome.⁴⁷ The result was a universe in which the gods only controlled general forms and relations, particulars being allowed a great degree of autonomy. Late Neoplatonists found this unsatisfying and wished to expand divine rule over all things, including the particulars. For this reason they concluded that the gods must have foreknowledge even of our contingent decisions – otherwise they would not be able to supervise them efficiently.⁴⁸ Not that all the worldly events were predetermined. Their course is only laid down in general outlines, but is contingent in a number of details. Nonetheless, the gods are able to know even all the contingent things in their final, determined form. Divine knowledge is so powerful that it penetrates down to what is uncertain and contingent, grasping it as something certain and necessary:

⁴⁷ See Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De fato* 30 (201.13–18 Bruns); Calcidius, *In Tim.* 162–3.

⁴⁸ This is not to say, of course, that the gods would take any active interest in earthly events. Their providential care is unintentional, being a by-product of their own perfection. See *ET* 122.13–16: ‘Thus in exercising providence they assume no relation to those for whom they provide, since it is in virtue of being what they are that they make all things, and what acts in virtue of its being acts without relation.’

We conclude: the gods know what depends on us in a divine and timeless manner and yet we act according to our nature. And whatever we choose is foreknown by them, not because of a determination in us, but of one in them.⁴⁹

Our decisions do depend on us, but despite this they are known by the gods beforehand, appearing as necessary from their perspective.⁵⁰ 'Even the contingent must find completion in necessity, for neither here in this world is the unlimited allowed to be deprived of unity' (*De dec. dub.* 14.8–10). The same must apply to the gods' relation to evil, which also arises out of our decisions. The gods understand evil and know all our failures beforehand. Thanks to this they are able supervise them meticulously and direct them towards the Good.

A nice example of how this works is given by Proclus in the sixth treatise of the *Republic Commentary*. In [chapter 5](#) he deals with the famous scene from book IV of the *Iliad* in which Athena persuades the Trojan archer Pandarus to break the peace treaty and shoot at Menelaus. In this way Athena provokes Pandarus into injustice, earning thus Plato's condemnation in the *Republic* (379e). Proclus admits that Athena sets Pandarus' evil act into motion, but he is able to vindicate her intervention in no less than two ways. First, he stresses that while Athena helps to accomplish Pandarus' action, acting as its ontological patron, she only does so because Pandarus himself has chosen to take the evil path and has made himself well disposed for performing the unjust deed. The gods do cause evil indeed, but only after the human culprit has chosen it and assumed responsibility for it (*In Remp.* I 102.19–29):

The breaking of oaths and treaties is strictly speaking done by humans, who are meant to suffer for their previous offences whatever has been appointed by the gods, who govern all mortal things in accordance with justice. At the same time, however, it is said to be set into motion and brought to accomplishment by the gods themselves: not in the sense that they would make the punished persons impious and unjust, but in that they actualize these actions as soon as the persons are ready for them, in order that these people may eventually deserve

⁴⁹ Proclus, *De prov.* 65.11–14. Cf. *ET* 124; *De dec. dub.* 6–19, and above, p. 14. The entire conception goes back to Iamblichus, as Ammonius makes clear in *In De int.* 135.14.

⁵⁰ Proclus admits that he has no idea how exactly the gods achieve this remarkable effect. Their knowledge is 'unspeakable and not graspable by human intuitions, being only comprehended by the gods themselves' (*PT* 1 98.14–16). The easiest way to approach the secret of divine knowledge is perhaps through the relation of time and eternity. Our decisions are made in time, which only arises at the level of soul. The gods live in eternity, in which the past and future is all contained in a single point. Accordingly, even our future decisions are grasped by them as something present and already determined. Cf. Boethius, *Consol.* v 6.

a just punishment by having acted in accordance with their internal disposition and having brought forth the fruit of those harmful activities they had borne in themselves.

In addition Proclus explains that Athena acts in the name of justice. As a Greek patriot he takes it for granted that the Greeks were generally in the right and had only launched the war to punish the Trojans for their moral depravity, whose evidence was to be found in the abduction of Helen. This depravity, however, would have remained incurable had it not been brought forth clearly (105.28–30): ‘There are certainly many psychic states that, if they were to remain unrealized, would make all cure impossible for those who possess them.’ For this reason the gods need to bring out the corruption of the Trojans, like doctors incising ulcers and revealing the pus within (103.8). Had the peace treaty been kept, the war would have been over and the Trojans would have kept on carrying their immorality hidden within their souls without reaching any solution. The war must continue, therefore, till Troy falls completely. It is only when the Trojans lose all they have that they will have a chance to reflect on their wretchedness and start to do something about it (105.30–160.10). All of these implications are borne in mind by Athena when she persuades Pandarus to break the treaty. While in the short run her intervention might seem cruel and unjust, from the long-term perspective it is performed in the name of the good and with a view of eventually curing the Trojans. If the gods may sometimes goad us into evil deeds, it is only because they know that in the long run their perpetration will be good for us.

Proclus’ interpretation of Athena’s intervention might seem bold, but is in fact based on a long tradition of theodicy whose foundations had been laid by Plato (cf. *Resp.* 380a–b). In book x of the *Laws* Plato describes the working of divine providence as follows (903b–904b):

He who manages the universe has arranged all things with a view to the preservation and excellence of the whole; and each part experiences and does what is proper to it, as far as it can. To each of these parts, down to the smallest fraction, there have been appointed overseers who supervise its experiences and actions, taking care that even the tiniest details come out as they should. And one of these parts is yours, too, wretched man; though it is very small, it also contributes to the universe and has regard to it. But you do not realize that all things that come into being do so for the sake of the whole in order that the life of the universe might be a blessed one. The universe does not happen on account of you, but you on account of it . . . And since soul is joined now with one body, now with another, and it constantly undergoes all kinds of changes, either of itself or owing to another soul, the divine draughts-player has no other task than shift the improving character to

a better place, and the deteriorating one to a worse place, according to what suits them, so that each obtains the fate it deserves . . . Since our King saw that all actions originate from soul, and contain much virtue as well as much vice . . . and since he reached the conclusion that all that is good in soul is naturally beneficent, while all that is bad leads to injury – taking account of all this, he skilfully considered where he should place each of the parts so that vice might be defeated in the universe, while virtue might receive the easiest and the most powerful and efficient victory. With this purpose in mind he has worked out what sort of position each part should obtain and what region it should inhabit depending on the qualitative changes of its character; but he left to the will of each one of us men to determine the direction of these changes.

These lines contain in a nutshell the Platonic theory of divine providence, which the Neoplatonists take up and bring to its conclusion. It is based on the idea that evil events are always incorporated in the order of the universe in ways that make them beneficent both for the order as a whole and for each of its parts. Proclus often stresses that evil only exists from the perspective of particulars. From the point of view of the whole all is good (see e.g. *De mal.* 27 and 60). It might appear that this approach plays evil down and belittles it: it is nice to claim that from the perspective of the whole evil does not exist, but this hardly changes things for us individuals, for whom evil is terribly real. The Neoplatonists admit this, and in comparison with the *Laws* passage just quoted strive to take individuals into account in a consistent manner. Nevertheless, they still reach the same conclusion Plato does – though in their characteristic manner they change it from a relatively loose sketch into a hard system worked out in great detail.

In the first place, the Neoplatonists insist that ‘nothing is bad for the good man and nothing, correspondingly, good for the bad one’.⁵¹ The reason lies in the nature of evil. As we have seen, the only true evil is injustice, which consists in the disruption of the right vertical hierarchy within human soul. It follows that evil can never be caused from the outside; it is always we ourselves who are the causes of our own evil, namely by not maintaining the rule of reason and succumbing to weakness. The basic idea is already expressed by Plato, who in the *Gorgias* (469a–b) stresses that it is only evil to commit injustice, but not to suffer it. A good illustration of this attitude is to be found in the person of Socrates, who in the *Apology* rejects the view that for a good man capital punishment might be bad in any way (*Apol.* 30c–d):

You should know that if you kill me . . . you will not cause harm to me but rather to yourself. For neither Meletus nor Anytus can do me any harm – that would

⁵¹ Plotinus, *Enn.* III 2, 6.2–3.

certainly be beyond his power. In my view, it is not allowed for a better man to be harmed by a worse one. My prosecutor may kill me, no doubt, send me into exile or deprive me of my citizen rights, and he, as well as many others, probably considers such things as terrible evils; but I do not.

The Neoplatonists go a step further in maintaining that for a good man unpleasant events are not only harmless but are actually good for him. In this they lean on their concept of providence, which works in a similar manner as that described in the above-quoted passage from Plato's *Laws*: it shifts each individual to a place that best suits him – not just in the sense that the individual is useful to the whole, but also in that the whole is useful to him (*De dec. dub.* 39.8–14):

As regards those things we suffer from others (albeit unjustly), we must know it is the law of the universe that assigns all of its parts to work on one another in accordance with their impulses . . . But all the agents are followed by justice, the good ones no less than the bad ones. And whenever a person suffers something, the suffering corresponds to what this person deserves; for not even the perpetrator is ignored by the law.

In his *Ten Doubts Concerning Providence* Proclus gives a number of examples of how providence takes care to make all our sufferings deserved. Frequently it lets us experience seemingly evil things in view of our good. It sends diseases 'so that the body does not brim with strength, sweeping our intellect along', it sends poverty 'so that the incontinent manner of life has no opportunity to reach fulfilment by means of money', it makes us powerless 'so that the soul may not become fond of public honours' (*De dec. dub.* 36.5–7). Providence also has regard to our past, and many of its blows are meant to purify us of our former transgressions.⁵² All the misfortunes are a challenge for us, and if we respond properly, they will turn to good for us – 'for many have already improved their character thanks to troubles that have beset them' (*De dec. dub.* 39.23–4).

What is important is that this rule applies equally well when the misfortunes we suffer are unjust. From the providential perspective it makes little difference whether we lose our property due to a thief or due to a morally neutral natural calamity. Should poverty be useful for us, the gods will search for every opportunity to bestow it on us, gladly making use of the thief. Not that they would actively support thievery. They certainly do not want anyone to steal. But if someone is so depraved that out of his own

⁵² Proclus, *De dec. dub.* 39.24–6. Past lives are no less important (*De dec. dub.* 60); cf. already Plotinus, *Enn.* III 2, 13.11–15.

choice he has embarked on the career of a thief, they do not prevent him, but take care that by their providential interventions they turn his evil acts into good – namely by only sending in his way those victims that may be helped somehow by being robbed.

This is not to say that Proclus would like to excuse criminal activities. All injustice is potentially useful and educative for the good person, but this does not change anything about the fact that it is evil and should be punished. From the perspective of the universe all events are good – for they can only happen when the world order allows this (*De prov.* 35.5–8). Yet, when making moral judgments we must set this completely aside (*De prov.* 35.8–13, 36.8–11):

And for these reasons, in regard to events, we praise some people and blame others, as if they were masters of these events through their choice. And however we may qualify the events that take place, we do not say that the universe has this [moral] character, but the person who acts. This is because the [moral] quality in what happens did not come from the world, but from the life of the acting person. He is co-ordinated with the universe because of the universe and he is in turn of such and such quality because he is a part . . . And it is because of its choice that we say that it [i.e. the faculty that depends on us] makes failures and acts rightly, since even if the result is good, but the agent acts on the basis of an evil choice, we say that the action is bad. For, what is good in what is done is due to a [favourable] external factor, but what is bad is due to the choice of the agent.

The problem is perfectly summed up by a classic Neoplatonic rule first formulated by Plotinus. It says that each action is just for the person who suffers it, but may be unjust from the point of view of the person who performs it:

The injustice which one man does to another is certainly an injustice from the point of view of the doer, and the man who perpetrates it is not free from guilt, but as contained in the universal order it is not unjust in that order, or in relation to the sufferer, but it was ordained that he should so suffer. But if the sufferer is a good man, this will turn out for his good.⁵³

It is due to this that the gods are able to incorporate all evil into the order of the world and make it good. As Proclus puts it, the task of providence consists in ‘using one vice to cleanse another one, and in making use of

⁵³ Plotinus, *Enn.* IV 3, 16.18–22; cf. *Enn.* III 2, 13.8–9: the world’s Logos causes ‘those who have killed unjustly to be killed in their turn, unjustly as far as the doer of the deed is concerned, but justly as far as concerns the victim’.

the principle that what is unjust from the point of view of the doer is just from the point of view of the sufferer'.⁵⁴

To make the providential care of the gods altogether perfect, Proclus links it with the above-described idea of evil's dependence on the Good, concluding that even for the criminal the crime is good to a certain extent, for it allows him to reveal his injustice, enabling him to do something about it (*De mal.* 59.4–24):

These actions are totally good as well to the one who suffers them as to the one who performs them, insofar as the latter follows the designs of the whole. But insofar as he does not follow these, but performs such an action for his own motives, he does evil, and he gives in to the woes of his soul that are not appropriate to him nor grand. Nevertheless, it is the beginning of salvation for him. For many people conceal the evil which they contrive and which stays inside the soul, and make it appear good, as it [really] is shameful and inappropriate, but when the evil is performed its nature becomes evident. . . . In medicine, too, doctors open ulcers and thus make evident the ailment and the inwardly concealed cause of the disease. In so doing, they display an image of the workings of providence, that hands [souls] over to shameful doings and passions in order that they may be freed from their pain, as well as this festering condition, swollen up with evils, and then begin a better cycle and a better type of life. And all the internal passions of a soul that make the soul evil possess goodness, in the sense that they always lead the soul towards what is appropriate to it. For it is not possible for the soul to choose the inferior and still remain among superior things. No, the soul will soon be dragged towards darkness and baseness. And not only the actions of the soul, but also its choices, even without action, are punished. For every choice leads the soul towards a state similar [to what has been chosen].

In other words, when someone commits a crime, it is bad *from him* but good *for him*. The crime is primarily harmful for the soul of the criminal, but it has a positive function in that it brings his depravity to light, where it may possibly be cured. It is for this reason that divine providence may occasionally provoke us into evil – just as we have seen in the case of Pandarus.

To modern readers, thoughts such as these might seem rather shocking. The idea that robbers, violators or thieves are sent in our way by the gods, who may even have incited these villains to act out their crimes, appears hard to accept today. To appreciate (if not necessarily accept) Proclus' position, it is useful to look at it from a broader anthropological perspective. If we examine various types of worldview reactions to injustice,

⁵⁴ Proclus, *De dec. dub.* 44.16–18. Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* III 2, 5.23–5: 'This belongs to the greatest power, to be able to use even the evil nobly and to be strong enough to use things which have become shapeless for making other shapes.'

we shall basically find three ideal models:⁵⁵ (1) we may perceive the unjust event coming from the outside as random and meaningless, (2) we may dualistically assume that it results from an attack of evil powers which must be answered by attaching oneself to the powers of good, (3) we may see it as part of a higher divine order of things, which despite its seeming cruelty is meaningful and just at some deeper level that is hard for us to understand. The first alternative, so popular among the more successful members of our own individualistic society, would appear unbearable to the Neoplatonists, for it would leave the individual at the mercy of blind chance and would prevent meaningful orientation in the world. The second possibility would be no less unacceptable for them, for it would break the integrity of the cosmos, limiting the omnipresent power of the Good. Only the third option seemed to offer a dignified and relatively optimistic worldview, which enabled our philosophers to face life's adversities bravely and unflinchingly. It should be remarked that in antiquity this approach was far from unique. If Proclus differed from Plato or Epictetus, it was not in his overall attitude to injustice but merely in the degree of logical consistency and in his readiness to work out the common Stoic and Platonic conception into the most bizarre details.

We should also keep in mind that the aim of Proclus' theodicy is not to excuse crimes but to help good people bear injustice more easily. The Neoplatonists did not doubt that unjust actions should and would be punished – whether by human or divine justice. Yet, the punishment of criminals does not guarantee that the victim will be able to cope with the painful experience. And it is precisely the victims that Neoplatonic theodicy is primarily designed for: it offers them a perspective which sets injustice into a meaningful framework, turning it into an opportunity for self-advancement. Should the victims turn all their frustration into hatred and desire for institutionalized revenge, they are unlikely ever to reach a more peaceful state of mind; indeed, in many cases they just get entangled in the same snares of passion that originally led the villain to commit his crime. As opposed to this, the Neoplatonic approach gives the victims an opportunity for self-reflection, allowing them to draw something positive from what they have suffered. In this regard Proclus' attitude may still be inspiring today – though few of us would wish to accept it in its totalitarian precision.

⁵⁵ In their identification I am following Mary Douglas 1996, ch. 'The Problem of Evil'.

Ethics

Late Neoplatonism is famous for its complicated metaphysics as well as its interest in higher levels of reality, which at first sight seem to have little connection to moral problems of human life. This should not make us think, however, that the Neoplatonists were detached from ethical concerns. Neoplatonism is a holistic philosophical approach, in which all specific fields of knowledge are interconnected, each implying all the others. Accordingly, even most of the abstract metaphysical principles discussed in [chapter 2](#) have a number of interesting ethical consequences. One needs to admit that most of the time Proclus pays comparatively little attention to them. His chief aim is to analyse things on as general a level as possible, so that the theorems arrived at in this way might subsequently be applied to any particular field of enquiry. Unfortunately, these particular applications are something Proclus rarely finds sufficient time for. As a result, modern readers, who only have access to Proclus' thought through his texts, may easily miss the fact that Neoplatonic metaphysics was not only thought but lived and practised as well. It is the aim of this chapter to correct this bias. I shall attempt to articulate some of the more practical consequences implicit in Proclus' abstract conceptions, in this way bringing them to life, so to speak, and showing them as relevant to everyday moral concerns.

The groundwork for such a presentation has already been laid by our analysis of Proclus' theory of evil in [chapter 7](#). While Proclus' main interest in evil was metaphysical, I have also tried to highlight some aspects of his conception that have important moral consequences. In particular we have seen that the difference between psychic (moral) and bodily evil is in fact more important for Proclus than it might seem at first sight from his treatment of this subject in *On the Existence of Evils*. We shall take up this subject at the end of this chapter, using Proclus' theory of evil to throw light on Neoplatonic criteria of moral action. Before we do so, however, we shall first survey what the Neoplatonists had to say on the traditional ethical subject of virtue. Since the preserved treatises of Proclus only deal with this

topic marginally, we will have to have recourse to other Neoplatonists for a more explicit formulation of their virtue-theory. As usual, our starting point will be Plotinus, by whom we are fortunate to possess several specifically ethical treatises.¹ For late Neoplatonic developments of the original Plotinian position our main source will be Marinus, who designed his *Life of Proclus* precisely as an illustration of different degrees of virtue of which Proclus became a living example.

If we asked the Neoplatonists how a person should act properly, we would probably be asked in return what kind of person we have in mind. Our philosophers were aware that ethical requirements are different for different types of lives. The most important distinction for them was that between 'practical' and 'theoretical' lives. From the perspective of comparative religion this is no more than a version of the widespread religious distinction between the community of laymen, supplying the basic necessities of life, and a much less numerous spiritual elite, whose task is to communicate with higher levels of reality. The Neoplatonic philosopher is a saint and a priest in many regards, and his actions are thus to be evaluated by different criteria from those we apply to ordinary people pursuing worldly aims.² As we might expect, Neoplatonic texts pay much more attention to the ethics of the sage than to those of the ordinary person – after all, most of them were written for students and colleagues, and not for the general public. When surveying the Neoplatonic theory of virtue, therefore, we need to bear in mind that it was mainly designed for this very specific circle of contemplative virtuosos. This is not to say that the Neoplatonists had nothing to say on the ethics of practical life. Its presentation, however, will require a greater degree of interpretative reconstruction – a task we shall embark upon in chapter 8.2.

