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PROCLUS

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1 LIFE AND WORK

Proclus was born in 412 in Byzantium in a Lycian family, still faithful to the old Hellenic religion in a society already dominated by Christianity. The talented young man did not opt for a career in the imperial administration as his father had done, but decided to devote his life to philosophy. After completing his studies in Alexandria, Proclus arrived in Athens in 430 where he joined the Platonic Academy and was first educated by the elderly Plutarch. Under Plutarch the Athenian Academy had turned to the new form of Platonic philosophy that was initiated by Plotinus and propagated by Porphyry. Under the influence of Iamblichus, this Platonic philosophy had become more and more linked to the old beliefs and rites of paganism, of which it offered a rational justification. This tendency increased when Syrianus became the new head of the Academy in 432.[1] During more than fifteen years Proclus not only followed Syrianus' courses, but was also initiated by him in theurgic rituals. Proclus was deeply influenced by his master and he often praises him lavishly (cf. *In Parm.* 1.618.2–9). After Syrianus' death (around 437), he became the head of the school and thus 'successor (*diadochos*) of Plato', a position he held for almost fifty years until his death in 485. Notwithstanding the hostile ideological climate – which even forced Proclus to go to Lydia for one year – the Academy still continued to enjoy

[1] The strong connection between pagan religion and Platonic philosophy is characteristic of the Athenian Academy from Syrianus on and sets it apart from the Alexandrian school. There were certainly close relations between members of the schools, even family relations, and all were educated in the same philosophical tradition (cf. I. Hadot 1978 who tends to minimize the differences between the schools). However, the Alexandrian philosophers were less occupied with the defence of pagan beliefs and even seemed to avoid discussing them. Their main interest was explaining Aristotle in harmony with Plato (whereas Syrianus and Proclus are often very critical of Aristotle). The different development of both schools may be explained by the different socio-cultural context. Athens was in the middle of the fifth century a small provincial capital with a relatively important pagan community cherishing the old reputation of the city, whereas Alexandria was a flourishing metropolis with a large population and a dominant Christian community, which did not hesitate to attack pagan philosophers: see Watts 2006.

an intellectual prestige in Athens and in the Greek cultural world, also having the financial resources for its members and their families to live independent lives. We are well informed about the daily life in the Academy thanks to Proclus' biography by his successor Marinus.[2] It is a sort of pagan hagiography celebrating Proclus' attainment of supreme happiness by the practice of the whole scale of virtues, culminating in the theurgic virtues. According to Marinus, Proclus worked day and night with tireless discipline, studying, lecturing, discussing and writing, as is shown by his impressive list of publications.

> So immense was his love of labour that he gave five courses of exegesis, sometimes even more, in the course of a day, and generally wrote about seven hundred lines, went on conferring with the other philosophers, and in the evening held further seminars that were not written up. And all this besides his nocturnal devotion to worship and his prostrations to the rising, midday, and setting sun.
>
> (*Vit. Procl.* 22.29–37)

As Marinus' last comment indicates, Proclus was not merely an academic philosopher, but a deeply religious person, who started his day with rituals and prayers. He even composed hymns to the gods. In the community of the school, Proclus and his intimate disciples and relatives continued to perform the sacrifices and prayers of the old Hellenic religion, which could no longer be practised in public in the temples. Like Iamblichus, Proclus was convinced that theoretical philosophy is not sufficient to connect us with the gods. Only the correct performance of theurgic acts using the power of ineffable symbols and sacred words could warrant the salvation of the soul. In his view, it was impossible to dissociate philosophy from the Hellenic religious tradition, as the Christians tried to do. Proclus' religious conviction is also evident in his commentaries on Plato, which often mix remarkable philosophical insights and technical explanations of the text with abstruse considerations about different classes of gods. For Proclus, Plato was more than a philosopher, intent upon the search of the truth; he was a divinely inspired prophet, a 'hierophant of divine doctrines' having come down on earth for the salvation of souls; and so were all true interpreters of Plato, and, in particular, Syrianus (*In Parm.* 1.618.4–9).