8.1 VIRTUES OF THE NEOPLATONIC SAGE

What is the ultimate aim of Neoplatonic ethics? A radical answer to this question is provided by Plotinus (*Enn.* 1 2, 6.2–3): 'Our concern is not to be out of sin, but to be god.' Other Neoplatonists would probably use some less daring words, but even they would see the ultimate aim (*telos*) of human life in assimilating oneself to god.³ Their chief source of inspiration

¹ The best overview of Plotinus' ethics is Dillon 1996c; a useful correcting supplement is Smith 1999.

² Proclus reflects on this distinction when defending Homeric heroes against Plato's objections in the *Republic*: since the heroes are practically minded men of war, we cannot expect the same kind of behaviour from them that we would require of philosophers (*In Remp.* 1 100.10–12; 119.22–120.3; 124.1–7; 145.28–146.5).

³ See e.g. Proclus, *De dec. dub.* 54.9–10; Marinus, *Vita Procli* 18; Porphyry, *Sent.* 32 (25.9 Lamberz).

was the famous passage from Plato's *Theaetetus* (176a–b), in which Socrates explains that evil may never disappear from our world:

Therefore we must try to escape from this world to that world as quickly as possible. The escape consists in assimilating oneself to god as far as possible; and the assimilation amounts to becoming just and holy, with understanding.

These words express a basic paradox inherent in Platonic ethics. On the one hand, its character is distinctly otherworldly: our task is to escape from this world to a higher plane of reality. The assimilation to god in this sense implies overcoming the normal human condition, which is characterized precisely by a mixture of good and evil. On the other hand, Plato himself suggests a more modest interpretation: the assimilation may simply consist in living justly and reasonably in this world – a view that is easy to reconcile with the more ‘worldly’ concept of justice as the internal order of the soul that Plato presents in the *Republic* (where the ideal of becoming like god is also present – 613a). Still, it can hardly be denied that there is a certain tension between the two approaches.⁴

The Neoplatonists took both views seriously, seeing them as two different stages on the road to self-perfection. The first clear formulation of this interpretation is to be found in Plotinus' treatise *On Virtues* (*Enn.* 1 2). According to Plotinus, the god we are meant to assimilate ourselves to is intellect, which itself transcends all normal human virtues.⁵ This is not to say, though, that these virtues would be useless. Even they are helpful, but they must be seen as a means to an end, not as the end as such.

Plotinus distinguishes two basic steps on the road to moral perfection. The first amounts to the ‘civic’ virtues (*politikai aretai*), which consist in the right relation of rational soul to the irrational parts. These are the four virtues that Plato discusses in book IV of the *Republic*: wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice. Plato uses his ideal city to illustrate their nature, and it is in this connection that he refers to them as ‘civic’ in one passage (430c). The Neoplatonists take this designation seriously and assume that the civic virtues are not only applied to the irrational parts of one's soul, but concern one's relation to other people and the civic community as well. When Marinus describes the civic virtues of Proclus, he pays greatest attention precisely to his political involvement and his readiness to help his friends (*Vita Procli* 15–17). Plotinus stresses that though these virtues are foreign to god (who has no irrational part himself, and therefore has

⁴ It is systematically discussed e.g. by Annas 1999: 51–70.

⁵ Plotinus, *Enn.* 1 2, 1.15–21. That the gods do not need ordinary human virtues is already claimed by Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1178b8–18.

no need to impose order on it), they do bring us one step closer to god, for they ‘set us in order and make us better by giving limit and measure to our desires’ (I 2, 2.14–15).

A much more important part on the journey to god is played by another class of virtues, which help to free the soul from any relation to the lower parts whatsoever. Plotinus envisages them as structurally analogous to the civic virtues but much more potent than these:

Since the soul is evil when it is thoroughly mixed with the body and shares its experiences and has the same opinions, it will be good and possess virtue when it no longer has the same opinions but acts alone – this is intelligence and wisdom – and does not share the body’s experiences – this is self-control – and is not afraid of departing from the body – this is courage – and is ruled by reason and intellect, without opposition – and this is justice. One would not be wrong in calling this state of the soul likeness to god, in which its activity is intellectual, and it is free in this way from bodily affections.⁶

Plotinus finds a Platonic prototype of these virtues in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates contrasts the conventional ‘civic and vulgar’ virtue to the virtue of philosophers (82a–b), seeing the essence of the latter in its ability to purify the soul from corporeal states (66b–69d). From Porphyry on these higher virtues will be known as ‘purificatory’ (*kathartikai*).⁷ If the ideal to be achieved at the level of civic virtues was ‘moderate affectivity’ (*metriopatheia*), the next step on the road to divinity consists in complete ‘freedom from affects’ (*apatheia*).

Plotinus’ classification of virtues was taken up and elaborated by all other Neoplatonists. At the higher end of the hierarchy Porphyry introduced two further types: ‘contemplative’ (*theōrētikai*) virtues, which regulate the soul’s relation to intellect, and ‘paradigmatic’ (*paradeigmatikai*) virtues, which on the level of intellect represent an archetype of all the psychic virtues.⁸ Iamblichus crowned the whole pack by ‘theurgic’ or ‘hieratic’ virtues, which by means of appropriate rituals make the soul divine.⁹ At the lower end the scale was expanded by ‘natural’ (*physikai*) virtues, consisting in various inborn physical and psychic perfections, and ‘ethical’ (*ēthikai*) virtues, which correspond to the virtues of popular ethics based on traditions and

⁶ Plotinus, *Enn.* 1 2, 3.11–21. For an application to Proclus see Marinus, *Vita Procli* 21.

⁷ Porphyry, *Sent.* 32 (26.1 Lamberz). See in detail Baltzly 2006.

⁸ Porphyry, *Sent.* 32 (27.3–29.7 Lamberz).

⁹ The introduction of this type of virtue is attributed to Iamblichus by Marinus, *Vita Procli* 26, who himself seems to shift the ‘paradigmatic’ virtues above the theurgic ones, regarding them as virtues of the gods themselves (*Vita Procli* 3.4–7). Olympiodorus identifies the paradigmatic virtues with the theurgic ones (*In Phaed.* 8.2–3), while Damascius leaves the paradigmatic ones at the level of intellect, placing theurgic virtues at the top (*In Phaed.* 1 143–4).

conventional rules (it is these that Plato contrasts in *Phaedo* 82a–b to the virtue of philosophers).¹⁰

The question is how exactly the lower degrees of virtue relate to the higher ones. Are they just a passing phase to be overcome in the next stage of one's ascent, or do all the types coexist, the lower serving as a foundation for the higher ones? In other words, is the ideal sage completely above worldly affairs, or does he still take care of them despite his detachment? Plotinus formulates this question himself at the end of his treatise *On Virtues*, providing a clear answer (1 2, 7.19–28):

The possessor of [the lower] virtues will know them, and how much he can get from them, and will act according to some of them as circumstances require. But when he reaches higher principles and different measures he will act according to these. For instance, he will not make self-control consist in that former observance of measure and limit, but will altogether separate himself, as far as possible, from his lower nature and will not live the life of the good man which civic virtue requires. He will leave that behind, and choose another, the life of the gods: for it is to them, not to good men, that we are to be made like.

What this amounts to is that the sage does possess the civic virtues indeed, but most of the time he does not act according to them, for he does not need to deal with the kind of problems these virtues are designed for.¹¹ At the background of this approach we may sense Plotinus' conception of the 'undescended soul'.¹² As we have seen (ch. 1.2.2), for Plotinus the true core of the soul is located at the level of Intellect. Most people do not realize this, living at the level of their embodied soul and dealing with its specific problems. The aim of the philosopher is to ascend to his true intelligible self. Once he succeeds, he does not need to be bothered by the lower components of his person any longer.

This is not to say, of course, that the Plotinian sage would let the lower parts of his soul run their course. While he does not pay any active attention to them, he is able to influence them by his mere presence. In the treatise *On Virtues* Plotinus uses a poignant image to describe the influence of the higher soul on the lower one (1 2, 5.21–31):

The soul will be pure of all these things [i.e. of all base desires] and will want to make the irrational part, too, pure, so that this part may not be disturbed; or,

¹⁰ See Damascius, *In Phaed.* 1 138–9. The entire hierarchy in all of its variants is discussed by Saffrey and Segonds 2001: lxix–xcviii.

¹¹ Plotinus takes a slightly different view in *Enn.* 1 3, 6.16–24, where he toys with the possibility that the higher virtues might bring the lower ones to perfection; unfortunately, he is not very explicit on this point. Cf. Smith 1999: 232.

¹² Its connection with Plotinian ethics is discussed by Dillon 1996c: 326–7.

if it is, not very much; its shocks will only be slight ones, easily allayed by the neighbourhood of the soul: just as a man living next door to a sage would profit by the sage's neighbourhood, either by becoming like him or by regarding him with such respect as not to dare to do anything of which the good man would not approve. So there will be no conflict: the presence of reason will be enough; the worse part will so respect it that even this worse part itself will be upset if there is any movement at all, because it did not keep quiet in the presence of its master, and will rebuke its own weakness.

The relation of the higher soul to the lower one is exactly analogous to that of the higher levels of reality to our world. According to the Neoplatonists, each level only contemplates itself as well as its higher cause, paying no attention to the lower effects it produces. Nevertheless, it still orders these effects unintentionally, acting as an ideal archetype which the lower terms strive to imitate (see ch. 2.2.2). In like fashion, once the Plotinian sage ascends to his true intelligible self, he does not need to take any active care of his lower parts, ordering them simply by acting as an authoritative paragon of virtue. Peripherally he is still aware of what is going on down below, but he only monitors this disinterestedly, without taking any active part himself (Smith 1999: 235).

The same pattern applies to the sage's external actions as well as to his attitude to others: the sage will help them and be friendly, but all his external activity is but a by-product of his contemplation, and is therefore of secondary importance to him. A good example is Plotinus himself, who was always ready to help his neighbours and friends. According to Porphyry people habitually asked him for practical advice and noble Romans appointed him as a guardian of their children. Plotinus never refused, but all his help was incidental, so to speak, without the philosopher getting really involved. As Porphyry explains, 'though he shielded so many from the worries and cares of ordinary life, he never, while awake, relaxed his intent concentration upon the intellect' (*Vita Plot.* 9.16–18). The Plotinian sage was characterized by a strange sort of cold kindness. Plotinus stresses himself that the perfect person 'will not be unfriendly or unsympathetic . . . he will render to his friends all that he renders to himself' (1 4, 15.23–4); but he certainly will not be moved by any of their troubles (1 4, 8.9–30):

One must understand that things do not look to the good man as they look to others; none of his experiences penetrate to the inner self, griefs no more than any of the others. And when the pains concern others? [To sympathise with them] would be a weakness in our soul . . . If anyone says that it is our nature to feel pain at the misfortunes of our own people, he should know that this does not apply to everybody, and that it is the business of virtue to raise ordinary nature to a higher

level, something better than most people are capable of; and it is better not to give in to what ordinary nature normally finds terrible... Does the good man, then, want misfortune? No, but when what he does not want comes he sets virtue against it, which makes his soul hard to disturb or distress.

As Plotinus remarks further on (11.12–14), the sage ‘would like all men to prosper and no one to be subject to any sort of evil; but if this does not happen, he is all the same well off. His overall attitude is perfectly summarized by John Dillon (1996: 324): ‘One feels of Plotinus that he would have gladly helped an old lady across the road – but he might very well fail to notice her at all. And if she were squashed by a passing wagon, he would remain quite unmoved.’ We should add that it was precisely this kind of behaviour that gave the philosopher his strong moral authority. His total detachment and disinterestedness guaranteed that his help would be unbiased and reliable. In the tangle of worldly pressures the philosopher stood out as a steady point everyone could rely on (Brown 1978: 61–2).

May the same be said of the late Neoplatonists? In rough outline yes. Marinus certainly depicts Proclus as a saint whose soul, ‘collecting itself from every side and gathering itself within itself, all but departed from the body, even while it seemed to be still detained by it’.¹³ Proclus showed his detachment from this world in many ways: he limited his nourishment to the necessary minimum, was a strict vegetarian (though he did not hesitate to taste of meat symbolically during sacrifices), he refused to marry and slept for just a few hours a day – but ‘perhaps even then he did not refrain from thinking’.¹⁴ Hand in hand with this he was ready to help others, and that to an even greater degree than Plotinus. For his friends he played the part of a common father, who assisted them in their difficulties, sponsored them financially and supervised their moral behaviour (*Vita Procli* 16–17). Moreover, he took an active part in political life (*Vita Procli* 15.1–8): he ‘sometimes took a hand in political deliberations, being present at public debates on the city’s affairs, offering shrewd advice and conferring with the magistrates about matters of justice, not only exhorting them, but in a manner forcing them by his philosophic frankness to give to each his due’. His political activities sometimes went against the authorities, exposing our philosopher to the danger of persecution by the Christians. In one case the risk was so great that Proclus chose to go into a one-year exile.

¹³ Marinus, *Vita Procli* 21.2–4. The idealized and hagiographic quality of Marinus’ description helps all the better to illustrate the late Neoplatonic concept of virtues, whose perfect embodiment Proclus is meant to be. What Proclus was really like is irrelevant in this regard.

¹⁴ Marinus, *Vita Procli* 24.12–13. Apparently, Marinus tries to show that Proclus surpasses even Plotinus, who only retained his intellectual concentration during waking hours (Porphyry, *Vita Plot.* 9.16–18).

All of this might suggest that for Proclus involvement in worldly affairs meant perhaps something more than just an unintentional consequence of his contemplative perfection. It is significant in this regard that Marinus designs his biography as a description of all types of Proclus' virtues, making it clear that they all coexist, the lower virtues cooperating with the higher ones rather than being a temporary stepping stones to be kicked off later, as we have seen it in Plotinus. Just as theurgic unification proceeds by stages, each new step leaning on the previous ones, so do the higher virtues require the lower ones as their basis (see above, pp. 181–3). Of no less interest is the fact that in *Vita Procli* our philosopher even shows some strong emotions:

And if he found anyone too slack in his calling, he rebuked him severely, so that he seemed rather hot-tempered and too competitive, being at the same time willing and able to judge everything correctly. He was indeed competitive, but in him competitiveness was not a passion, as in others. No, virtue and the good were the only objects of competition for him; and it may be that no great thing could occur among human beings without this sort of energetic action (*energeias*).¹⁵

Proclus' hot temper did not have the status of an 'affect' or 'passion' (*pathos*), i.e. it was not experienced as a strong emotional pressure beyond one's control. Instead, it consisted in strong energy serving a higher purpose.¹⁶ In this respect Proclus showed distinct signs of moderate affectivity (*metriopatheia*) smoothly combined with his general freedom from affects (*apatheia*).

Naturally, we may not legitimately compare Proclus' and Plotinus' approach to practical ethics on the basis of their biographies only. Proclus' greater involvement in worldly affairs might simply have resulted from his different personal character, and to some extent was also enforced by the troublesome times our philosopher lived in: under the pressure coming from the Christians the last Hellenes could hardly have afforded a complete detachment.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the difference between Plotinus and Proclus does seem to have its philosophical reasons too.¹⁸ First of all, Proclus refuses Plotinus' conception of undescended soul, placing the essence of our being on the level of rational soul only. He still sees the aim in imitating the intelligible world, but in his view this imitation must take place

¹⁵ Marinus, *Vita Procli* 16.9–17. Damascius speaks similarly of Isidorus in *Hist. phil.*, fr. 15–16.

¹⁶ As we shall see soon (p. 242), Proclus himself conceptualizes this emotional energy as a 'providential loving desire' (*erōs promoētikos*). Just as the gods are sometimes a bit tough on us for pedagogical reasons (see ch. 7.7), so is the sage on his disciples.

¹⁷ As Watts persuasively argues (2006: 101–10), Proclus initially underestimated the political influence of Athenian Christians, which led to his eventual one-year exile (*Vita Procli* 15). After his return he became more politically concerned and worked to get sufficient external support for his school.

¹⁸ They are systematically discussed by Baltzly 2004; the following two paragraphs are but a summary of some of his arguments.

in a psychic manner. The higher levels of divinity are but a remote ideal to which we only assimilate ourselves indirectly. A direct assimilation is only possible in relation to the psychic (hypercosmic) gods, who represent the highest type of participated souls. Proclus' goal is thus more moderate than that of Plotinus, standing closer to our world.

Furthermore, Proclus differs from Plotinus on the issue of virtues of the gods themselves. For Plotinus there are no proper virtues in the intelligible realm, only their higher archetypes (*Enn.* I 2, 2.1–4; 3.19–31). It follows that even the purificatory virtues (not to mention the civic ones) are but a transient stage on the road to divinity. Once the aim is achieved, one stands beyond all virtue. Late Neoplatonists take a different view: following the 'all-in-all' principle they claim that 'even in gods there are all the virtues'.¹⁹ The gods thus possess the civic virtues too. After all, divine souls have their luminescent bodies, and even a most refined sort of irrationality (Proclus, *In Tim.* III 236.32). Needless to say they keep it in a perfectly ordered state, but precisely in this they show their civic virtue. We may expect, therefore, that not even the humans who strive to be like them need to give up their civic virtues, practising them hand in hand with all the other types.

It is important in this connection that Proclus lays great stress on the providential care of the gods for all the lower things. Admittedly, he agrees with Plotinus that strictly speaking the care is quite 'automatic': the gods only send their involuntary emanation to lower things, while being fully absorbed in themselves (see ch. 2.2.1–2.2.2). Nonetheless, in his descriptions Proclus chooses a slightly different type of metaphor, describing the care as a systematic activity which is an integral part of the gods' existence (*ET* 120). He even goes as far as positing a special type of 'providential loving desire' (*erōs pronoētikos*) which, contrary of the usual Platonic conception of *erōs*, is conceived not as a desire to attain perfection for oneself, but a desire to provide perfection to others. In a Platonic philosopher such an idea might appear surprising, and it has sometimes been compared to the Christian concept of charitable *agapē*, which used to be seen as the very opposite of *erōs*.²⁰ Yet, while Plato himself would probably never think of *erōs* in this way, seeing it as essentially directed upon that which the lover lacks, there are in fact a number of points in Platonic dialogues that

¹⁹ Damascius, *In Phaed.* I 150.1.

²⁰ A classic formulation of the *erōs–agapē* antithesis was provided by Nygren 1930, who was forced to see Proclus' providential *erōs* as influenced by Christianity. Nygren's black-and-white distinction was criticized by Armstrong 1961, who found a prototype of Proclus' conception in Plato's *Phaedrus*; cf. in similar vein Rist 1964b.

Proclus could build upon in reworking this traditional notion of *erōs*. First and foremost, the workings of *erōs* presuppose the presence of *beauty*, which shines from the higher levels into our world. What Proclus does is bring these two aspects together, seeing them as two sides of one and the same process:

The whole order of erotic desire is for all beings the cause of reversion to the divine beauty, on the one hand elevating to, uniting with and establishing in it all that is secondary, and on the other filling with this beauty all the lower things and irradiating from thence the communications of divine light that proceed from it.²¹

Proclus' concept of *erōs* is to be understood in the context of the cycle of procession and reversion. In the first stage of this cycle it amounts to a creative emanation, in the second it changes its direction and turns into a desire to revert.²² Normally, we only talk of erotic desire in connection with the second of these movements, but in fact the energy that drives things upwards is the same as that which in the first half of the cycle flowed downwards. By applying the concept of *erōs* to the entire cycle, Proclus introduces no substantial change into Neoplatonic metaphysics, but he does shift the emphasis slightly, creating a different worldview effect: while Plotinian gods seemed more detached, the gods of Proclus relate to the cosmos actively and keep looking after it.

The providential care for the world, of course, goes hand in hand with the gods' transcendence (*In Alc.* 53.17–54.8):

The more accurate accounts say that there are two principal elements in divine and daemonic providence towards the secondary beings: (1) that it passes through all things from the top to the bottom, leaving nothing, not even the least, without a share in itself, and (2) it neither admits into itself any thing it controls nor is infected with its character nor is confused therewith. It is not mixed up with the objects of its provision just because it preserves and arranges everything (for it is not the nature of the divine or daemonic to experience the emotions of individual souls), nor does it leave any of the inferior beings without order or arrangement because of its distinct superiority over all that is secondary, but it both disposes everything duly and transcends what it disposes.

This is exactly how a perfect philosopher should behave in his effort to become like the gods: he should actively impose order upon the lower parts of his soul as well as the world around him, and yet should retain his philosophical detachment. In other words, he should possess both the

²¹ Proclus, *In Alc.* 30.14–18; cf. 32.9–33.16; 45.4–6; 55.10–17.

²² For the cyclic nature of *erōs* see Gersh 1973: 123–7; van den Berg 2001: 197–8.

civic and the purificatory virtues (as well as all the other types of virtue). For Proclus, the perfect embodiment of such an approach is Socrates and his 'erotic' relation to Alcibiades: he calls himself the youth's first lover, thus showing his providential love for him, yet for many years he has not spoken to him at all (Plato, *Alc.* I 103a), thus expressing his transcendence (*In Alc.* 55.4–6): 'So at the same time he is both present to Alcibiades and not present, he both loves and remains detached, observes him from all angles yet in no respect puts himself in the same class.' While we may perhaps see this as an all too inventive reading of the Platonic passage in question, in general one may hardly deny that Plato's Socrates does indeed display distinct signs of both characteristics of divine providence: he cares for the good of the city, yet he does not wish to get involved in politics; he loves talking to others, yet never loses his own concentration; he enters into erotic relationships, but never abandons his self-control.

In his own life, Proclus attempted to unite these opposing attitudes too: 'he did not live according to only one of the modes that characterize divinity, that of pure thought and aspiration to the better, but he also displayed a more divine consideration of things in the second rank'.²³ Contemplation only reaches its completion when it is combined with providential care for the lower levels (*De mal.* 23.10–18):

For the primary good is not contemplation, intellectual life, and knowledge, as someone has said somewhere.²⁴ No, it is life in accordance with the divine intellect which consists, on the one hand, in comprehending the intelligibles through its own intellect, and, on the other, in encompassing the sensibles with the powers of [the circle of] difference and in giving even to these sensibles a portion of the goods from above. For that which is perfectly good possesses plenitude, not by the mere preservation of itself, but because it also desires, by its gift to others and through the ungrudging abundance of its activity, to benefit all things and make them similar to itself.

Experts on Plotinus would no doubt be able to find parallels to most of these motifs in him as well, denouncing the ethical contrast between him and Proclus as artificial. One cannot deny that the basic philosophical principles are very similar, the difference being rather in diction and in

²³ Marinus, *Vita Procli* 28. Marinus adds that he did so 'not merely in the political way recorded earlier', but also by having recourse to theurgic rituals. Apparently, the highest theurgic degree of virtue does not surpass the lower ones but allows one to act in accordance with them more effectively.

²⁴ In the note to their translation Opsomer and Steel refer to Aristotle, *Eth. Eud.* 1214a32–3; but more generally Proclus might have Plotinus in mind as well, who in *Enn.* 1 4 identifies well-being with intellectual contemplation regardless of the sufferings of one's body.

greater fondness for certain subjects. Nevertheless, even this purely rhetorical distinction means a lot, for it points to different worldviews that one may construe using the same building blocks. While Plotinus' universe had an open ceiling, so to speak, enabling an escape into the intelligible world, the eastern Neoplatonists postulated sharp boundaries between levels of reality, condemning the human soul to perpetual sojourn at its own proper level (see ch. 1.2.2). At the same time, however, they placed greater cosmic responsibility upon it. The soul's task is to mediate between our world and the intelligible realm, bringing both into harmony. This essential function stands out clearly in Proclus' answer to the question of why the soul descends into the world in the first place (*In Tim.* III 324.6–12):

For it wants to imitate the providential care of the gods; it is for this reason that it abandons its contemplation. For divine perfection is of two kinds: one is intellective, the other providential; the former consists in rest, the latter in motion. This being so, the soul imitates the intellective and unswerving stability of the gods by its contemplation, but their providence and motion by its life in the world of generation.

The soul thus combines the upward and downward movements, care for the body with the desire to contemplate. While most people experience descent and contemplation as two distinct stages separated in time, being only engaged in contemplation in the interim between incarnations, philosophers should be able to pursue both activities at the same time during their life on earth.

In similar vein Proclus insists that for human souls there is no release from the cycle of reincarnations. 'Every particular soul can descend into generation and ascend from it to being an infinite number of times' (*ET* 206.1–2). The worse souls descend more often, for due to their weak will they naturally gravitate towards the realm of matter; nonetheless, not even the best souls can completely avoid repeated births: each needs to descend at least once in each cosmic period (*ET* 206; *In Tim.* III 278.9–27). The reason lies in the intermediate position of soul: if throughout the entire cosmic period it did not descend at all, it would belong to intellective entities that by their nature always remain in themselves.²⁵ While the immaculate

²⁵ Proclus, *In Tim.* III 278.23–4. Another interesting reason is provided in the fourth century by Sallustius (*De deis* 20): were it possible for souls to be released from the cycle of rebirth, god would either have to create new souls perpetually (which is absurd), or the world would gradually get depopulated, turning into a ghetto in which only the most miserable losers remain. Once again, we can see here the late Neoplatonic emphasis on shared cosmic responsibility. It is significant that the

souls might in theory enjoy their perfection indefinitely, in actuality they choose to descend into generation of their own free will – not on account of their weakness, but out of their providential desire to care for lower things and help others: ‘some help the less perfect souls through the art of divination, others through initiatory rites and others through the divine art of healing’.²⁶

None of this is to deny that the contemplative effort was in fact much stronger with our philosophers than their downward providential activity. Since the world by its natural course drags the soul down permanently, the philosopher needs to devote most of his energy to contemplation simply in order to balance out this constant downward pull. For this reason we cannot expect to find the Neoplatonists exposed in the middle of worldly affairs in positions that would make the maintenance of contemplative detachment extremely difficult.²⁷

Proclus himself solved the discrepancy between contemplative and practical life by a sophisticated manoeuvre: he was mainly devoted to contemplation himself, transferring the burden of practical activities to his best friend Archiadas, the grandson of the Neoplatonist Plutarch of Athens. He ‘taught him and trained him in civic virtues and methods, and, as one encourages people in a race, exhorted him to be at the very head of public affairs in his own city, and to be a private benefactor to everyone’.²⁸ Archiadas thus acted as a kind of ‘practical’ double of the contemplative Proclus (*Vita Procli* 17.30–1): ‘for Archiadas was nothing that Proclus was not also, nor was Proclus anything that Archiadas was not also’. Robbert van den Berg (2005: 107) compares this strategy to that of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* (41–2), who creates souls and the universe as a whole, but leaves the creation of individual bodies to the ‘young gods’, so that he does not soil his hands by the lowest corporeal work. In like fashion, many of the late Neoplatonists only exercised their providential care indirectly. They found it important, but preferred to direct it from a distance, lending

only Neoplatonist to admit the final release of souls is Plotinus’ pupil Porphyry (*De regr.*, fr. 11). Plotinus himself is silent on the matter. See in detail Smith 1974: 56–80.

²⁶ Proclus, *In Alc.* 33.1–3; cf. *De mal.* 20–2. John Dillon (1973: 243) fittingly compares these ‘immaculate’ souls with the Buddhist *bodhisattvas*.

²⁷ This is rightly emphasized by van den Berg (2005) against the slightly overblown stress on the political activity of the Neoplatonists in O’Meara 2003.

²⁸ Marinus, *Vita Procli* 14.8–12. It is interesting that Plotinus, on the other hand, attempted to dissuade his friends Zethus and Rogatianus from a political career (Porphyry, *Vita Plot.* 7); one needs to admit, though, that Rogatianus’ health was greatly improved by this. Besides, Proclus also had pragmatic reasons for supporting the public engagement of Archiadas: his position in the increasingly Christian Athens was insecure and he needed a trustworthy Athenian citizen to politically defend his school (Watts 2006: 107–8).

contemplative support to those who had the courage to throw themselves headlong into the turbid stream of politics.

8.2 ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Whether the ethics of the Neoplatonic sage had a Proclean or Plotinian form, it always created a clear divide between philosophers and laymen. Important philosophers played the part of saints, who had surpassed the limits of mortal nature, having achieved a degree of perfection to which ordinary people could not aspire. No doubt the sage could still significantly influence the actions of laymen: his superhuman moral integrity turned him into a powerful ethical model that others could admire and imitate at least partially and imperfectly.²⁹ Despite this, the aims of the philosopher differed greatly from those of common folks, and we may therefore rightly wonder whether Neoplatonic ethics has something to say on the problems of ordinary mortals. While admittedly the Neoplatonists hardly paid any explicit attention to this aspect of ethics, I believe a coherent theory of moral action can be deduced from their writings – particularly if we take into account Proclus' theory of evil.

What exactly is the status of practical action in Neoplatonism? The clearest answer to this question is provided by Plotinus' treatise *On Nature and Contemplation and the One* (*Enn.* III 8), which we have already discussed in chapter 4.2. We have seen, that for Plotinus 'every action (*praxis*) is a serious effort towards contemplation' (III 8, I.15). At higher planes of reality, action is a natural by-product of contemplation, for it is precisely by contemplating both itself and its higher causes that each hypostasis reaches perfection and starts to produce. This is the ethical model imitated by the sage, who only performs his good deeds unwittingly, being permanently absorbed in his thoughts. In the realm of matter, action usually takes a more complicated course: it is not a consequence of contemplation but a substitute for it. Since most embodied souls are too weak to contemplate directly, they need to have recourse to external actions and creations which serve as a means to bring forward the soul's own hidden *logoi*, allowing it to contemplate them and recognize them as its own. In late Neoplatonism this conception of human action was taken up and systematized into the doctrine of projection (*probolē*).

²⁹ See Plotinus, *Enn.* I 2, 5.21–31 (quoted above, pp. 238–9). The idea of Neoplatonic sages acting as ethical models influencing the behaviour of ordinary people is defended in detail by Schniewind 2003.

The idea of worldly actions having a contemplative dimension is no invention of the Neoplatonists. It goes back to Plato, who formulates it quite clearly in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. According to the *Phaedrus* myth, before their incarnation all souls spend their time above the heavens contemplating the Forms; after being born in earthly bodies they forget about those marvellous sights, but they can be reminded of them by being confronted with something in this world that resembles the Forms. In a memorable passage (255c–d) Plato gives a vivid picture of what was later described as ‘projection’ by the Neoplatonists, narrating that from every lover ‘a flowing stream’ of love pours in upon the beloved³⁰ and rebounding from him as from a smooth hard surface turns back and re-enters the eyes of the lover, so that the beloved becomes ‘as it were a mirror’ in which the lover ‘unconsciously beholds himself’ (255d6), the lover thus having the opportunity to recollect the Forms within himself through his beloved. Moreover, in the *Symposium* we are told that this is actually the case not just with human relationships but with all of our activities – for *erōs* is really a name for ‘every kind of longing for the good’ and one indulges in love even by becoming a businessman, or by practising gymnastic exercise or philosophy (205d). It follows that even these activities must involve some kind of projection, reminding us of the Forms whose traces we unconsciously bear in our souls.

The Platonic theory of projection is significant in that it allows one, at least partially, to bridge over the antithesis of action and contemplation. It grants external activities their import, while regarding them as something relative and instrumental. Everyday activities have no value in themselves, but they are valuable as tools which help us reintegrate our *logoi*. Interestingly enough, Proclus seems to take this idea slightly more seriously than Plotinus. We have seen above (p. 145) that while Plotinus does indeed regard actions as leading to contemplation, he only sees them as a poor substitute suitable for ‘the duller children, who are incapable of learning and contemplative studies and turn to crafts and manual work’ (III 8, 4.45–7). The philosopher apparently has no need of external actions, examining his own soul directly.³¹ Proclus’ approach to external actions is more hospitable (*De dec. dub.* 37.9–20):

³⁰ In the passage the relation is actually reversed and it is the beloved who falls for the lover, the basic situation having already been described. But as this might lead to confusion, I will keep to the more natural relation in my summary.

³¹ See Plotinus, *Enn.* III 8, 6.37–8: ‘The truly good man, therefore, has already finished inspecting his reason-principles (*lelogistai ēdē*) and instead he reveals them to others out of his own self; but in relation to himself he is vision.’ In other words, for the sage his pedagogical activity is not a prop for contemplation but its spontaneous by-product.

Moreover, since virtue is not one and indivisible but multifarious, we must understand that providence always incites us to ever different projections of our reason-principles, in order that the virtuous person might realize all possible modes of virtue and be shown as its true champion in the eyes of those who have arranged the contest of virtue [i.e. the gods]. For this reason providence often brings externally active people to rest, making the intellect within them revert on itself, but it moves to actions those who only look inside themselves; in this way it teaches us what form virtue has and that it is of two aspects. This is why providence gives us various tools but then takes back again what it has given: by making human lives variegated it challenges good people to actualize their dispositions in all possible manners, training them in this way to administer this universe together with the gods.

Proclus speaks from his own experience, here: he too was not allowed to spend all his life contemplating and was occasionally forced by providence to get involved in political debates, and in one case to go into a one-year exile (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 15). Still, he tried to see such troublesome episodes as positive trials that ‘providence sends us as opportunities of practising the reason-principles within us’ (*De dec. dub.* 37.26–7). Internal and external activity were complementary in this regard, corresponding to different kinds of virtue one should exercise simultaneously.

The Neoplatonic ‘projective’ view of human action is not just interesting in that it allows us to take worldly activities seriously and find higher meaning in them. Even more importantly for our discussion, it provides the key criterion for their moral evaluation. According to the Neoplatonists, actions which fail to lead to contemplation are not just meaningless but positively *evil*. Let us recall that for Proclus evil consists in the failure of each being to achieve its own proper perfection. The perfection of humans consists in their rational self-reflection, for man is a rational soul, which in its perfect essence is self-constituted, contemplating itself. Self-knowledge is thus the true aim of human life,³² and Proclus may duly claim that ‘the greatest evil’ consists in ‘not knowing oneself’ (*In Alc.* 17.3–4), i.e. in failing to see one’s actions as a means of reintegrating one’s own *logoi*, in this way falling short of the basic perfection of humans as reflexive beings.

It might seem that while this conception makes good sense ontologically, it is difficult to apply to practical ethics. Yet it is in fact in agreement with the basic line of Platonic ethics, which was revolutionary in shifting the criteria of morality away from actions to the psychic state of the agent. From the Platonic perspective what matters is not *what* we do but *how* we

³² See *ET* 39 with commentary above, p. 68, and in greater detail Steel 2006.

do it. As Plotinus puts it, 'actions do not produce goodness of themselves, but it is men's dispositions which make actions excellent'.³³ In the *Republic*, Plato postulates the correct hierarchical symmetry of the soul's parts as a criterion of its just disposition. The *Phaedrus* myth describes these same inter-psyche relations by referring to the soul's contemplative ability: a good soul is one whose wings grow, i.e. one that takes worldly encounters with beauty as opportunities for contemplating intelligible archetypes of beauty without giving in to base bodily desires. The Neoplatonic theory of projection is but a more precise way of expressing the same idea: an action is only good if it helps the soul recollect its reason-principles.

Why exactly is it that an action divorced from contemplation should make the soul evil and should frequently produce the kind of behaviour which even conventional action-based ethics regards as vicious? The answer lies in the essential bi-dimensionality of human beings (cf. *De mal.* 23). We are essentially rooted in the higher world, bearing its glamorous invisible vision secretly inscribed in the depths of our souls. Even the lower, irrational impulses are deeply influenced by this primordial vision, and strive to catch some reflection of it in this corporeal world of ours. They always manage, to be sure, but being blind to the transcendent dimension, they are unable to distinguish between the relative perfection of the image and the true perfection of the original. Having a faint memory of the beauty of the higher realm, they try to achieve it in our world as well. This, of course, is an impossible task, for the material world simply cannot contain the ideal beauty of higher realities. As a result, people *pervert* the *logoi* they are trying to realize, investing them with more expectations than they can bear. They want to *possess everything*, just as each Form possesses all the others, and the result is covetousness and possessiveness; they want to achieve *unity* with all other things, and so indulge in sexual promiscuity or become a part of the mob; they want to *occupy the same place* as other people, just as the Forms do, and so commit murders.³⁴

Proclus provides a cogent illustration of this principle in the *Alcibiades Commentary*. Analysing Alcibiades' aspiration to become the greatest and the most honoured man ruling over both Europe and Asia, Proclus explains that it stems from his deep-seated longing for the divine. Unfortunately, Alcibiades mistakes the earthly image of greatness for its divine

³³ Plotinus, *Enn.* I 5, 10.12–13. Another aspect of the same approach is nicely expressed by the Alexandrian Neoplatonist Olympiodorus (*In Gorg.* 41.5, 8–10): 'To achieve well-being it is not enough to refrain from stealing, one also needs to have one's soul completely ordered; for not stealing means nothing.'

³⁴ See Plotinus, *Enn.* II 3, II.1–II (quoted above, p. 225) for various examples of distortion that heavenly influences may suffer in our world.

archetype, perverting his ambition and making it immoderate (*In Alc.* 148.10–16):

Well, in pursuing all that is held in honour, he is at any rate striving after the divine; for the divine is primarily held in honour . . . but unawareness of what is really held in honour makes him concern himself with what is apparent and unstable. It is therefore the task of knowledge to indicate what is true honour and in what grade of being the honourable is to be found.

Similarly, the desire to rule over all men is really the soul's yearning 'to join the gods in the regulation of the whole world; if knowledge prevails the end of such a soul is salvation, but without it the end is ruin both for those who have these desires and for the rest of men' (*In Alc.* 149.6–10).

It is useful to compare the Neoplatonic position to that of the Stoics. For Chrysippus, vice consists in passion (*pathos*), which is defined as a *perversion* of *logos* due to its being coupled with *excessive impulse*.³⁵ Our impulses are excessive whenever they lack *reservation*, i.e. whenever we are not able to adapt our intentions to the inscrutable cosmic plans of Zeus, sticking to our own ideas of what is good for us. The passionate man takes the aims he strives for too seriously, mistaking them for something unreservedly good, choosing strongly what he should have chosen lightly, lacking the easiness and readiness to give up things.³⁶ His mistake, therefore, consists in overvaluing things, and thus deforming them by pushing all too hard.