[2] Marinus was born around 440 in Neapolis in Palestine. Though of Samaritan origin, he converted to paganism (Damasc. *Vit. Isid.* 97A) and entered the Academy in Athens around 460, where he soon became a close collaborator of Proclus (Proclus dedicated to him his commentary on the myth of Er (*In Remp.* 2.96.2–4)). After some hesitation – Isidore was first approached, but declined the offer – Proclus designated Marinus as his successor, though he was concerned about his bad health. He died a few years after Proclus' death, leaving the school in a deep crisis. Marinus had a keen interest in mathematics and astronomy, but was not a speculative mind as was his master. He even did not follow his theological interpretation of the *Parmenides*. On Marinus, see Saffrey and Segonds 2001.

Proclus was convinced that the divine truth had been revealed in different types (*tropoi*) of theological discourse: (1) divinely inspired poets, such as Homer, Hesiod and Orpheus, narrate mythological stories filled with symbols about the generation of gods, their sexual relations, their fights and betrayals, the eating of their children and castrating of their fathers; (2) prophets inspired by the gods reveal in an oracular language the different classes of gods, the creation of the sensible world, and the means by which the soul may escape fate and find its salvation; (3) Pythagoreans use mathematical and geometrical images to expound the different classes of the gods; (4) finally, philosophers use dialectical terms such as 'one' and 'being', 'whole' and 'parts', 'same' and 'other', define and divide, and develop demonstrations (*PT* 1.4; *In Parm.* 1.646.16–647.15). Plato practised with brilliance each of these modes of discourse; he composed wonderful myths, occasionally used oracular language (as in the myth of the *Phaedrus*), and exploited mathematical and geometrical arguments, particularly in the *Timaeus*. But above all he was a dialectician, who attempted to explain what is encoded in obscure oracles, myths and symbols. 'He easily penetrated the whole theology, that of the Greeks and that of barbarians, clouded as it was by mythical fictions, and brought it to light for those who were willing and able to follow it, expounding everything in an inspired manner and bringing it into harmony' (*Vit. Procl.* 22.15–21). Proclus saw himself as the interpreter whose task it was, under Plato's guidance, to reveal the hidden truth of the venerable oracles and myths and to expose in a systematic way their doctrines about the gods in a civilization in which their cult was threatened. He devoted a massive commentary to the *Chaldaean Oracles*, which enjoyed in the Athenian school almost the same authority as biblical texts had for Christians. He also annotated and edited Syrianus' comments on the Orphic poems (*Vit. Procl.* 26–7). Like Syrianus, he wanted to demonstrate the harmony between Plato and the other sources of divinely inspired wisdom, the mathematical tradition from Pythagoras, the Orphic theogony and the *Chaldaean Oracles*. In his view, only a philosophical approach could offer the concepts and arguments needed for such a scientific synthesis of doctrines, beliefs and practices. His rational approach to theology is evident from the first chapters of his *Platonic Theology*:

> Everywhere we shall prefer the clear, distinct and simple, to the contraries of these. What is conveyed through symbols, we shall transfer to a clear doctrine, what is communicated through images, we shall refer to their exemplars, what is written in a more categorical way, we shall examine by causal arguments, what is composed through demonstrations, we shall investigate, and we shall explain the mode of truth which they contain, and render it known to the hearers, and of what is enigmatically proposed, we shall discover the clear meaning starting not from foreign suppositions, but from the most genuine writings of Plato.
>
> (*Theol. Plat.* 1.2, p. 9.20–10.4)