Proclus would basically agree, but would probably claim that within their immanentist framework the Stoics are not quite able to explain *why* men should have this tendency to exceed measures and overestimate things. If all the world is divine, and matter and *logos* are but two aspects of the same thing, as the Stoics hold,³⁷ why should *logos* ever be perverted at all? The Platonic distinction between various levels of reality provides a convincing answer, postulating an essential *tension* between *logos* and matter. For Proclus, this tension is positive at heart: it is constituted by that continuous flow of energy which unites causes and effects in a perpetual cycle of *monē*, *prohodos* and *epistrophē*, combining similarity and difference in a balanced way. The task of human souls is to maintain this tension, making sure that the rational and the bodily level are kept similar *and*

³⁵ See e.g. *SVF* III 459 or III 377: 'passion is an impulse that is excessive or that stretches beyond the measures given by reason'. Chrysippus' conception was set in an entirely different framework of monistic psychology, of course, but the basic idea was meaningful across different schools, being already adopted and 'platonized' by Plutarch in *De virtute morali* 450C–451B, 444C.

³⁶ See Inwood 1985: 118–25, 165–71 for this interpretation of 'excessive impulse'.

³⁷ See *SVF* II 310; 313. For a specifically Proclean criticism of Stoic immanentism see *In Tim.* I 413.27–414.7 (= *SVF* II 1042).

distinct at the same time. Evil originates whenever the tension is released, one of its poles giving way to the other.³⁸

The peculiar existential situation of mankind that tempts us to pervert our *logoi* becomes even more obvious when compared to that of irrational animals.³⁹ Ontologically, the crucial difference between beasts and humans is that the former live on one level only, namely that of the bodily world with the irrational soul immersed in it. As a result, their aspirations are adapted to the limits of corporeal reality, and they may indulge in them more or less freely. A lion may behave violently and devour our sheep, and yet it will not become unmeasured by behaving so, for in all its activities it follows a strictly defined pattern of behaviour that is natural for it, setting clear measures to whatever the animal may do.⁴⁰ It is only with humans that the same kind of behaviour becomes problematic, for our true nature is of a higher level: 'In the case of lions and leopards one would not consider rage to be something evil, but one would do so in the case of human beings, for whom reason is the best.'⁴¹

What Proclus perhaps implies is not just that the same behaviour is good for the lion but bad for humans, but even more significantly, that by behaving like lions or leopards men actually become worse than them. That 'the vice of animals is less serious than that of people' was noted by Porphyry,⁴² though he did not provide an explanation of this fact. Proclus' own theory offers an answer. The behaviour of animals is regulated by a *logos* that is natural to them, consisting in a pattern of behaviour that may ideally be realized in this world. The realization may sometimes fail, the result being a behaviour that is weak and unnatural – such as that of a lion becoming cowardly. The situation of humans is more complicated due to their bi-dimensionality. They too have a *logos* to follow, but it lies on a

³⁸ In this, of course, Proclus again comes close to the Stoics, who also identify virtue with the correct tension (*tonos*) in the soul (see Long 1996: 212–13). Where he differs from them is in verticalizing this tension and relating it to the 'amphibious' status of human soul.

³⁹ See Proclus, *De mal.* 18 and 25.

⁴⁰ Indeed, the only way a lion might become evil would be by *not* being violent and devouring sheep (*De mal.* 25.24–7, quoted above, p. 209). To what extent this is the animal's own fault (i.e. to what extent its evil can really be classified as 'vice') is unclear from *De mal.* 25–6. The possibility of animal vices is defended by Porphyry in *De abst.* (e.g. III 10.4, 13.2–3), who refuses to see a sharp boundary between animals and humans, taking the difference between the two as merely a matter of degree. In Proclus' own universe, however, the boundaries are fixed and impenetrable, animals standing on an entirely different level (see the quote from *PT* III 6 above, pp. 97–8). This is why a human soul cannot be reborn into an animal but may only be externally attached to an animal soul for educational reasons (*In Tim.* III 294.22–295.32).

⁴¹ Proclus, *De mal.* 18.22–3. Cf. *In Remp.* II 90.26–91.2.

⁴² Porphyry *De abst.* III 10.4; cf. earlier Aristotle, *Pol.* 1253a31–7.

higher ontological level. At their own level our irrational impulses have no *logos*, i.e. no inbuilt controlling mechanism to regulate them.⁴³ It is the task of our reason to do that. Accordingly, while a lion's rage can only fall short of its natural limit, a man's rage easily transgresses all limits, turning ugly and unmeasured. Our impulses aspire to a higher perfection than the material world can bear, thus 'overstraining' it and making it deformed.⁴⁴

From the point of view of practical ethics it is important that this principle holds regardless of the conventional moral quality of our worldly actions. Even seemingly noble activities are bad if one just pursues them in themselves and fails to see them as referring to higher realities. As Plotinus puts it (*Enn.* iv 4, 44.25–7): 'If one is content with the nobility in practical activities, and chooses activity because one is deluded by its vestiges of nobility, one has been enchanted in one's pursuit of the nobility in the lower world.' Not even charitable work or other laudable activity can count as a guarantee of goodness. Indeed, it may sometimes be more dangerous than plainly immoral behaviour, for by its seeming moral beauty it may easily deceive us and make us think that the activity in question has its moral value in itself. Its author may thus become a passionate 'perpetrator of the good', whose internal moral contortion cannot be demonstrated by means of conventional ethical criteria.

It is for this reason that the Neoplatonists refuse to delimit the good in any way. They believe that any positive 'list of goods' would lead to an unhealthy attachment to particular 'good' activities in this world, preventing us from relating to their transcendent sources. From the Platonic perspective the good may be reached by all roads – but only if we really take them as roads, not mistaking them for the end as such. The negativity of the Good keeps on reminding us of the narrowness of all partial goods. It shows clearly that all definable goods are relative only. It provides not a positive description of what *is* good, but negative criteria of what is *not*. In this way it avoids the pitfalls of restrictive moral traditionalism, yet it does not slide down into ethical relativism – for the negative criteria it offers are absolute. The Platonists recognize that the good is to be defined differently for each individual in each particular situation, but they are also

⁴³ Strictly speaking this is not true, for 'there is no form of life so bad that the power of reason-principle (*logos*) is completely extinguished; some reason-principle remains inside, expressing itself feebly, though surrounded by all kinds of passions' (*De mal.* 7.42–3) However, the feeble *logos* that our irrational impulses have is not regulative, and thus cannot guarantee their proper behaviour.

⁴⁴ See Porphyry *De abst.* iii 19.3: 'We see that many people live only by perception, having no intellect or *logos*, and that many surpass the most terrifying beasts in savagery and anger and aggression: they murder their children and kill their fathers, they are tyrants and agents of kings.'

convinced that despite this ethical flexibility we may clearly ascertain in each case whether one's action is good or evil. They are able to maintain this position thanks to the fact that they do not regard the Good as a positive measure (which would always be confined to some cases only) but a negative one – and therefore one that is altogether general and may be equally applied to all possible situations.

CHAPTER 9

Worldview

Throughout the previous chapters, I have attempted to present Proclus' thought not just as it appears from within (i.e. as a coherent philosophical system of rational propositions that may be reconstructed on the basis of Proclus' texts), but also in regard to its wider 'worldview effect'. Above all, I have tried to argue for a fundamental worldview difference between Plotinus and the eastern Neoplatonists. While in terms of particular arguments and conceptions Proclus' metaphysics may often be seen as a rigid formalization of the thought of Plotinus, once we consider the two systems holistically, we will find them presenting a very different conception of the human subject and its place in the universe. So far I have only commented on this difference occasionally and unsystematically. The aim of this chapter is to finally pull all the threads together and attempt a systematic presentation of Proclus' worldview as contrasted with that of Plotinus – and indeed, with that of Classical and Hellenistic philosophy as well.

A systematic worldview analysis will require a substantial shift in methodology. Whereas the previous chapters were primarily written for students of ancient philosophy, in what follows we will have to step back from the philosophical details of Proclus' thought and look at our philosopher against the wider background of late ancient society and religion. As I have explained in the Introduction (pp. 3–8), I understand 'worldviews' as transcending the limits of philosophy and being concerned with the general way people think of themselves and of their place in the world. Worldviews certainly find one of their most elaborate expressions in the hands of philosophers; at the same time, however, they also pervade all other areas of human culture, such as religion and politics. For this reason we will have to widen the perspective and take into account a number of areas normally ignored by historians of philosophy. We shall start in chapter 9.1 by examining the part that the Neoplatonists played on the religious scene of late antiquity. Sections 9.2–3 will go one step further, attempting a tentative general reconstruction of a process of worldview changes between

the second and the fifth centuries. My main guide will be Peter Brown, whose valuable analyses I will try to combine with a Foucaultian inquiry into the Greek notion of the subject.

9.1 PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Throughout antiquity, Greek religion and philosophy were always partners rather than enemies.¹ Early philosophers may have criticized traditional religion severely, yet in most cases they did not do so in order to demolish it, but rather with a view to correcting it and improving it. If they chastised the mythical image of the gods, in most cases it was only to offer a more sublime conception of divinity, one that is free from immoral and base features. Significantly, it was mostly the myths of the poets that were censured, never the civic cults that formed the true pillar of Greek religion. The philosophers wished to *speak* of the gods differently, but were prepared to perform the same rituals as ordinary folk – though they may have had different reasons for doing so.² As a result, philosophy and religion never really clashed. At worst, they ran parallel to each other. At best, they were complementary, philosophy providing a higher theological support to traditional cults. The Neoplatonists were no exception in this regard, and we may trace in them both of these opposing approaches, Plotinus favouring parallelism, Iamblichus complementarity. Nonetheless, living as they did in an age of religious and social transition, their religious attitudes displayed some interesting novel features. To understand them, we need to make a brief (and necessarily simplistic) sketch of the changes that pagan civic religion underwent in late antiquity.

Hellenic religion had always been closely tied to the existence of autonomous cities, which formed its basic framework.³ Traditional polytheism was characterized not just by the existence of multiple divinities, but even more significantly by a plurality of their local manifestations. Each city in fact possessed an independent religious system of its own which was quite autonomous, despite cooperating with other religious systems on a Pan-Hellenic level. Hellenic religion was primarily a religion of local communities whose members took part in the same cults, which bound them together and gave them a common identity. In Roman times, cities were oligarchies ruled by members of local elites, who demonstrated the

¹ More on this subject see e.g. Meijer 1981; Most 2003; Betegh 2006.

² See e.g. Price 1999: 133–6.

³ See Sourvinou-Inwood 2000 for the Classical period, and Lane Fox 1986: 46–63 for the second and third centuries AD.

'love of their hometown' by their 'euergetism', i.e. by investing their riches in public amenities. Religion offered an ideal opportunity for such an investment: civic cults and festivals had always been the backbone of social life, and their support was a perfect way of satisfying individual ambitions in a publicly approved and beneficial way. In this way, the competitive 'love of honour' of local magistrates worked as fuel that kept traditional cults strong and vital.⁴

The model just sketched enjoyed its last heyday in the second century AD, when both written and archaeological sources attest to vivid religious activity, and even to an effort at reconstructing sanctuaries and renewing old cults.⁵ In retrospect, this religious and cultural renaissance appears as the last attempt at saving the old cultural world that was slowly entering a period of fundamental transformation. From the end of the second century there are signs of 'a loosening of the civic cohesion of the Greek city-state'.⁶ Not only was there an ever-growing gap between the rich elite and the passive majority of citizens. Even more importantly, the crucial institution of euergetism, which would normally help to bridge this gap and unite the rich and the poor in one civic community, progressively started to reach its limits. When Libanius retrospectively analysed this process in AD 365 in his *Funeral Oration on Julian*, he saw the main problem as the tendency of more and more notables to evade the responsibility of public benefaction: the city councils, which in the old days (i.e. in the second century) had plenty of wealthy members, were gradually reduced to just a handful of desperate individuals, 'most of whom were reduced to beggary by their public financial duties' (*Or.* 18.146); the majority of former councillors had been exempted from the financial burden by entering imperial service, 'some serving in the army, others in the Senate' (*ibid.*).

Generally, what started to change from the end of the second century AD was the relation between cities and the Empire. Not that the autonomy of cities would vanish: they were still the basic organization units of the Empire with a great degree of local responsibility. However, they were now embedded in a complex system of imperial administration, and one that progressively offered to city notables 'alternatives to a municipal career, and motives for getting out of the latter, which could not be regarded as dishonourable either by the community or by the individuals concerned'.⁷

⁴ For lively descriptions of this system of financing public religion see Lane Fox 1986: 52–7; Brown 1978: 23–42. On euergetism in general see Veyne 1990 and 1997: 106–15.

⁵ See Lane Fox 1986: 72–5, who contrasts this revival to the relative neglect of sanctuaries in the preceding centuries.

⁶ Lane Fox 1986: 322. For details see *ibid.* 52, 57, 63, 321–5, 334; Athanassiadi 1981: 99–103.

⁷ Carrié 2005: 312.

Each notable in fact had two distinct citizenships: one that bound him to his hometown, potentially involving him in a number of public financial duties, another that made him a Roman, allowing him to escape the local constraints and pursue a much less burdensome, yet equally respectable imperial career. Since the third century, this way of avoiding local obligations in favour of imperial service was apparently taken by more and more individuals, and was increasingly tolerated by the emperor.⁸

The effects of this development on the life of cities were far-reaching. During the third century, 'the great flood of private munificence displayed in public buildings, banquets, distribution of money or food, games, statues and inscribed monuments subsided everywhere'.⁹ When public building activities took place, they were frequently initiated by imperial governors instead of local councillors.¹⁰ For civic religion this meant a substantial change. Public cults certainly did not wither away, but they were slowly being cut off from what used to be their main source of vitality, viz. the competitive love of honour of local notables. The ceremonies had to become more modest, and when they did retain their splendour, it was frequently with the help of imperial subsidies.¹¹ Public inscriptions advertising the generosity of local religious sponsors drastically decreased by the 250s – a clear sign that the chief source of social prestige no longer lay at the local level.¹² Instead of seeing it as their prerogative to invest their riches into the social and religious life of the entire city, many local aristocrats now preferred to pursue their individual careers in the higher echelons of imperial administration.

It seems to have been this process that internally eroded traditional polytheism long before the Christians came to power.¹³ Outwardly, Hellenic religion was still very much alive at the beginning of the fourth century,¹⁴ but by slowly losing its local foundations it became very fragile. As long as civic cults enjoyed imperial support, the fragility remained rather inconspicuous, but it quickly came to be felt after Constantine's conversion in 312, when the imperial funding of pagan cults ran dry. The long tension between local engagement and imperial patriotism was suddenly given a new twist,

⁸ A detailed analysis of this process is given by Millar 1983. Cf. Liebeschuetz 1992: 12–14.

⁹ Liebeschuetz 1992: 3. ¹⁰ Liebeschuetz 1992: 8–9. ¹¹ Lane Fox 1986: 582–3.

¹² *Ibid.* The benefactors commemorated after 250 'were usually imperial officials or the emperor' (Liebeschuetz 1992: 4).

¹³ Except for several areas in the eastern provinces the number of Christians in the Roman Empire at the time of Constantine's conversion in 312 is estimated to have been no more than 5–10 per cent (Veyne 2007: 10; Lane Fox 1986: 592), and while they undoubtedly were a conspicuous minority, Christianity could hardly have prevailed so quickly had the Hellenic world not been in a crisis of its own.

¹⁴ For evidence see e.g. Lane Fox 1986: 576–82.

as the latter came to be associated with the new religion.¹⁵ Constantine's unexpected decision to support Christianity revealed a fundamental weakness in the old religious system: Hellenic religion was essentially local, and was never really capable of ascending to the heights of universality; yet the increasing imperial patriotism called precisely for universal piety. The emperor cult and worship of the Sun were worthy attempts in this direction, but they were too weak to integrate the plurality of local cults into a unified system.¹⁶ The new imperial religious perspective made this more than obvious:

The local notables found themselves denied the right to resort to precisely those religious ceremonials that had once enabled each city to give public expression to its own sense of identity. It was no longer considered advisable to sacrifice, to visit temples, or to celebrate one's city as the dwelling-place of particular gods bound to the civic community by particular, local rites. Instead, the Christian court offered a new, empire-wide patriotism. This was centred on the person and mission of a God-given, universal ruler, whose vast and profoundly abstract care for the empire as a whole made the older loyalties to individual cities that had been wholeheartedly expressed in the old, polytheistic system, seem parochial and trivial.¹⁷

Christianity was well prepared for the role of an imperial religion: its cornerstone was not local cults, but the person of a universal transcendent God. At the same time, its hierarchical structure allowed it to operate locally as well, attracting many of those who had formerly financed local pagan festivals. 'Public occasions became increasingly Christian occasions. . . . Newly built churches became alternative centres of urban life.'¹⁸ The ability to combine universality with locality was one of Christianity's biggest advantages: whereas traditional civic institutions only catered for citizens, the Church was able to provide for everyone, including those from the lowest strata of society that the local communities were no longer able to integrate by means of traditional mechanisms.¹⁹ Christianity did not directly assault the social barriers, but 'sidestepped them in the name of the spiritual equality, while leaving them in place'.²⁰ The spiritual dimension was precisely the crucial factor that pagan piety was lacking and that made its sponsoring

¹⁵ Interestingly enough, 'in 320 and again in 326, Constantine already had to legislate against pagans who claimed to be clerics in order to avoid civic duties' (Lane Fox 1986: 667).

¹⁶ It is worth noting that one of the most fervent worshippers of Sol Invictus was Constantine (Liebeschuetz 1979: 279–87). Accordingly, his conversion did not amount to the discovery of the supreme God but merely to the conviction that 'the supreme God had to be worshipped in a particular way' (ibid.: 280).

¹⁷ Brown 1992: 19; cf. Brown 1978: 48–51.

¹⁸ Lane Fox 1986: 669.

¹⁹ Lane Fox 1986: 321–5.

²⁰ Lane Fox 1986: 325.

attractive even for those who had long seen local competitions for prestige as too provincial:

Pagan cults had benefited from the buildings and the 'love of honour' of its donors, but their gifts had been made from somewhat limited motives. By contrast, Christianity combined the exercise of patronage with a sense of spiritual progress, an ethic against sin and hopes of superior treatment on the world to come.²¹

The Hellenes had a strong 'spiritual' tradition too, of course: the religion of philosophers, which could equal Christianity both in its universalism and its moral dimension. The problem of Greek philosophical religion was one that nicely corresponds to the tension between imperial and local patriotism: the lofty religious conceptions of the philosophers were too removed from everyday piety of ordinary Hellenes. As long as local cults prospered, the philosophers were glad to take part in them despite their intellectual distance. The situation started to change precisely in the third century, when the local rootedness of the Hellenic elite ceased to be taken for granted.²² Plotinus is the first clear example of a philosopher with no local connections whatsoever: according to Porphyry 'he could never bear to talk about his family, parents or his native country' (*Vita Plot.* 1.3–4). His true fatherland was in the intelligible realm and his father was there (*Enn.* 1 6, 8.21).²³ His attitude to traditional cults was in harmony with this approach: he had nothing against them, but as a philosopher he felt above them and had no need to waste his time on them.

Plotinus' approach is nicely illustrated by a famous story told by Porphyry. When asked by his pupil Amelius to participate in a religious ceremony, Plotinus replied (*Vita Plot.* 10.35–6): 'They ought to come to me, not I to them.' As Robbert van den Berg has shown (1999), Plotinus' words are not a mark of arrogance, but rather of the incompatibility of two different religious discourses. Plotinus does describe in some of his treatises how the gods at the level of Intellect come to him (*Enn.* v 1, 6; v 3, 17.28–32; v 8, 9), and in such passages his words radiate with piety. Nonetheless, it is philosophical piety, which regards local cults as irrelevant. While earlier generations of Platonists found participation in public festivals worthwhile, to Plotinus civic cults mean nothing. His attitude goes hand in hand with his conception of the undescended soul. If the

²¹ Lane Fox 1986: 670.

²² Significantly, philosophers were one of the first professions to be exempted from local public duties already in the second century (thus the Roman lawyer Herennius Modestinus, *Digesta* 27.1.6.8, quoting a letter of Marcus Aurelius).

²³ The same is true of Porphyry: see *De abst.* 1 30.2–3, and in detail G. Clark 1999.

philosopher is able to activate by his own mental effort the higher layers of his being and live on the level of intellect at least partly, there is no need for him to pay any specific attention to what goes on down below. In view of this, it is hardly surprising that he has also lost interest in traditional Hellenic religion, which in its mainstream civic form hardly ever had any 'spiritual' ambitions, addressing the gods mainly as powers turned towards this world and caring for its prosperity (cf. ch. 9.2).

The Plotinian philosophical approach is itself strongly religious, but it is a new kind of religion. Its focal points are strong individuals who reach god by their own internal effort. In the third century this was not an uncommon phenomenon. As Peter Brown has famously claimed, late antiquity gave way to competitive individualism that the Greeks had always tended towards but that until the second century AD they had been able to regulate effectively – among other things precisely by means of religious festivals shared by the entire community and financed by the city's wealthy elite. As soon as local notables increasingly ceased to regard the care for their city as their chief commitment and started to invest their energy into climbing up the ladder of imperial administration, an analogous development took place on the religious scene. Here, too, strong individuals appeared – the 'friends of God', who by their own religious virtuosity were able to transcend local disputes, representing 'an oasis of certainty in a world shot through with ambition'.²⁴

In traditional Greek religion access to the gods had been the same for everyone, as we can see e.g. from the common practice of electing priests by lot from the ranks of common citizens, without requiring any special religious preparation or personal devotion and calling. From the third century on the boundary between heaven and earth became more fixed. At the local level, the gods were still accessible through visions and oracles, as they used to be, but simultaneously there emerged a new class of endowed virtuosos who were capable of rising far above the common folk and obtaining religious insights not available to everyone. These special individuals were able to establish a firm and intimate relation with god that in the old days would not have been conceivable.²⁵ Among the pagans the part of 'friends of God' was played by the philosophers. Its perfect embodiment is Plotinus, who by his enormous intellectual strength was able to rise to the vicinity of the One, uniting with it several times. No wonder that some of the wealthy Romans trusted his authority so much as

²⁴ Brown 1978: 62. ²⁵ Brown 1978: 92–100.

to make him an arbitrator of their disputes and a guardian of their children (*Vita Plot.* 9).

In the third century Plotinus' approach was highly progressive and in full accord with the latest religious developments. At the same time, however, it helped to undermine civic polytheism. Culturally, Plotinus was still a Hellene, but in fact he no longer felt any ties to traditional religion and saw no reason to take an interest in it. His successor Porphyry reflected on his own polytheism more sincerely, but the results of this reflection were far from optimistic. Porphyry was fascinated by Hellenic cults and he dealt with them in a number of his treatises. He was well aware of their importance for Hellenic culture as such, yet he struggled with them deeply as a philosopher, and in the end failed to reconcile them with his own intellectual spirituality.²⁶ He knew how important it was for local communities to venerate the gods of old, but was no longer able to embrace this veneration seriously himself. To his wife Marcella he still presented it as 'the greatest fruit of piety' (*Ad Marc.* 18), justifying his decision to marry her by his desire to 'appease his native gods' and play for them that worldly theatre they usually require of their worshippers (*Ad Marc.* 2). Deep inside, though, he was above similar kinds of worship, regarding them as a poor substitute suited to the masses. As he condescendingly explains to Marcella, to perform rituals in accordance with local traditions is certainly commendable, yet one must remember that the essence of piety lies elsewhere: the true temple of god is our intellect and it is virtue only that draws the soul upward towards divinity (*Ad Marc.* 16–19).

At other times Porphyry was more uncompromising, refusing to take part in traditional cults altogether. As he claims in his treatise *On Abstinence*, public cults do not pertain to the gods but to the lowest sort of daemons, who are no more than inferior and often even positively distorted imitations of the true gods, taking delight in bloody animal sacrifices and supervising passions and worldly desires. For ordinary folk, submerged as they are in the whirl of passions, the worship of these dark powers is unavoidable. The philosopher, however, should stay clear of them as much as possible (*De abst.* II 43):

So an intelligent, temperate man will be wary of making sacrifices through which he will draw such beings to himself. He will work to purify his soul in every way, for they do not attack a pure soul, because it is unlike them. If it is necessary for cities to appease even these beings, that is nothing to do with us. In cities, riches and external and corporeal things are thought to be good and their opposites bad,

²⁶ For this failure see Smith 1974: 128–41, 147–50; van Liefferinge 1999: 176–208.

and the soul is the least of their concerns. But we, as far as possible, shall not need what those beings provide, but we make every effort, drawing on the soul and on external things, to become like god and those who accompany him – and this happens through dispassion, through carefully articulated concepts about what really is, and through life which is directed to those realities.

The result of this religious attitude was a tragic and in the long run untenable split between civic religion and philosophical piety. The philosopher could still be seen as a person of religious authority by ordinary people, but in actuality he could not transmit more than an echo of his piety to these people, leaving them at the mercy of traditional cults that he was no longer able to take seriously himself.

It is not surprising that among the pagans the Plotinian approach did not prevail and was mainly followed by Christians, whose religion (unlike traditional polytheism) was capable of bridging the gap between universal and local concerns, as well as that between the philosophers and ordinary believers. In a non-Christian framework such reconciliation was far more difficult. Hellenic philosophers soon became aware of this problem and searched for possible solutions. A crucial part was played by Iamblichus, who saw the limits of Porphyry's position clearly, arguing against it passionately in *De mysteriis*. Iamblichus was convinced that without traditional rituals polytheism is unfeasible. Were religion reduced to an intellectual ascent to the divine, the schism between philosophical and local popular religion would become unavoidable.

Naturally, Iamblichus was unable to turn back the hands of time and undo the religious changes of the third century. He too accepts the new concept of philosophers as saints endowed with religious authority. However, he tries to offer a model of philosophy that does not go against traditional cults, becoming instead their chief ally. It is symptomatic that when in 361 Julian the Apostate became the emperor and attempted to revive Hellenic religion, he did so precisely with the help of Iamblichean Neoplatonism, which he tried to turn into an official theology.²⁷ Julian's reforms were bound to fail, for they went against the new mentality as well as against the power structure of the empire.²⁸ Traditional cults were closely tied to the political autonomy of cities, which by the fourth century had long gone. Julian and the Neoplatonists were able to defend cults intellectually, but unable to justify them in terms of power relations. Julian's attempts to give back to cities at least a part of their former autonomy were unsuccessful: the city representatives had grown all too used to the new imperial

²⁷ For a full description see Athanassiadi 1981, ch. 4.

²⁸ Brown 1978: 52–3.

system and were unwilling to sacrifice individual ambitions in favour of active involvement in local councils.²⁹ Not even those local aristocrats who remained Hellenic had much interest in financing the old civic cults; the channels of public support had changed their course and it was now much more prestigious for pagans to organize chariot racing.³⁰ The remains of pagan cults were mostly supported by a handful of old Hellenic families, who did so on account of their traditionalism and their intellectual adherence to the values of civic religion. This of course was too weak a basis for Hellenic religion to stand upon, and one that grew weaker with time. Christianity, on the other hand, was able to harmonize religious claims with those of the power structure, having the road to success smoothly paved.

It is in this historical context that we may read the remarkable effort of eastern Neoplatonists to defend traditional religion. The Neoplatonists saw the old cultural world crumbling, and did their best to save it. In the second century religious philosophers such as Plutarch of Chaeronea could still count on the lively religious life of cities, offering their own philosophy as its intellectual theological complement. Iamblichus and his followers no longer had such confidence. Traditional rituals were entering a period of crisis, and philosophers could not just act as their defenders – they had to become their executors too. Their turn towards theurgy was not a mark of superstition, but rather an effort to combine old ritual forms with newly invented ones in order to provide a substitute for the outdated civic religion. It is significant that in its lowest and least elitist forms theurgy incorporated a number of traditional cultic practices, such as animal sacrifice, which had always been the cornerstone of Greek religion. From Marinus' account of fifth century Athenian Neoplatonism we can clearly see that at one level the philosophers did indeed see their own theurgic practices as a continuation of traditional cults, carrying on in private what could no longer be done in public. When Proclus regarded himself as 'the

²⁹ See Bowersock 1978: 72–3, 96–8; Athanassiadi 1981: 218–25. It is telling that even the pagan historian Ammianus (25.4.21) regarded Julian's attempt to revive city councils as harsh and oppressive. Ironically, the forceful support of local concerns was perceived as yet another case of imperial despotism.

³⁰ A typical example was the situation in Antioch, where Julian spent several months during his Persian campaign. Local noblemen regardless of their religious affiliations boosted their prestige chiefly by organizing horse races and theatre spectacles. The festival of Apollo was neglected and the only sacrifice offered was a goose donated by the priest. See Julian, *Misopogon* 361d–363c. There were significant exceptions, though, the most important one being Athens, where the councillor class was still strong at the turn of the fifth century, investing its riches in public buildings (Watts 2006: 80–4). Proclus' teacher Plutarch was one of those involved: an inscription honours him for sponsoring the Panathenaic procession three times (*IG 11/1112* 3818; Watts 2006: 93).

common priest of the entire world' (*Vita Procli* 19.30), he was pregnantly expressing the burden of cultural responsibility the Neoplatonists were taking on their shoulders.

9.2 THE INWARD TURN: PLOTINUS AND THE 'FRIENDS OF GOD'

The rise of the 'friends of God' as well as the general social and religious changes in the third century help to explain the Plotinian type of piety as well as the Iamblican reaction against it. In itself, however, it may be seen as no more than an expression of a wider process of worldview shifts that were taking place in late antiquity. These were not just concerned with religion and society, but with the general way men thought of themselves and of their position in the order of reality. By attempting to analyse them, we may perhaps be able to throw light not just on the eastern Neoplatonists' religious stance, but on their entire philosophical approach.

As a starting point of our inquiry we may recall one crucial feature of Plotinus' thought that we have discussed in chapter 1.2.2, namely his identification of levels of reality with states of consciousness. Inconspicuous as this may seem, in the context of ancient thought it was a revolutionary idea, and one that testifies to a significant shift in the conception of the subject. To appreciate it, we need to recognize that since the Archaic period, the Greeks generally had had little sense for introspective self-reflection. The Greeks were a society of shame and honour, a society in which one's personal value was determined by what one achieves in the eyes of others. As Jean-Pierre Vernant explains (1991: 327–8), the individual in Archaic and Classical Greece was turned outward, not inward:

Individuals seek and find themselves in others, in those mirrors reflecting their image, each of which is an *alter ego* for them – parents, children, friends . . . There is no introspection. The subject does not make up a closed, interior world he must penetrate in order to find himself – or rather to discover himself. The subject is extroverted. Just as the eye does not see itself, so the individual must look elsewhere to apprehend himself. His self-consciousness is not reflexive, folded in on itself, and contained. It is not internal, face-to-face with itself: it is existential. Existence is prior to the consciousness of existing.

In basic outline this held for philosophers too. While it is true that these paid much greater attention to care for the self and for one's soul, opening up a space for an inward turn, this care did not in fact lead to introspection, and was still very much tied to external reality, albeit in a much more sophisticated manner: whereas for ordinary citizens the external mirror was represented by the expectant and critical gaze of others, the philosopher's *alter ego* was the entire cosmos. Knowledge of oneself went hand in hand

with knowledge of the universe and man's place in it: the human subject defined itself by means of its relation to the cosmic order.³¹ It is significant that the 'soul' that philosophers tried to care for was usually conceived not as an intimate core of one's personality, but as an impersonal rational element within us, which most schools interpreted as a manifestation of universal Reason.³² Care for the self was set in a cosmic perspective. The main road to oneself – and to god as well – did not pass through the interior of one's psyche, but through examining the cosmic order and bringing oneself in accord with it. It is for this reason that most philosophers were so interested in the study of nature and the universe.

This cosmic stance was in harmony with the socio-political situation. In the Classical polis the interests of individuals were ideally subordinated to the needs of the entire civic body. The human subject was delimited in relation to the civic community of which it was a part. Inside this community, however, all were supposed to be equal, each citizen being a ruler and a ruled in one person. To exercise one's power, one needed to accept its limits, conforming to the decisions of the civic assembly. Once internalized, this attitude produced the requirement of self-control – for to rule one had to be able to rule oneself. The way one related to oneself was therefore comparable to the way one related to the community of the polis – and by analogy to the community of the cosmos.³³

The same was true also for the way the Greeks approached their gods. Greek religion was essentially ritualistic. It did not care for what one thinks or feels about the gods. The only thing that mattered was what one does in front of others. Like the subject, Greek piety was extroverted, consisting in outward acts to be performed in traditional civic communities. The resulting religious attitude is well characterized by Vernant (2006: 354):

Society [in Classical Greece] always acts as the mediating link between the faithful and the god. It is not a direct interaction between two individual personalities but the expression of the relationship that links a god to a human group – a particular household, a city, a type of activity, a certain place in the land. If the individual is banished from the domestic altars, excluded from the temples of his town, and exiled from his fatherland, he is thereby cut off from the world of the divine.

Once again, the philosophers take up this model and 'cosmicize' it: the part of the mediator between man and the gods is now played by the order of the universe, which by most important schools is seen as divine in some regard.

³¹ See Brague 2003, chs. 2–4. ³² Vernant 1991: 329–31; Brague 2003: 30–5.

³³ For the parallel between the civic and the cosmic community see e.g. Plato, *Gorg.* 507e–508a, as well as the general philosophical ethos of 'cosmopolitanism'.

In the Hellenistic period the Greek constitution of the subject slowly evolved. As Michel Foucault has shown in volume III of *The History of Sexuality*, the Greeks progressively paid greater attention to private life and cultivation of the self. According to Foucault (1986: 81–95), this was due to the new socio-political situation. While the cities retained the 'horizontal' equality of their elite representatives, they were at the same time 'vertically' subordinated to higher imperial powers. The result was an increased awareness of the precariousness of fortune and of the fragility of human existence, which led to greater emphasis on private self-cultivation. Nevertheless, this self-cultivation is still firmly embedded in a cosmic framework. The best witnesses are the Roman Stoics, who focused on care for oneself more than any of their predecessors, yet saw self-control and internal autonomy as closely tied to one's ability to attune oneself to the order of the universe expressing the will of Zeus. The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, despite their title, are far from a purely introspective text: Marcus only focuses on himself in order to better distinguish between what is and what is not in his power, so that he might be able to play better the social part which has been assigned to him in the divine arrangement of the world.

A substantial change only comes in the third century when the Roman imperial patriotism starts to offer an alternative to local engagement with its constraints. This significant shift in the realm of politics seems to have been partly brought about precisely by a change in the constitution of the subject. As Peter Brown has famously claimed (1978: 27–53), late antiquity was characterized by the ambitiousness of individual members of the cultural and political elite. Competitive ambitions were not new in the ancient world, but till the end of the second century AD they were kept within limits by means of a strong emphasis on reciprocity and the 'euergetism' of the ruling class. Cosmic piety, which subordinated the impulses of the individual to the cyclic movements of the universe, may be seen as a philosophical correlate of this situation. In the third century this uneasily maintained equipoise exploded and ambitions were given full vent. In the area of politics this amounted to the new possibility for local notables of ascending to the heights of imperial hierarchy; in the sphere of religion this led to the rise of the 'friends of God' – holy men, who freed themselves from the bonds of worldly affairs patronized by local divinities and by the strength of their spirit related to the highest God himself.³⁴ In many cases, their original motivation was an effort to escape from the unendurable social pressure of communities in which reciprocity

³⁴ Brown 1978: 54–80.

was gradually giving way to ruthless competition. The holy men reacted by severing the horizontal social ties and by a vertical rise towards God.

It is these religious virtuosos who introduce an entirely new conception of the subject. Their approach is summarized by Vernant again (1991: 332), who puts together the contributions of Brown and Foucault:

With the rise of the holy man, the man of God, the ascetic, and the anchorite, a kind of individual appears who separates himself from the common herd and disengages himself from the social group only in order to set out in quest of his true self, one strung between the guardian angel who pulls him upward and the demonic forces below that mark the lower boundaries of his personality. The search for God and the search for the self are two dimensions of the same solitary ordeal.

While the old ethical ideal was self-control, understood as the ability to set clear limits to one's impulses and to subordinate them to the shared civic and cosmic order, the holy men no longer have confidence in this order. For them the outside world is not a trustworthy mirror allowing one to catch a glimpse of oneself. Instead, they turn within and try to find a more authentic relationship to god through their internal psychic world. Yet, the human psyche is far less reliable than the world order, for it is easily deceived and is a source of both evil and good. Hence the new crucial part of introspection and the ability to distinguish pure thoughts from impure ones.³⁵ Evil thoughts were typically seen as coming from evil demons. The polarity of the divine and the demonic was parallel to that between the spirit and the flesh. If our true self is to be found inside us, the body as our external social self has to be seen as its adversary.

The phenomenon of holy men is fascinating in that it cut across different religions. It found its most perfect expression in Christianity, one of whose attractions lay precisely in that it offered the possibility to break one's old social ties and join new communities gathered around the 'friends of God' (Brown 1978: 72–8). Christianity was well disposed for a 'vertical' type of piety, for it had always been an exclusivist type of religion. Here the mediator between God and man was not the universe shared by all, but Christ, who addressed each person separately, requiring individual repentance and offering an opportunity to relate to God in an unprecedented and more authentic way. This was perfect breeding ground for the holy men, who got closer to God than ordinary mortals. Individual religious virtuosity was greatly facilitated by the fact that unlike Judaism, Christianity did not base its exclusivism on national or social affiliation, offering a model of piety

³⁵ See Foucault 2001 and 1988; Brown 1988 (esp. ch. 11).

depending solely on individual choice and allowing one to establish social ties on an utterly untraditional and in a sense more 'egotistical' basis.³⁶

A natural by-product of Christian piety was its mistrust of all higher powers guaranteeing alternative types of social ties. Unlike the Greeks, who despite their emphasis on local traditions had always taken it for granted that the gods of other nations are but different manifestations of the same generic divine power, the Christians followed the Jews in distancing themselves from foreign divinities, regarding them as dark and dangerous demons.³⁷ In this one crucial principle lies a germ of dualism that Christianity has always been prone to. At first this dualism concerned one's ritual actions, leading to a categorical refusal to participate in pagan cults. Very soon, however, and partly under the influence of Greek philosophy, it was transferred by Christian thinkers into the soul as well. The demons started to be seen as powers working on the soul's irrational parts, enslaving them and deforming them after their image.³⁸ In the internal fight between the lower and the higher parts of one's soul the aim was no longer to set the irrational faculties in order, as in Greek Platonism, but to cut oneself from the sources of demonic temptation completely and attach oneself to God – who as a personal Creator allowed for a highly intimate relation that would hardly have been imaginable for Hellenic divinities.³⁹

Christian ascetics, however, were not the only 'friends of God'. A parallel phenomenon may be found among the Hellenes. While in the second century AD Lucian still mocked severely all religious virtuosos transcending the bounds of common humanity, since the third century these same divine men start to attract admiration. Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* is one of the first of the hagiographies of late antiquity propagating this new ideal. Later on hagiographic treatments of other philosophers, both ancient (Pythagoras) and contemporary will follow. Plotinus is a prime example: Porphyry's account of his life testifies to the superhuman authority attributed to the founder of Neoplatonism. Significantly, Plotinus is not just a new type of a religious virtuoso in the social part he plays for others, but

³⁶ As Brown puts it (1978: 78), the Christians were perhaps able to love their neighbours precisely 'because they belonged to a growing body of people who were a little more determined than in any previous period of ancient history to choose their neighbors. For a pagan observer, such love would have confirmed his worst suspicions of the basically egotistical quality of the age.'