If Plato is his supreme guide *in theologicis*, Proclus is also well acquainted with the whole tradition of ancient philosophy and his predecessors in the Platonic school in particular, 'having gone through all their treatises'. 'If anything was fertile in them he made critical use of it, but if he found anything worthless, he rejected this entirely as an absurdity, and if anything was contrary to sound principles, he refuted it polemically with severe examination' (*Vit. Procl.* 22.21–7). This polemical attitude is particularly manifest in his encounter with the works of Aristotle. During his studies in Alexandria he had already 'learned by heart' Aristotle's logical works (*Vit. Procl.* 8.33–6) and later commented on them. In Athens, he read with Plutarch Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul* alongside Plato's *Phaedo* (*Vit. Procl.* 10.8–10) and later continued with Syrianus his Aristotelian education: 'In less than two years Syrianus read with him the entire works of Aristotle, logical, ethical, political, physical and the science of theology which transcends these [i.e., metaphysics]' (*Vit. Procl.* 13.1–4). However, the reading of Aristotle was only seen as a preparation, the 'lesser mysteries' before being initiated in the 'greater mysteries', which are revealed in the Platonic dialogues. If Aristotle is an indispensable master in logic and theory of demonstration and has developed a detailed explanation of physical and biological phenomena, he falls back from Plato's achievements in his search for the first causes. Like his master Syrianus, Proclus does not hesitate to criticize Aristotle whom he often accuses of not having properly understood Plato. Of course, this polemical attitude does not prevent him from integrating whatever is valuable in his philosophy.

Proclus also learned much from his great predecessors in the Platonic school, Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus, the 'exegetes of the Platonic epoptics' (*Theol. Plat.* 1.1, p. 6.16). He highly appreciated Plotinus and even devoted a commentary to the *Enneads*, but had problems with many of his provocative views and always tried to bring them down to a more acceptable level within the system. Thus he rejected his doctrine about the One as cause of its own being (see below), his claim that a part of the human soul never descends from the intelligible, but always remains 'above' (*In Tim.* 3.334.3–27), his explanation of time as originating from the discursive motion of the soul (*In Tim.* 2.21.6–24.30), and his identification of matter and evil (*De mal. subs.* 30–5). In this critique he mostly follows Iamblichus as also in his rejection of the possibility of salvation through theory alone without the practice of rites and sacrifices. Proclus' religious Platonism is undoubtedly Iamblichaean in inspiration and many of his seminal doctrines lead back to the Syrian philosopher. Proclus, however, succeeds in translating Iamblichus' divine intuitions, often expressed in an inflated style, to intelligible principles explaining the procession of all reality. But Proclus owes most to his master Syrianus, in particular in his interpretation of the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*. As most works of the Platonic

tradition before him are lost, it is difficult to assess Proclus' originality. Even Marinus, who wants to stress Proclus' own achievements, has difficulty in finding doctrines 'that were not known before' (*Vit. Procl.* 23).

Proclus worked and wrote indefatigably throughout his career. Although much of his huge production is lost, the extant work remains impressive. He wrote commentaries on the logical works of Aristotle and on all dialogues of Plato that constituted the curriculum of the Platonic School since Iamblichus. The course started with the *Alcibiades I*. This dialogue about self-knowledge was in fact considered as an introduction to philosophy, offering in outline 'the complete plan of all philosophy'. Since it reveals what a human being truly is and exhorts each of us to turn towards ourselves, we may discover by self-reflection the fundamental principles of all philosophical disciplines (*In Alc.* 14.3–5; 11.3–12). The curriculum culminated in the explanation of the two supreme dialogues of the whole Platonic corpus, the *Timaeus* about the creation of the physical world and the *Parmenides*, which, as we will see, was considered to offer Plato's doctrine on the first principles. Proclus' commentaries on the *Alcibiades*, the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides* have partially survived. Of the commentaries on *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and *Philebus* we only have testimonies. The commentary on the *Cratylus* survives in excerpts of students' notes, but sufficient to reveal an original philosophy of language. Proclus connects semantics with Platonic dialectic, shows the 'generative and assimilative power' of the human soul in name giving and how it imitates the creative activity of the divine Intellect, and examines what one can learn about the gods through an analysis of the divine names. Also preserved is a large collection of interpretative essays on various topics in the *Republic*, a dialogue outside the curriculum. It contains *inter alia* a defence of the Homeric myths against Plato's censorship, making a valuable distinction between three forms of poetry, a discussion of the celebrated comparison that gives indirect insight into 'the Idea of the Good' and an explanation of the subsequent Allegory of the Cave, a defence of Plato's 'communist' state against Aristotle's critique in *Politics* 2, a mathematical explanation of the nuptial number, and a commentary on the final myth of Er.