³⁷ In Christian contexts I prefer to spell 'demons' in this traditional way in order to distinguish them from the religiously neutral 'daemons' from the Greek tradition.

³⁸ Thus e.g. Athenagoras, *Legatio* 27, and Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* II 110.1.

³⁹ As Vernant shows (2006), the Greek gods, despite their anthropomorphism, were rather impersonal. Cf. Aristotle's assertion that 'it would be absurd if someone claimed to love Zeus (*philein ton Dia*)', for friendly affection (*philia*) is only possible when it can be repaid (*antiphileisthai*), i.e. when it is a relation between two subjects (*Magna Moralia* 1208b).

first and foremost in the way he cares for his own self. In harmony with the latest trends he turns within his soul more than any of his Platonic predecessors. It is inside himself that he attempts to find the highest divine principle.⁴⁰ Plotinus is still very much rooted in traditional Greek thought, of course, and he combines it with the new approach by identifying the degrees of his subjective consciousness with objectivized levels of reality. The inward turn and contemplation of the universal order were two complementary ways for him leading towards the same aim. By combining them Plotinus proved to be a groundbreaking thinker, opening up new vistas for ancient thought. It is not surprising that his unorthodox Platonic approach would later be inspiring for Augustine, whose *Confessions* were a true landmark in the European history of ‘subjectification’.

Despite Plotinus’ ingenious effort, the balance between ‘subjectification’ and cosmic piety turned out to be more fragile than it seemed at first. Try as he did to keep both aspects in harmony, his conception of matter betrays that the task was far from easy (see ch. 7.1). Plotinus’ search for the divine within himself seems to have been not just a neutral philosophical choice, but rather a result of disenchantment with some aspects of the external world, which in its material dimension appeared to him as misleading and dangerous. Plotinus never succumbed to this dualistic vision entirely, and in accordance with traditional Platonism he still saw the cosmos as such as a beautiful and within the bounds of possibility perfect image of the intelligible world.⁴¹ Still, his identification of matter with evil, as well as his personal shame for ‘being in the body’ (*Vita Plot.* 1.2), show clearly that maintaining a positive relation to the corporeal world was far from easy for him.

Important signs of increasing imbalance may be found in Porphyry, who follows in the footsteps of his master, attempting to systematize his ideas and bring them to their conclusion. If for Plotinus the problematic nature of the world was represented by matter, in Porphyry’s thought it finds a much more impressive expression: it becomes associated with the lowest classes of daemons, who are responsible for cosmic catastrophes and who arouse in human souls various harmful emotions (*De abst.* II 40.1–3):

One thing especially should be counted among the greatest harm done by the maleficent daemons: they are themselves responsible for the sufferings that occur around the earth (plagues, crop failures, earthquakes, droughts and the like), but

⁴⁰ See Miller 2005, who shows Plotinus’ new conception of the self to be in many respects similar to his contemporary Origen the Christian.

⁴¹ See esp. his treatise *Against the Gnostics* (*Enn.* II 9), which is one of the most impressive late ancient expressions of the cosmic optimism of Greek philosophers.

convince us that the responsibility lies with those who are responsible for just the opposite [i.e. the gods]. They evade blame themselves: their primary concern is to do wrong without being detected. Then they prompt us to supplications and sacrifices, as if the beneficent gods were angry. They do such things because they want to dislodge us from a correct concept of the gods and convert us to themselves. They themselves rejoice in everything that is likewise inconsistent and incompatible; slipping on (as it were) the masks of other gods, they profit from our lack of sense, winning over the masses because they inflame people's appetites with lust and longing for wealth and power and pleasure.

The idea of evil daemons was not new in Greek thought. It was first introduced by Xenocrates, who postulated the existence of 'morose' and 'obdurate' daemons to account for the dark aspects of some traditional cults.⁴² Their nature was investigated at the turn of the second century AD by Plutarch, who regards them as a special class of higher souls.⁴³ As souls, they are capable of moral decisions, some being good, others becoming evil and harmful.⁴⁴ In this regard Plutarch would agree with Porphyry. Unlike him, however, he sets this 'dynamic' conception of choosing daemons into a broader 'static' framework and believes that for evil daemons there exist certain stable positions in the cosmos in which their troublesome activities may be useful for the world as a whole, providing just punishment for those who deserve it.⁴⁵ The clearest sign of the incorporation of evil daemons into the world-order is their traditional place in public cults, which help to regulate and appease dark daemonic powers. Accordingly, Plutarch insists that even these daemons should 'be worshipped in the traditional manner of our fathers' (*De defectu* 416C).

The novelty of Porphyry's approach lies in the fact that he refuses the worship of evil daemons altogether. As we have seen (p. 262), in his view daemons should only be worshipped by common folk who are incapable of freeing themselves from passions. For philosophers, such worship is positively harmful and should be avoided. Moreover, since evil daemons are defined as those who require bloody sacrifices, they now comprise not just a small group of unusually 'morose' divinities described by Xenocrates, but all the divinities worshipped in traditional cults. If in the eyes of Plutarch

⁴² See Plutarch's account in *De Iside* 361B.

⁴³ The best analysis of Plutarch's daemonology is given by Dillon 2001 in a paper that unfortunately was only published in Spanish translation.

⁴⁴ Plutarch, *De Iside* 360E and 361A; *De defectu* 415C.

⁴⁵ For the daemons as punishers of injustice see *De defectu* 417A–B (evil daemons 'go about in order to punish arrogant and serious cases of injustice') and 417D (evil daemons as 'avengers', *alastoroi*). Cf. a similar approach in *Corp. Herm.* XVI, where evil daemons also act as avengers of injustice (§10), being subordinated to the Sun who governs their activity (§§ 13 and 17).

these were the lower servants of the pure gods described by philosophy (*De defectu* 42IE), for Porphyry they rather act as their competitors, who deceptively pretend to be gods to eclipse the true divinities (*De abst.* II 42.2). Hitherto, such radical thoughts had only been embraced by Christians, who regularly saw the divinities worshipped by the pagans as demonic usurpers of God's glory.⁴⁶

Porphyry knew Christians well (see *Vita Plot.* 16), and he may have been partly influenced by their view of demons, though his general outlook is still decidedly Hellenic and he certainly did draw from pagan daemonologies too.⁴⁷ More interesting than his partial sources, though, is the way he put them together and the worldview effect he achieved. By being associated with evil daemons, the darker pole of reality now becomes much more tangible than it was for Plotinus. Moreover, Porphyry's refusal to worship the daemons entailed important social consequences. As Peter Brown suggests (1978: 75), evil daemons embodied 'all the anomaly and confusion' that since the third century 'was latent in human culture and in human social relations' after the traditional model of civic solidarity started to fall apart as more and more notables evaded their euergetic obligations. Porphyry's conviction that it is these disruptive powers that cities worship in their cults testifies to his great disillusionment with traditional social forms. Yet, while from the Christian perspective the fight against evil demons made good sense and was able to produce new types of social cohesion, in Porphyry's Hellenic universe this was not so. His effort to cut himself off from the dark and conflicting daemonic forces was one-sided, driving a wedge between the higher and the lower levels of reality, between the universal and the particular, between intellectuals and ordinary folk.

In this regard, Porphyry's thought entailed a dualism that was fundamentally different from what we usually find in earlier Platonist thinkers. There had always been dualist inclinations in Platonic thought,⁴⁸ of course,

⁴⁶ Thus e.g. Justinus, *Apologia* 54; *Apologia secunda* 5; Clement Alex. *Stromata* v 10.1–3. For the impossibility to worship both God and the demons see already Eph 6:10–13, and 1 Cor 10:20–1.

⁴⁷ Proclus (*In Tim.* 1 76.30–77.24; cf. Lewy 1978: 497–508) derives Porphyry's daemonology from Origen the Neoplatonist, who studied with Plotinus in Alexandria (he is probably not to be identified with Origen the Christian); Porphyry is supposed to have combined his doctrine with Numenius' conception of lower souls. This does not mean, of course, that Origen's daemonology would entail the same radical consequences as that of Porphyry. Another important source seems to have been the *Chaldean Oracles* (Lewy 1978: 304–9; Bouffartigue 1979: 39–47), but again, their conception is likely to have been more neutral, for Proclus seems to have had no problems reconciling it with his own positive view of the daemons (for which see below, pp. 276–7).

⁴⁸ See Dillon 2008b for a survey of pre-Plotinian types of Platonic dualism, and Armstrong 1984 for a lucid overview of different kinds of dualism in Greek philosophy, Gnosticism and ancient Christianity.

but while these postulated the existence of an independent principle of evil (be it matter, evil soul, or the Dyad), they aimed at mastering this principle and subjecting it to rational control – never at rejecting it altogether. Plutarch is a good case in point:⁴⁹ in *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus* he postulates an opposition between Soul and Intellect. Soul is a powerful source of energy and movement, but in itself this movement is entirely irregular and disorderly. Intelligence, on the other hand, is perfectly orderly and regular, but in itself it is quite powerless, being unable to move. The aim of the Demiurge is to put these principles together, creating a concordant whole which is full both of order and of energy. The same thing is to be achieved by each of us: our task is not to eradicate the passions in the manner of Christian ascetics, but to cultivate them and subject them to the rule of reason.

The tendency to flee the passions instead of struggling with them and bringing them under one's control may already be glimpsed occasionally in Plotinus (e.g. in *Enn.* 1 4), but it is only in Porphyry's rejection of evil daemons that it found an unequivocal expression. In effect, Porphyry's approach was a sign of a growing crisis in the heart of Platonism, which in its Plotinian form was no longer able to keep the whole of reality together. Whereas older Platonic 'dualists' of Plutarch's kind maintained a generally optimistic and world-embracing attitude, integrating evil daemons into the order of the universe and seeing no reason to refuse their worship, Porphyry's inability to do the same meant that the divine could no longer be entirely trusted in its ability to pervade all of corporeal reality – including its social dimension – and keep it under its control.

9.3 IAMBlicHEAN RE-EXTERNALIZATION

If Porphyry's daemonology betrays his failing cosmic confidence, eastern Neoplatonism may be seen as an attempt at re-establishing it. Iamblichus was undoubtedly no less aware of the social crisis than Porphyry was, but his reaction was just the opposite: he tried to check the disruptive tendencies and reintroduce order into both society and the world at large. The philosophical-cum-religious reform designed by him was meant to bridge the Porphyrian abyss between the material world and the higher levels, making them appear as two parts of a harmonious whole.⁵⁰ Significantly, this was first of all achieved by re-establishing impenetrable boundaries

⁴⁹ See Chlup 2000 in detail.

⁵⁰ This is also how Iamblichus' debate with Porphyry is interpreted by Brown 1978: 100–1.

between levels of reality. In this way, the human soul regained its firm place in the order of things and was prevented from vertically climbing all the way to god by its own force. Once again, the soul became bound to the material cosmos and was forced to take responsibility for it – an approach that Miller (2005) fittingly designates as a move from ‘a touch of the transcendent’ to the ‘touch of the real’. Not even the most perfect philosophical souls could escape, their duty being to descend and help others (see above, pp. 245–6). It is not surprising that when Julian projected Iamblichus’ vision into politics, he did so by (unsuccessfully) attempting to lower his imperial majesty, subordinate the emperor to laws and return at least a portion of political power into the hands of the local civic magistrates.⁵¹

The hierarchic universe set up by Plotinus remained the same in basic outlines, but it was meticulously externalized: it was no longer accessible by introspection only, but was perceived as objective reality ‘out there’ to which one needs to attune oneself. The decisive task became to come to know the structure of this reality as precisely as possible. Only in this way could the soul be brought into accord with the order of the universe, linking up with the gods by means of it. Hence the characteristic passion of eastern Neoplatonists for painstaking conceptual distinctions mapping the outer zone lying between man and the One. While modern readers may easily be repulsed by the extreme ‘realist’ (as opposed to nominalist) conviction that e.g. being, life, and thinking are actually three objectively existing ontological levels (and not just three intermingled aspects of Intellect distinguished by our thought only, as Plotinus believed), it makes good sense if we see it precisely as a way of firmly subordinating the human soul to the external order of reality. Once again, just as in Classical and Hellenistic thought, the soul had to restrain its individual ambitions and see itself as part of and subject to a cosmic civic community.⁵²

Needless to say at the turn of the fourth century all of these steps were essentially conservative. They meant one big No to most of the new intellectual trends introduced by Plotinus. Iamblichus recognized that the middle Plotinian way between turning inside into oneself and outside into the cosmos was hard to tread and would eventually lead to seeking refuge on the higher planes of one’s self from the darker aspects of the external

⁵¹ See Dvornik 1966: 659–66; Bowersock 1978: 72–4; Athanassiadi 1981: 96–110, 112–13.

⁵² It is significant that when Dionysius christianizes Proclus’ metaphysics, he does so precisely by radically re-internalizing it: what Proclus regards as a hierarchy of objective hypostases are for Dionysius simply different ways of God’s presence in the world (Perl 2007: 65–7). All that matters now is the individual soul’s direct relation to God with no other levels of reality standing between the two.

world. In the long run the philosophers would have to choose whether to continue on the path of cosmic piety, or switch to Christianity, which unlike the all too intellectual Platonism was able to find a link between the subjective virtuosity of holy men and the more prosaic piety of the masses, allowing the integration of all the layers of society into a coherent whole. The price for this new coherence, however, would be the break-up of traditional social and religious forms – an eventuality that Iamblichus found unacceptable. Instead, by his philosophical reform he attempted to save the Hellenic world and keep it alive under new conditions. He too had to accept the idea of holy men mediating between the gods and ordinary humans, for at the end of the third century it was not possible to return to the older model which gave equal access to the gods to everyone. Nonetheless, Iamblichus tried to find a place for the ‘friends of God’ in which they would not disrupt the traditional social and cosmic order, helping instead to keep it together.⁵³

The rejection of the process of subjectification helps to explain one feature of late Neoplatonism that the older generation of modern scholars was most repelled by: the embracing of theurgy. For Iamblichus and his followers, union with the gods was no longer to be attained solely by turning within oneself; it required the support of external ritual acts. The inward ascent to the divine practised by Plotinus was deemed as too dangerous in that it distanced the philosopher from the cosmos and his fellow citizens. Theurgy returned to the old Hellenic practice of communicating with the gods by means of outward symbolic performance. Just as all the metaphysical distinctions were now to be seen as existing objectively ‘out there’, so too was religion to be externalized. It is typical of ritual acts that they appear to the actors ‘as “external”, as not of their making’, as pre-existing objective patterns to be realized and re-enacted by the performance.⁵⁴ Performing rituals is like acting out a theatre play in which all the parts have been written beforehand and in which all one does is aimed at an external audience (whether human or divine). In effect, ritual devotion stresses precisely one’s subordination to broader metaphysical order existing outside the subject. Even the higher levels of ritual worship were conceived in this way, and though the ritual acts were progressively less material and more mental, they are likely to have been perceived as external to the subject,

⁵³ It was possibly for this reason that in *De mysteriis* Iamblichus put on the mask of an Egyptian priest: the Egyptian model of priesthood may have been for him an ideal example of a system in which privileged holy men helped to sustain traditional order.

⁵⁴ Thus Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 89), whose theory of ritual is one of the most influential ones today.

as outward corridors whose doors could only be opened by presenting the right 'token' (*synthēma*) revealed to the theurgists by the gods themselves (see above, p. 180).

A crucial part of the Iamblichean endeavour consisted in an attempt to excise from Platonism all traces of dualism. The bipolar image of reality, which required the philosopher to reject the lower pole and attach himself to the higher one, was replaced by a much more 'totalitarian' circular image in which the One envelops all things and holds them in check. We have seen already (ch. 7) how crucial it was for Proclus to absolve matter from all responsibility for evil and offer a worldview in which all the components down to the lowest ones were good, evil only arising partially as a product of their occasional asymmetry.

Even more remarkable is the late Neoplatonic view of evil daemons, which is in sharp contrast to that of Porphyry discussed above. Iamblichus himself only seems to go half way in this regard. Like all Neoplatonists, he does not doubt the existence of evil daemons who arouse base desires in humans and keep them away from the gods. If demons personified the tensions implicit in social relations at the end of the third century, Iamblichus could hardly have ignored them. Unlike Porphyry, however, he rejects the idea that these dark powers would have anything to do with traditional cults, and stresses that it is precisely these cults that keep the daemons away most efficiently.⁵⁵ Instead of separating philosophers from ordinary folk, polytheistic cults help to unite them.

What precise cosmic status evil daemons have is unfortunately unclear from Iamblichus' writings, but we learn more from Proclus, who offers not only the most complex, but also one of the most positive conceptions of daemons preserved from antiquity. Proclus emphasizes that since evil daemons are a class of cosmic powers, they cannot really be evil. Cosmos must be regarded as a trustworthy divine framework for us to rely upon, and it is inadmissible to see any of its forces as positively harmful. As we have seen in chapter 7.2, daemons are unsusceptible to evil due to the fact that they always preserve their rank and never deviate from the perfection that is natural to them (*De mal.* 18.10–22). Proclus does not deny the occasional harmfulness of the daemons, but sees it as strictly relative. The daemons are good in themselves but harmful for those individuals whom they prevent from reaching their proper perfection. Their part is analogous to that of schoolmasters appointed to chastise the pupils' wrongdoings, or

⁵⁵ Iamblichus, *De myst.* III 31. Julian later on explicitly identifies the worshippers of evil daemons with the Christians (*Ep.* 89, 288b–c).

to guardians 'who stand in front of temples and stop every defiled person outside the precinct because they will not allow them to participate in the rites taking place inside . . . For there must also exist demons to detain in the earthly realm the defiled person who is unworthy of travelling to heaven' (*De mal.* 17.16–25).

In his all-embracing monism Proclus is ready to include in the meaningful whole of reality the most problematic aspects, insisting on their ultimate goodness. Not even the lowest and meanest recesses of the material world are without divine supervision. In all these cases, the daemons act as envoys of the gods, surveying everything down to the darkest detail (*In Remp.* I 78.6–14):

For the lowest classes of daemons, which work in the realm of matter, take charge even of the deformation of natural powers, of the ugliness of material things, of deviations into vice, and of disorderly and discordant motion. For these things, too, must exist in the world, contributing to the perfect diversity of the order of the universe; and it is necessary that the eternal classes also contain the cause of the parasitic existence of these deformations, the cause of their stability and permanence.

In the end, all responsibility for lapses is on the part of human individuals. Universal cosmic forces are innocent and we may rely upon them even in our darkest moments.

An even more radical way of reuniting the higher and the lower consisted in the attempt to provide a philosophical framework for valorizing the local and the particular. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the famous debate between Porphyry and Iamblichus on the divine names.⁵⁶ Porphyry did not understand why as a Hellene he should ever use barbaric names of the gods: surely what matters is the meaning, whatever the kind of words used. What this implies is a formal or conceptual theory of language in which particular local names are but lower insignificant vehicles to be kicked away after climbing up to the universal concepts to which they refer. This is fully in accord with Porphyry's tendency to disregard local and material concerns and search for the divine in the heights of the intellect. Iamblichus refuses this approach: divine names have a symbolic force, and as such are exempt from the formal translatability of ordinary language. It is only the formal categories of being that may be translated. Symbols, however, are supra-essential: they are not discovered by rational reasoning but revealed in local religious traditions.

⁵⁶ Iamblichus, *De myst.* VII 4–5. Cf. Struck 2004: 204–26; Butler 2005.

Proclus developed the same conception by firmly grounding it in his conception of the henads. As we have seen (ch. 3.3), the henads transcend the regime of being in that their unity amounts to their individual uniqueness (*idiotēs*), manifesting itself in the non-conceptualizable singularity of local mythic and cultic traditions. In this way, an ingenious method was found for bridging over the chasm between the universal and the particular: philosophical ascent to the universal heights of being had to be accompanied by theurgic work with locally unique symbols. Once again, we see here the same radical tendency of discarding dualism and seeing reality as thoroughly united. While at first sight the contingent realm of material particularities might seem an adversary of the formal orderliness of being, the henads help to reconnect the two extremes by revealing themselves precisely in the local and particular.⁵⁷

Unrealistically optimistic as all of this may sound, it was only by taking a radical monist position of this kind that the late Neoplatonists could have hoped to stop the disruptive tendencies raging all around and gradually bringing the old Hellenic world to ruin. Needless to say, their effort was bound to fail, for it was too elitist and progressively cut off from social and political reality. Julian's brief attempt at re-establishing Hellenism and turning it into an imperial religion showed all too clearly how difficult this would have been even with the support of the emperor. The Neoplatonists may have venerated local cultic traditions, but their own religious conceptions were too lofty to serve as a generally acceptable theological framework for the ordinary pagan. Their willingness to experiment with new ritual procedures and use them to support the fading religion is fascinating, but the curious mixture of the old and the new was bound to raise suspicions in many members of the conservative Hellenic elite. In the end, all our philosophers could achieve was to create remarkably stable islands of Hellenism amidst the increasingly Christian world. Even so, the intellectual rigour they invested in their desperate struggle for survival was such that even today it must command our admiration.

⁵⁷ As Miller (2005: 27–30) shows, this valorization of the particular was not confined to the pagans, but played a no less important part in Christian spirituality of the age, being apparent e.g. in the veneration of relics.

Epilogue: Proclus' legacy

Pagan Neoplatonism was dead as a living philosophical approach by the end of the sixth century AD. Its crucial texts proved to be long-lived, however, and went on to exercise a considerable influence – and those of Proclus most of all.¹ The first decisive instance of this happened as early as the turn of the sixth century, when an unknown author adapted Proclus' metaphysics to Christian aims in four treatises written under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian convert of St Paul mentioned in Acts 17:34. Dionysius drew from other sources too (such as the Cappadocian fathers), and he simplified Proclus' system a lot, dispensing with most of the intermediate hypostases and making the cosmos dependent on God in a much more immediate way. Still, in doing so he managed to apply a number of Proclus' fundamental metaphysical principles, creating a unique theological synthesis which was to leave an indelible stamp on Christian thought in both East and West. Byzantine theologians were from the beginning well aware of the striking similarity between the thought of Dionysius and that of Proclus, and some even disputed the authenticity of the Dionysian treatises. Eventually, however, the doubts petered out and Dionysius was accepted as a theological authority from whom Proclus had 'stolen' his basic ideas.²

It was in all likelihood precisely his similarity to Dionysius that made the arch-pagan Proclus so attractive in the eyes of many later Christian thinkers. At first, however, his direct influence was rather small. For a long time he was apparently studied by the Byzantines only marginally, though his works were among those chosen for transcription into minuscule in the ninth century, a sure sign of their relative importance. In the eighth

¹ For a general overview of Proclus' influence see Kristeller 1987; Siorvanes 1996: 30–41; and in greater detail the essays in Gersh (*forthcoming*). Very useful is the commented bibliography in Steel *et al.* 2002: 227–77.

² On Proclus' influence on Dionysius see e.g. Wear and Dillon 2007; Perl 2007; Beierwaltes 1998: 44–84; de Andia 1996; Perczel 1995 and 2000; Barnett 2000; Saffrey 1998.

century Proclus' theurgy seems to have played some part in the controversy between iconoclasts and defenders of images in Byzantium, helping the latter to explain in what sense images may be illuminated by divine presence (see Criscuolo 1992). A major Proclean revival only came in the eleventh century with Michael Psellus, who not only had expert knowledge of Proclus' metaphysics, but was also greatly interested in theurgy. He inspired a number of followers as well, though this in turn alerted the critics of paganism. His successor John Italus was excommunicated and forced to spend the rest of his life in monastic obscurity. More successful was another student of his, Ioane Petrizi, a philosopher from Georgia who developed an original harmonization of Christian doctrine with Neoplatonic thought, and who introduced Proclus into Georgian intellectual circles by translating and commenting on the *Elements of Theology*.³

From the twelfth century on, we may observe a curious love-hate relationship of Byzantine intellectuals towards Proclus, who was regularly both admired and condemned. He was ardently studied by the philosophical circle gathered in the twelfth century by Anna Comnena, a Byzantine princess and historian, daughter of the emperor Alexius Comnenus. It is typical, though, that her uncle Isaac Sebastocrator composed his three essays on fate, providence and evil in a way which completely disguises their Proclean provenance, citing reputable sources only, such as Dionysius. The best known representative of the opposite camp was Nicholas of Methone, who in the twelfth century wrote a *Refutation of Proclus' Elements of Theology*. By this time, Proclus became an embodiment of all that was incompatible with Christian doctrine. Despite this, he did not cease to fascinate the Byzantines. In the thirteenth century George Pachymeres took great interest in Proclus' writings and transcribed his commentaries on the *Parmenides* and the *Alcibiades*.⁴

Of great significance was the reception of Neoplatonism by the Arabs. Philosophical exchange between the Greek world and its eastern neighbours already existed in the sixth century, when Damascius and his pupils undertook their trip to Persia. At the eastern fringe of Byzantium the contacts with Persian, and later Arabic intellectuals apparently continued in the subsequent centuries, though details elude us. It is clear, in any case, that the Arabs absorbed Greek philosophy largely in its Neoplatonic form, and the Aristotle they venerated as the greatest authority was not the rebellious pupil of Plato from the fourth century BC, but rather the friendly chap of

³ On Petrizi see Alexidse 1995 and 2002; Giginishvili and van Riel 2000.

⁴ For Proclus in Byzantium in general see Parry 2006. The Anna Comnena circle: Steel 2002; Isaac Sebastocrator: Steel 1982b; Nicholas of Methone: Podskalsky 1976.

the Neoplatonic Aristotle commentaries, who agreed with Plato on most major points. It was this harmonizing attitude that allowed the Arabs to attribute to Aristotle numerous metaphysical conceptions of Neoplatonic origin (see D'Ancona 2004: 24–6).

The original centre of Arabic reception of Greek thought was the intellectual circle around al-Kindī, who taught in the ninth century in Baghdad. Al-Kindī commissioned a number of translations from Greek, many of them of Neoplatonic works. These were meant to supply the metaphysical principles that were missing in Aristotle's works, and as such were seen as integral to the Aristotelian philosophical project. A good example is the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, actually a rearranged Arabic version and paraphrase of parts of Plotinus' *Enneads*, augmented probably by al-Kindī himself by copious notes and comments, and accompanied by pieces from Proclus. Similar in genre was a selection of twenty propositions from Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, transmitted under the telling title *What Alexander of Aphrodisias Has Excerpted from the Book of Aristotle Entitled Theologia, i.e., The Discourse on the Lordship*, which attempted to convey a monotheistic and creationist interpretation of the Neoplatonic system. Yet another such selective anthology was the *Book of Aristotle's Exposition of the Pure Good*, a rearranged selection of thirty-four propositions paraphrased from Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. This work proved immensely influential later in the twelfth century, when it was translated into Latin as *Liber de causis*.⁵

In the Latin West, Proclus' influence was for a long time indirect only, mediated first of all through Dionysius the Areopagite, whose works were sent in 827 by the Byzantine emperor Michael II to King Louis the Pious of France. Doubts concerning authenticity did not appear to have filtered through to the West, and the work was always held in great respect, influencing medieval philosophy to a significant extent. Even more important was the flood of translations of Arabic philosophers in the twelfth century, which transmitted to the West the same kind of Neoplatonised Aristotelianism that was fostered by al-Kindī and his followers. Crucial among these works was the Latin translation of the Arabic *Liber de causis*, which was commented on by Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas.

It was only in the second half of the thirteenth century that Proclus became known directly thanks to the Latin translations of William of Moerbeke. Most important was his translation of the *Elements of Theology* in 1268, a text that allowed Thomas Aquinas, in the proemium of his

⁵ On Proclus' (and generally Neoplatonic) influence on Arabic philosophy see Endress 2000 and 2007; D'Ancona 2004; Wakelnig 2006. A full bibliography on the *Liber de Causis* is given by D'Ancona and Taylor 2003.

late treatise *Super librum de causis expositio* (1272) to identify the *Liber de causis* as an excerpt from the *Elements*. In the 1280s Moerbeke continued to translate the three *opuscula* and the *Parmenides Commentary*. For Aquinas himself Moerbeke's translations came too late to substantially modify his thought, and he mainly absorbed various Proclean conceptions indirectly. Extensive direct use of Proclus was made by Aquinas' pupil Henry Bate of Malines (1246–1310), who in his *Speculum divinatorum* defends a Neoplatonically conceived harmony between Plato and Aristotle. Proclus was particularly popular in the German Dominican Tradition, which walked in the footsteps of Albert the Great. Proclus figures prominently in the thought of Dietrich of Freiberg (1250–1310), and less conspicuously also in that of his slightly older friend Meister Eckhart. The most important German follower of Proclus, though, was Berthold of Moosburg, who in the mid-fourteenth century composed the *Expositio super Elementationem theologicam Procli*, the only extant Medieval Latin commentary on Proclus.⁶

A further boom in Proclean studies took place in the Renaissance, when the West profited by philosophical exchange with the last representatives of Byzantine philosophy: Gemistos Plethon (1360–1452),⁷ and even more importantly Basilius Bessarion (1403–72), both of whom went in 1438 to Italy to attend the Council of Union between the Greek and Latin Churches. As a supporter of the union, Bessarion was bitterly resented at home, and in consequence decided to leave Greece forever and move to Italy, where Pope Eugene IV made him a cardinal in 1439. Bessarion was greatly interested in Proclus and the systematic exposition of Platonism in book II of his treatise *Against the Calumniator of Plato* (1469) owes much to Proclus' *Platonic Theology*.⁸ Importantly, Bessarion was in touch with leading Italian intellectuals, and played a crucial part in the spread of Platonism in the Renaissance. It was largely to him and his debate with Plethon that Western intellectuals once again learned to properly distinguish between Platonism and Aristotelianism, being now able to pursue each of these philosophical approaches in a purer form.

The first Renaissance philosopher to profit from the contact with Byzantine intellectuals was Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–64), who in 1437 brought from Constantinople the manuscript of the *Platonic Theology*, commissioning later Pietro Balbi, a member of Bessarion's circle, to make a Latin

⁶ On the influence of Neoplatonism in the Middle Ages in general see Klíbanký 1981; Brunner 1997; Bos and Meijer 1992. Aquinas: Hankey 1997, 2002 and forthcoming; Henry Bate: Steel 1997b; German Dominicans: Imbach 1978; Eckhart: Beierwaltes 1992; Berthold of Moosburg: Gersh 2001.

⁷ Plethon knew a number of Proclus' works, though he referred to him little and disagreed with him on a number of points; cf. Hladký (forthcoming), chs. II.6.d and II.9.

⁸ See Hankins 1990: 441–4 (and for Bessarion's Platonism in general 217–63).

translation (which was only finished in the 1460s). He also studied carefully Moerbeke's translations of the *Elements* and the *Parmenides Commentary*, leaving numerous notes in his manuscripts of these treatises and integrating a number of Proclean conceptions into his thought. All of these treatises were also well known to Marsilio Ficino, who borrowed the title (though not the contents) of his major work, *Platonic Theology*, from Proclus. Ficino also translated excerpts from the *Alcibiades Commentary* and the *Republic Commentaries*, and he even claimed to have made a new translation of the *Elements* and of Proclus' hymns, though these works have unfortunately been lost. In addition, he translated Proclus' *De sacrificio* in 1488, and showed great interest in theurgy in general (see below, pp. 290–2). Around the same time Giovanni Pico della Mirandola published his 900 theses assembled from numerous authorities and designed to join all schools of thought in a single symphony of philosophies; fifty-five of these were taken from Proclus. In similar vein, Francesco Patrizi incorporated a number of Proclean conceptions in his *New Philosophy of the Universe* (1591), after having published Latin translations of the *Elements of Theology* and *Elements of Physics* in 1583.⁹

With the end of the Renaissance interest in Proclus and Neoplatonism abated, but never disappeared entirely. In 1618 the first full edition and Latin translation of Proclus' *Platonic Theology* was published by Aemilius Portus. A great admirer of Proclus was Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), who in his *Harmony of the World* made particularly frequent use of the *Euclid Commentary*. Proclus was also widely used by the Cambridge Platonists, such as Ralph Cudworth (1617–85) and Henry More (1614–87). Yet, as the mechanical and corpuscular image of the world predominated, philosophers were increasingly unfriendly towards Neoplatonism.

The last big revival of Neoplatonism came at the turn of the nineteenth century in reaction to the rationalist mechanicism of modern science and philosophy. In England, Proclus was reawakened by Thomas Taylor, who published the first translations of Neoplatonic texts in a modern language, including the *Elements of Theology* (1792), *Platonic Theology* (1816) and the *Timaeus Commentary* (1820). While ignored by professional academics of his day, his lectures were attended by some of the famous Romantic poets, such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Coleridge, the most philosophically inclined of them, read Proclus in the Greek original as well and referred to him in

⁹ On Proclus in the Renaissance see Kristeller 1987: 201–10 (and 197–8 on Ficino's lost translations of Proclus); Ficino: Allen 1982 and 1987; Celenza 2002; Cusanus: Beierwaltes 2000; Bormann 2001; Patrizi: Leinkauf 1990.

some of his works. Thanks to Taylor, Proclus also influenced the American Transcendentalists, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82).

Even more interesting was the development in Germany, where Proclus caught the attention of the great idealist philosophers Hegel (1770–1831) and Schelling (1775–1854), who both absorbed some of his metaphysical principles – most notably the cycle of remaining, procession and reversion, which reappears in both Hegel and Schelling as the basic principle of their triadic dialectic. Hegel saw Proclus' system as the culmination of Greek thought (1894: 451): 'in it the world of thought has, so to speak, consolidated itself . . . for the sensuous world has disappeared and the whole been raised into spirit, and this whole has been called God and His life in it. Here we witness a great revolution, and with this the first period, that of Greek philosophy, closes.' It is not surprising that Victor Cousin in 1821 dedicated his edition of Proclus' *Parmenides Commentary* precisely to Hegel and Schelling. The legacy of German Idealism has been used as a clue to understanding Neoplatonism by the twentieth century German scholar Werner Beierwaltes, whose classic Proclus monograph (1979) is very Hegelian in its selection of topics.¹⁰

* * *

So far for the historical importance of Proclus. A far more difficult question is to what extent Proclus' thought might still be inspiring for us today. At first sight, his chances do not seem too high. Proclus has bequeathed to us one of the most elaborate metaphysical systems ever produced in the West. Yet, since the turn of the twentieth century Western philosophical thought has been characterized by a fundamental distrust of metaphysics. In addition, the collapse of colonialism has taught us to respect cultural diversity and has greatly diminished our faith in the possibility of uncovering the true nature of reality by universally valid rational reasoning. We have experienced what the great Plotinian scholar A. H. Armstrong (1981a: 49) has aptly called 'the breakdown of absolutism'. In this light, the grand metaphysical systems of old inevitably appear as culturally conditioned systems of meanings produced by humans in specific historical situations. Few of us would nowadays be willing to take seriously Proclus' ontological hypostases and consider them as completely realistic entities existing 'out there', independently from us. We would much rather take them for unique human cultural creations that have allowed the Neoplatonists to see the world around them as meaningful, and to make the best of their increasingly difficult historical position. In this regard, we are still heirs to

¹⁰ The classic study on Neoplatonism and German idealism is Beierwaltes 1972. The same line of research is continued by Halfwassen 1999.

the tradition of 'subjectification' which the eastern Neoplatonists opposed, but which prevailed in the West for the next 1500 years, leading ultimately to the subjective orientation of post-Cartesian philosophy and culminating in the cultural relativism of postmodern thought.

Despite this, there has been a persistent rise of interest in Neoplatonism in recent decades – surely a sign that there is something to be absorbed from its legacy. After all, as Mary Douglas puts it (1996: 93), 'it is necessary all the time to remind ourselves that we are only dealing with distant ages and remote places in order to understand ourselves'. While the historical method of modern scholarship allows one to study thinkers of the past with considerable detachment and without taking an open philosophical stance on them, the element of personal involvement is still present. The best example are the French scholars, who in the last 100 years have played a crucial part in the academic rediscovery of Neoplatonism. As Wayne Hankey (2006) has shown, most of these scholars were Catholics, and the study of Neoplatonism was a part of their personal religious quest. To some, the philosophical mysticism of the Neoplatonists presented an attractive alternative to the rigidities of Neothomism, which draws an all too rigid line between philosophy, theology and spirituality. 'Especially after Vatican II, and the rejection of Neothomism which followed it, Neoplatonic and Patristic studies affected general Catholic religious practice by opening Latin Rite Catholicism to Eastern Orthodox and Oriental spiritualities. Neoplatonism also became a substitute for Catholicism among laicized priests and the ecclesiastically disenchanted' (Hankey 2006: 132).

As Hankey makes clear, one of the main attractions of Neoplatonism lies in its negative theology, which seems to offer an interesting answer to the crisis of metaphysics that has dominated twentieth-century thought. While in popular philosophical discourse negative theology is often taken to refer simply to the use of negative predications describing what the divine cause is (God is without multiplicity, without limit, without time . . .), for the Neoplatonists it was something much more radical: the removal of all predications, a fundamental impossibility of saying anything about the first cause. The essence of negative theology is perhaps best expressed by Plotinus (*Enn.* vi 9, 3.49–54):

For to say the One is the cause is to predicate an attribute not of it, but of us, in that we have something from it, while it exists in itself. But he who speaks precisely should not say 'it' or 'exists', but we circle around it on the outside, as it were, and want to communicate our own experiences of it, sometimes coming near, sometimes falling away in our perplexities about it.

In other words, whenever we speak about the absolute, we do not really speak about the absolute as such, but about our own limits, and the insufficiency of our categories which we experience face to face with the absolute. Each statement concerning the absolute is actually a statement concerning the human world knocking against its own boundaries.