The ancient commentaries are not just scholarly works of interpretation in the modern sense, subservient to the text, but also offer an opportunity to expound one's own philosophical views starting from the text. Proclus' commentaries are masterpieces in their genre, and give us not only insight into his own views, but also a wealth of information about the hermeneutical discussions in the Platonic tradition. In particular, the great commentary on the *Timaeus* with its many quotations and named sources is invaluable for the reconstruction of centuries of interpretation of this dialogue and the history of

natural philosophy and cosmology. The commentary on the *Parmenides* is also an important document on the history of the interpretation of this enigmatic dialogue, though it is difficult to sort out the different positions here as Proclus does not identify his sources, apart from the omnipresent Syrianus. Books 3–4 contain a remarkable discussion of the different problems on the doctrine of the Forms, starting from the *aporiai* raised by Parmenides (and later employed by Aristotle). The general preface and the introduction to book 6 give a survey of the different interpretations of the final part, the hypotheses on the One.

Proclus also wrote a remarkable commentary on Euclid's *Elements*. The two prologues of this commentary offer the best introduction to the philosophy of mathematics in antiquity. Proclus examines here the ontological status of mathematical objects: they are neither empirical objects nor abstracted entities derived from them nor pure intelligible forms, but *logoi* projected in the imagination of the soul, where they become extended and divisible. Another important scientific work is the *Exposition of Astronomical Hypotheses*, which offers a critical assessment of the hypotheses proposed by the astronomers, and in particular Ptolemy, to explain the apparent anomalies in the planetary motions, which are supposed to be regular and uniformly circular. As Proclus shows, instead of saving the phenomena, the introduction of epicycles and eccentric motions only leads to more confusion and disharmony in the system. Proclus also composed monographs on diverse subjects, as on the eternity of the world, on the immortality of the soul, on providence and fate, on free choice, on the existence of evil. In the last treatise he defends the view that evil, when understood as privation, cannot exist in its own right and has no proper cause to explain it, as all agents act for the sake of some good. If, then, the contrary effect occurs, it must be unintended and uncaused, and only has a parasitic existence (*par-hupostasis*) supervening upon beings and their activities. Absolute pure evil does not exist. This doctrine, which enables Proclus to explain the existence of evil in a universe proceeding from an absolute first Good, became for centuries the dominant view on evil in philosophical and theological debates, because it was adopted by a Christian author writing under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite in his treatise *On Divine Names*.

Besides his commentaries Proclus owes his reputation mainly to his two great systematic works, the *Elements of Theology* and the *Platonic Theology*. Proclus uses the term 'theology' for a scientific systematic investigation into the first causes and principles of everything, which in the religious tradition have always been called 'gods' (*Theol. Plat.* 1.3, p. 13.6–8). From its very beginning, philosophy has been a theology in that it always attempted to identify those first causes. Thus, Aristotle's metaphysics, which culminates in the doctrine of the divine intellect, the unmoved mover of the universe, was considered by late-Platonic

commentators as a prominent example of a theological discipline, appropriately named 'theology'. In Proclus' view, however, only Plato developed the perfect form of theology because he recognized a cause beyond the intellect and beyond being, the One from which all things including even matter have their existence. It was Proclus' ambition to develop a comprehensive theology, based upon premisses taken from Plato's dialogues and in particular the *Parmenides*. The *Platonic Theology* is not just his last work, it is also the culmination of a whole life of research as philosopher and commentator of Plato and as interpreter of the authentic religious tradition. Proclus laid down the foundations and principles of this theology in his *Elements of Theology*. In his work, he demonstrates in a geometrical manner the fundamental theorems of his metaphysical theology. The work is composed of 211 propositions, each followed by a demonstration. They discuss the general principles governing the procession and reversion of all things from the First cause, the One, and apply them to the three hypostatic levels of reality, the gods or henads, the intellects and the souls. One has the impression that Proclus kept revising and perfecting the *Elements* throughout his career.[3] It is undoubtedly his most original composition, not so much because of the content – most of the principles were formulated in some form by his predecessors – but because of its highly innovative form, imitating Euclid's celebrated *Elements*. It had a tremendous influence for centuries thanks to the Arabic adaptation made of it in the ninth century, which was translated into Latin in the twelfth century. Under the title *Liber de Causis*, the treatise circulated at the medieval universities as a work of Aristotle, complementing his *Metaphysics*. This gave Proclus' doctrine an enormous, albeit anonymous, authority and contributed to the Platonic interpretation of Aristotle's metaphysics in the Middle Ages.

Since Proclus' ambition was primarily theological, my presentation of his doctrine will focus on his theological metaphysics, leaving aside many other

[3] Since Freudenthal (1881) the *Elements of Theology* is usually considered as one of the earlier works of Proclus. Proclus, it is said, stands closer in this work to Plotinus and Porphyry (presenting basically the doctrine of the three principal hypostases) and seems not yet to have developed some further elaborations, such as the introduction of an intermediate class between the intelligible and the intellective gods. Best discussion of the arguments remains Dodds 1933: xiii–xviii, who concludes that the *Elements* is a relatively early work, but warns that one should not regard it for that reason as 'the prentice essay of an undergraduate who has not yet developed his own system' (p. xvii). In fact, the system articulated in the *Elements* is substantially the same as in Proclus' last work, the *Platonic Theology*. Another problem concerns its relationship to the *Elements of Physics*. This latter work, which is almost entirely based on passages from Aristotle's physical works without any original contribution, is undoubtedly a work from Proclus' earlier career. Though in style and purpose similar, the *Elements of Theology* display a much more mature speculative thought. In my view, the uncertainties and incoherence in its composition as noticed by Dodds and the often disordered state of the argumentation, as manifested also in the divergence in the manuscript tradition (see Günther 2007) could be explained by the supposition that Proclus continued improving and rewriting this work throughout his career.

interesting issues, such as his doctrine of the soul, his discussion of intelligible Forms and psychic reason-principles (*logoi*), his theory of knowledge and philosophy of language, his natural philosophy, his contributions to mathematics and physics and his ethics. In my presentation I shall refrain, however, from commenting on Proclus' various attempts to interpret the pagan divinities, to understand oracles and myths and to justify religious practices. I realize that this rationalistic approach goes against Proclus' own wish to keep together religious piety and learning, but I will follow as my main inspiration the *Elements*, this superb monument of theological metaphysics, wherein Proclus himself is surprisingly sober and rational, and never introduces proper names of gods. The edition and translation of the *Elements* by E. R. Dodds is, after seventy-five years and an ocean of scholarship, still the best introduction to Proclus.

2 ELEMENTS OF A THEOLOGICAL METAPHYSICS

2.1 The One and the multiple

Like Aristotle's metaphysics, Proclus' theological project is an investigation into the first causes of whatever exists. 'For the task of science is the recognition of causes, and only when we recognize the causes of beings, do we say that we know them' (*El. theol.* 11). In this search for causes, one must ultimately reach 'a single first cause' of all that exists. The existence of a first cause is required to explain the system of causality. If there were no first cause, there would no longer be a universe where all things are held together in 'a sequence of primary and secondary, perfecting and perfected, regulative and regulated, generative and generated, active and passive'. If we were to continue the causal explanation to infinity, and always posit yet another cause behind the causes already found, we would obtain no explanation at all, for an infinite series of causes would be equivalent to no cause at all. It is also impossible to admit circularity in causation, for the same things would then be at once prior and consequent, cause and effect. If there is no infinite series of cause, and no circularity in causation, there must be a first cause of everything, and only a single one. To exclude the possibility of a multiplicity of first causes, Proclus invokes the basic axiom of Platonic philosophy, which is, fittingly, the first proposition of the *Elements of Theology*: 'every manifold participates in some way of unity'. Without some form of unity holding it together, a manifold, whatever it may be, could not subsist, as it would fall apart into an infinity of infinites. It cannot, however, be itself the unity it participates in, for it is not the One itself, but a unified manifold, which is 'affected' by unity. Hence, the manifold will always be posterior to the One upon which it depends. A multiplicity of first