What this means is that negative theology offers a way of speaking about the absolute without falling into the trap of its positive reification, i.e. without pursuing metaphysics in the sense that most Western thinkers decided to turn from more than a hundred years ago. Indeed, negative discourse allows us to bridge the chasm between religious thought and atheism, for it expressly stresses that beyond the human, culturally constructed boundaries there is 'nothing' (or 'non-being', as Proclus would call it). At the same time, however, negative theology calls attention to the enormous power of this 'nothing', regarding it as 'non-being superior to being' (*ET* 138.13). It is non-being not in the sense of complete emptiness, but rather in that of an inexpressible fullness of possibilities. It is a 'potency of all things'¹¹ that might become anything, but by itself is nothing. Its power comes from the fact that it constantly makes us aware of the limitedness of our human worlds, in this way endangering them but at the same time appearing as the ultimate transcendent source they depend on.

Twentieth-century thought has come close to negative theology in many regards. A prime example is the claim of Jacques Derrida that all things are signs, there being no 'transcendental signified', i.e. no pure signified which is not itself a sign. This resembles negative theology, which also sees all things as signs, regarding the ultimate source of their meaning as forever deferred and unspeakable. The crucial difference, of course, lies in the implications of these two approaches. As Eric Perl puts it (2002: 126), 'whereas for Neoplatonism this implies that the world is infinitely meaningful, the manifestation of God, for deconstructionism it implies that the world is meaningless'. In Perl's view, 'deconstructionism has performed a much needed, although purely negative service, in destroying, we may hope once and for all, the false notion of transcendence which has prevailed in the west since at least the late Middle Ages', namely 'the dream of a first principle, a God, who is included within the totality of that which is and hence can be disengaged and thought apart from all signs, images, or symbols. Thus deconstruction eliminates any possible dualism between world and God, peel and core, signifier and signified' (*ibid.*: 143). We should not allow this to be the last word, however, embracing total nihilism.

¹¹ Plotinus, *Enn.* III 8, 10.1; V 3, 15.33; V 4, 1.36 etc.

Rather, we may see this as a chance for 'rethinking the idea of transcendence which our own time so urgently requires: transcendence without dualism, transcendence as immanence' (ibid.).

Neoplatonism offers precisely such a perspective, and may thus be a perfect answer to deconstruction.¹² It regards meaning as transcendent, and yet as being only contained in the text and referring to nothing external. 'The meaning grounds the text, but occurs only in the text' (ibid.). Rather than being an external signified that the world refers to, the One amounts to a dynamic quality or power immanent in the world, though irreducible to it, and always making us desire more than we can grasp. It is for this reason that Neoplatonic negative theology has been espoused by a number of postmodern Catholic French thinkers (Hankey 2006: 152–62): Jean Trouillard, for instance, has found in Proclean negative 'henology' a perfect reply to Heidegger's critique of Western ontological metaphysics, while Jean-Luc Marion has developed his own radical non-metaphysical form of negative theology inspired by Dionysius.

Negative theology as such is of course common to both western and eastern Neoplatonists, and one might rightly ask whether Proclus' version of it has something more to offer to contemporary thought than that of Plotinus. One possible answer might lie in Proclus' henadology. Its implications are already pointed out by Trouillard, who draws a telling contrast between the approach of Proclus and that of Plotinus:

Plotinus returns to the One through a severe negation, or, better, he gives way to a purifying motion which, springing out of the ecstasy hidden in each of us, detaches it first from the empirical world, and then from intellectual vision . . . If Plotinus ultimately saves nature and the forms, he keeps them at a two-fold distance. He goes to the divinity by night. Proclus shows rather a will for transfiguration. Without doubt his universe is arranged on horizontal planes like that of Plotinus, but it is also traversed by a series of vertical lines, which like rays diverge from the same universal centre and refer back to it the furthestmost and the most diverse appearances. These chains tend to absorb the hierarchical ordering of the levels and to link them all directly to the One. . . . The sensible is thus susceptible to a transposition and a purification which announces and perhaps prepares for the intelligible expanse of the Cartesians. . . . A stone is itself able to participate in the divine power to purify.¹³

Proclus' henadology has several interesting implications. (i) It compensates for the radical distance between the world and the One by postulating

¹² For another detailed attempt to confront Derrida with Neoplatonism see Gersh 2006. For an equally enlightening comparison with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas see Corrigan 2007.

¹³ Trouillard 1965: 23–5, trans. by Hankey 2006: 194.

an equally radical proximity of the gods to sensible things. As we have seen (ch. 3.3), the gods are able to bypass the entire metaphysical system and pervade all levels of reality down to the lowest things, leaving their unspeakable symbolic imprints in them. For postmodern thought, which will probably find little use for Proclus' complex ontological hierarchy, this is a crucial point, allowing the pursuit of negative theology in a much more immediate way.

(2) Negative theology, once accepted in all of its radical conclusions, deprives us of the illusory certainty provided by traditional metaphysics, giving us no chance to regard our ontological speculations as reliable dogmas 'proved' by logical reasoning. By doing this, it makes us sensitive to other modes of accessing the absolute: to symbols or myths, conceived as revelations of the Unknowable which – unlike positive metaphysical concepts – are always open to interpretation, retain an element of uncertainty, and are culturally specific. As A. H. Armstrong (1981a) has pointed out, it is precisely negative theology that may teach us to take myths seriously once again. Proclus' conception of symbols as mediators between the world of thought in the unconceptualizable henadic realm is a case in point. As we have seen (ch. 6), symbols avoid the trap of postulating a pure 'transcendental signified' in that they do not point to any positive referent. Symbols do not signify the henads, they reveal their infinite presence, provoking us to ever new and ever incomplete attempts to give a rational account of them.

A postmodern parallel to this may again be found in Marion and his distinction between 'idols' and 'icons', which he adapts from Eastern Orthodoxy and Dionysius (who in turn draws on Proclus and his opposition between images and symbols). For Marion (1991: 24), 'the idol measures the divine to the scope of the gaze of he who then sculpts it', amounting to a mirror which reflects the limited human gaze back to itself, offering a conceptually circumscribed image of the divine. The icon, by contrast, 'recognizes no other measure than its own and infinite excessiveness', allowing our gaze to penetrate into its infinite depth. 'Contemplating the icon amounts to seeing the visible in the very manner by which the invisible that imparts itself therein envisages the visible – strictly, to exchange our gaze for the gaze that iconistically envisages us' (ibid.). While the idol reflects the observer, here it is rather the observer who becomes a mirror of the icon 'which transforms us in its glory by allowing this glory to shine on our face as its mirror' (ibid., 25).

(3) Marion speaks from a Christian monotheistic viewpoint. Yet, one source of the henads' postmodern attraction lies perhaps precisely in their

polytheistic plurality. Never before has the West been faced with the problem of religious pluralism to such an extent as it is today. As A. H. Armstrong has stressed in his poignant essay 'Some Advantages of Polytheism', it has now become increasingly difficult to see Christianity as superior to other religions (1981b: 188): 'the enormous increase of our knowledge of the universe and our power to damage it . . . seem to require a new degree of awareness of the holiness of all things, of divine presences quite outside man and his history, as well as of God's epiphanies in the gods of other men'. The henads offer a flexible conception that strives to reconcile plurality with a sense of the absolute. Not only are they a polycentric set of many gods. Even more importantly, they take local embeddedness for granted, allowing for the parallel existence of many such culturally specific pluralistic sets – for the untranslatability of divine names (see above, p. 277) implies that various national pantheons, while functionally comparable, are not reducible to one another, each relating to the unspeakable henads from a different unique perspective.¹⁴ No wonder that Edward Butler (2008b; 2007) has seen them as providing 'a theoretical basis for the non-reductive cross-cultural comparison between deities' and offering 'a promising foundation for a polytheistic philosophy of religion'.

Besides negative theology, Proclean Neoplatonism might perhaps be inspiring for us today with regard to some of its more general worldview features. We have seen, for instance, that Proclus' thought has an extreme 'totalitarian' tendency, attempting to comprise reality in all of its fullness. At first sight this is miles away from the specialized and open-ended character of postmodern thought, which deliberately refrains from creating all-encompassing universalistic systems for understanding reality. There is one aspect to Proclus' 'totalitarianism', however, that seems more appealing today, namely his persistent effort to integrate thinking with the whole of the human person. For Proclus, philosophy was not just a way of thinking about the world, but at a more fundamental level a specific way of living. To some extent, this holds for all ancient philosophical schools, as Hadot (1995) has shown, but the late Neoplatonists were forced to go much further in this respect than their predecessors. Living as they did in increasing cultural isolation, they had to incorporate in their philosophy a number of features that had previously existed independently as parts of the general cultural milieu. The main such feature was religion: it was now the task of the philosopher to transmit myths and perform rituals. Yet, theurgy

¹⁴ On the henads in relation to the diversity of different pantheons see Butler 2008a: 106–8. As Butler points out, it is for this reason that Proclus never specifies the actual number of the henads and that his teacher Syrianus explicitly pronounces it as unknowable for humans (*In Met.* 145.25–6).

involved not just a union of philosophy with religion; it also implied an integration of thought with other aspects of human personality, including the corporeal ones – for to perform theurgic rituals meant to work with one's body.

In this regard, Neoplatonism managed to pursue an approach that has otherwise frequently been missing in Western philosophy, which is notoriously weak precisely in its lack of touch with corporeal processes. While in India philosophy always went hand in hand with appropriate yogic techniques of the body, the West has more often tended to separate thought from the body – a tendency that in modern times has been greatly intensified by Cartesian dualism. It is only relatively recently that the dualist framework has been rejected in the West and that Merleau-Ponty, Lakoff and others have attempted to show human thought as fundamentally 'embodied'. So far this embodiment has been merely analysed, instead of being actively cultivated, but first germs of a more practical approach are already emerging in academia. Particularly interesting in this regard has been the development in the field of ritual studies, where a number of scholars are now attempting to see ritual performance as a specific kind of bodily knowledge which is not reducible to knowledge achieved by intellect (Jennings 1982). In view of these 'ritologists', academic study of ritual requires a physical training which will cultivate one's receptivity to non-discursive embodied modes of knowing (Grimes 1995). Neoplatonic theurgy was no doubt precisely such an embodied mode of knowing, and though it was not as directly physical as Indian yogic techniques, its corporeal cognitive potential was considerable nevertheless.

At first sight, theurgy appears as too distant from our world to be of any use in the potential search for ways of anchoring thought in the body, and it seems perhaps far more natural for us to turn to some of the sophisticated Eastern techniques, which have already infiltrated the West with remarkable success. Still, it is always good to examine one's own resources before accepting foreign ones – and theurgy certainly is a phenomenon that has been popping up repeatedly in Western (and Byzantine) culture with surprising vigour.

An impressive example may be found in the Renaissance, when a truly remarkable revival of theurgy was attempted by Marsilio Ficino. Its basic principles are described in his best-selling treatise *On Life (De vita)*, whose subject is more than unusual: caring for the health of scholars. Ficino knew all too well from his own experience that intellectual work is strenuous both mentally and physically. Intense scholarly preoccupations create a particular kind of one-sidedness in the human personality, leading frequently to

physiological disorders. Ficino's task was to relieve the bodies of scholars and allow them to function properly in the hard conditions of academic life. The main psychosomatic disease of intellectuals was identified as 'melancholy', and in the first two books of the treatise Ficino provides the first systematic analysis of this famous Renaissance phenomenon.¹⁵ More interesting for us is the third book, in which he attempted to revive theurgy and turn it into a holistic therapeutic technique allowing one to fight melancholy as well as other disorders. To reconcile theurgy with Christianity, Ficino had to deny its religious character, propagating it as 'natural magic' (*magia naturalis*), i.e. a secular scientific technique which instead of worshipping demons strives to use cosmic sympathies and receive the influences of heavenly bodies, helping to cultivate them and turn them to good use.

Significantly, Ficino's magic was 'natural' not just in its secularity, but in its concrete procedures as well. No longer do these resemble the obscure practices recalling folk magic or pagan rituals. Instead of collecting weird magical substances, the natural magician draws on the sympathetic potential of his everyday activities, which he organizes according to well-conceived patterns (*De vita* III 2.67–76, trans. by Kaske and Clark):

Always remember that through a given affect and pursuit of our mind and through the very quality of our spirit we are easily and quickly exposed to those planets which signify the same affect, quality, and pursuit. Hence, by withdrawal from human affairs, by leisure, solitude, constancy, by theology, the more esoteric philosophy, superstition, magic, agriculture, and by sorrow, we come under the influence of Saturn. We come under the influence of Jupiter by civic occupations, by those occupations which strive for honour, by natural philosophy, by the kind of philosophy which most people can understand, by civil religion, and by laws; of Mars, by anger and contests; of the Sun and of Mercury, by the pursuit of eloquence, of song, of truth, and of glory, and by skill; of Venus, by gaiety and music and festivity; of the Moon, by a vegetable existence.

The suggested therapy consists in counterbalancing one-sided planetary influences by pursuing activities and surrounding oneself with objects which help to evoke some opposite qualities. The resulting ritualized behaviour is at first sight indistinguishable from ordinary activities, differing from them merely by its concentrated and systematic character. The best antidote to melancholy, for instance, is to evoke the Solar power by eating foodstuffs and surrounding oneself with flowers or minerals belonging to the Solar chain – such as saffron, aloe-wood, ginger, cinnamon,

¹⁵ See Klibansky, Panofski and Saxl 1964: 254–74.

yellow honey, laurel or the palm tree (*De vita* III 14.51–6, trans. by Kaske and Clark):

From all these things, I say, or at least from many of them, you should compound something while the Sun is dignified. Begin to use it, too, under his domination, whilst you also put on Solar clothes and live in, look at, smell, imagine, think about, and desire Solar things. Likewise you should imitate both the dignity and the gifts of the Sun in your life. You should pass your time among Solar men and plants; you should touch laurel continually.

Ficino's 'natural magic' is highly interesting precisely for the inventiveness with which it reinterprets theurgy. Ficino studied and translated theurgic texts (such as Proclus' *De sacrificio* or Iamblichus' *De mysteriis*), but he knew that ancient procedures could not be transferred mechanically. Instead, he tried to understand the general principles behind theurgy, so that he might put them to use in an entirely different up-to-date manner. His daring transposition was successful: *De vita* was his most popular work, receiving countless reprints till the middle of the seventeenth century. From today's perspective his natural magic has a fairly modern look, resembling some procedures of contemporary alternative psychotherapy. Significantly, Ficino turned to theurgy not for religious reasons but precisely in searching for a more holistic conception of philosophy, one that might care for the whole person, including its corporeal dimension.

This is not to say, of course, that *magia naturalis* should be adopted by us today. It too is historically conditioned, and would require a similar fundamental reinterpretation to that undertaken by Ficino vis-à-vis theurgy. Its astrological framework, for instance, is closely tied to an organic view of the cosmos with all of its parts sympathetically interconnected – a notion fairly common in the Renaissance. It was only in the seventeenth century that an atomistic vision of the world prevailed, hand in hand with a new emphasis on the individual and the human subject. Our own era of individualism is still an heir to this approach, though numerous efforts at rehabilitating the cosmic perspective may be observed today – most notably in the field of ecology, which several recent philosophers have tried to ground precisely in Neoplatonism.¹⁶

Ecology is still a far cry, of course, from the belief in sympathetic chains and their ritual power, but even this may not perhaps be as unthinkable for us today as it might seem at first. Contemporary anthropology of religion does have some interesting conceptual tools for granting symbols their therapeutic efficacy, and by extension for seeing Ficino's natural magic as

¹⁶ See Blakeley 1997; Lea 2002; Westra 2002.

meaningful. It is now widely recognized that symbols do have a crucial evocative power. They allow us to bypass consciousness and communicate with deeper corporeal, psychic and interpersonal processes. They are capable of attuning us to wider biological and cosmic rhythms, and in a sense help to balance the onesidedness which our consciousness has to pay as a price for the enormous possibilities that the ability for rational reflection otherwise affords to us.¹⁷ Some recent theories of symbolic efficacy already start to resemble ancient conceptions of sympathy. The social anthropologist Geoffrey Samuel, for instance, has attempted to understand the efficacy of healing rituals by introducing a theory of transpersonal 'modal states' that 'correspond both to specific patterning of mind and body of individuals within a given social context, and to patterning of relationships among them'.¹⁸ For Samuel these modal states transcend the separation between mind and body, as well as the individual and society. Indeed, they are not just states of the individuals concerned, but rather objective 'properties' of a given social environment (*ibid.*):

While I speak here for simplicity of 'individuals' having repertoires of states, the states are really states of the entire social context, since they govern what happens between individuals as much as what happens within them. In fact, individuals as subjects are constituted by the states, rather than individuals being pre-given subjects who possess the states . . . The ritual operates on these states, and brings about transitions between them.

Samuel's conception shows a possible way in which the atomistic conception of the human subject might be overcome. It allows us to open up the boundaries of the subject and show it as interconnected with external reality. In this regard Samuel attempts to achieve something vaguely similar to what I have described in chapter 8.3 as Iamblichean 're-externalization'. So far his project is too isolated to achieve general recognition – indeed, he is blamed by critics precisely for reintroducing 'theories of cosmic sympathy such as those that flourished in Renaissance thought and in alchemy' (Sørensen 2006: 529). Yet his approach is in fact compatible with postmodernism. Derrida's rejection of the notion of a 'subject' as an independent entity standing outside the system of signs has already cleared the way for overcoming the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, and it is only to be expected that philosophers should search for positive alternatives to it. Just

¹⁷ This point is developed in connection with healing rituals by Dow 1986. For the bodily efficacy of symbols cf. already the classic paper of Lévi-Strauss 1963, which remains the basis of all recent discussions.

¹⁸ Samuel 2001: 76; cf. in detail Samuel 1990.

as negative theology may be seen as a meaningful response to Derrida's critique of the 'transcendental signified', so may perhaps Samuel's 'modal states' be regarded as a constructive reaction to postmodern death of the subject.

All of this testifies to significant worldview changes that Western thought is currently going through. Since these concern the conception of the subject to a crucial extent, it is more than appropriate for us now to pay renewed attention to the thought of late antiquity, when 'subjectification' for the first time entered the stage with full strength. Indeed, there seem to be a number of other remarkable resemblances between our time and that of the Neoplatonists. Nowhere is this better visible than in the sphere of religion: the religious situation of the 'post-Christian' West (and Europe in particular) is similar in some points to that of the third century AD, when paganism was still the dominant religion of the Empire, but was gradually getting out of touch with socio-political development, losing its importance and local sources of support. The new conception of the subject went hand in hand with this, producing novel worldview requirements that the old religion found extremely difficult to comply with (see above, ch. 9). In one regard, Iamblichus' reaction to this situation may of course serve as a warning, his attempt to conserve the old Hellenic world being a lamentable failure. Nonetheless, it was a highly creative failure, and one that has ever since repeatedly fascinated intellectuals both East and West.

It is usual for cultures to return to previous stages of their development whenever they stand at a crossroads, seeing the prevalent worldview frameworks as insufficient, and feeling the need to experiment with new possibilities. Ficino's Quattrocento was one such turning point, and our own time is no doubt another one. It is on account of this that study of ancient and Renaissance philosophy is so popular today: it allows us to map the internal possibilities of our civilization and gives us an opportunity to rearrange them, refocusing on some of the conceptions that the flow of history has pushed out to the margins. From this perspective, even if Iamblichus' worldview reforms proved to be a blind alley in their time, they were not altogether futile. Eastern Neoplatonists did manage to create remarkable new cultural and intellectual forms, and though these eventually failed to win the day, they have never disappeared entirely, subsisting as latent possibilities to be rediscovered and reinterpreted by later generations. For this reason, Proclean Neoplatonism is well worth our attention.

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