principles is for that reason impossible. The absolute One must be the first principle.

2.2 The One and the Good

The One is not only the first cause from which all beings proceed, but also the Good that all desire. Proclus' main argument for the identity of the One and the Good is the fact that both principles have the same effects, namely, the preservation of whatever exists. Plato in the *Republic* defined the good as 'that which preserves and benefits' and evil as 'that which destroys and corrupts' (*Rep.* 5.462a–b). Thus, the good of the state is to be found in whatever gives it coherence and unity, whereas civil war and partisan fights and opposition tend to destroy it. If it is proper to the Good to maintain everything, it is in fact a principle of unification, for that which keeps each thing together is the cause of its unity. If, then, the effects of the Good and the One are identical, the two principles themselves must be identical: 'Every good tends to unify what participates in it, and all unification is good; and the Good is identical with the One' (*El. theol.* 13; cf. *In Parm.* 6.1043.9–24). This identity is also evident from the fact that things desire unity as their ultimate good. If the One and the Good were different objects of desire, then (1) either the One would be superior to the Good or (2) the Good superior to the One (a third possibility that the Good and the One are co-ordinate principles is excluded as there can be no ultimate multiplicity of principles). If, however, the One were beyond the Good (1), then we would desire the One more than the Good. Hence, the One would be more desirable and 'better' than the Good, which is absurd. For if we desire something, we want it because it is good. There can be nothing-better-than-good, since 'better' is precisely what participates more fully in the good. What, then, if we put the Good above the One (2)? But it is not possible to conceive something that is superior to the One; 'for everything else is called "better and worse" in virtue of its greater and lesser participation in this cause; and indeed the very concept of being better is so through participation in the One'. A Good above the One would in fact be a not-One, and thus a not-Good (*El. theol.* 12; *In Parm.* 7.1144.16–20; 511.63–70). Therefore the One–Good is the first cause, as is also shown by the fact that its causality reaches further than that of any other principle, such as Being or Life or Intellect. In fact, not all beings participate in thought or life, and not everything within the universe is a being, as there is also matter, but all desire unity, even things that barely exist, such as matter (*El. theol.* 57; 72). As the aspiration for the Good is more comprehensive and more fundamental than the desire for being, the Good must be beyond being as is also the One. The Good, the ultimate *telos*

towards which all beings strive, beyond all other desirable objects and even beyond being itself, turns out to be the One, the *archē*, the absolute principle from which all things proceed. For that reason every aspiration is consciously or unconsciously a return to the origin of a being: 'Everything reverts upon that from which it originated' (*El. theol.* 34). Therefore, the One is not just One but both the origin and the end of a circular movement of procession and reversion.

In order to designate somehow the ineffable nature of the First we dispose of two names, the most venerable of all, 'One' and 'Good', which correspond to two different approaches to it (*Theol. Plat.* 2.5–6). We do not call the First itself by these names, as it is beyond all discourse and knowledge, but use them to express our own concept (*ennoia*) and apprehension of it, in our impossible attempt to reach it. We call it the 'One' because it is the origin of all procession, the cause of all plurality. Here the negative theology of the *Parmenides*, in which we deny of the First whatever proceeds from it, is appropriate. The term 'One' remains fundamentally a negative term conveying no proper meaning; it is the negation of all multiplicity. The second name, the 'Good', is given to the First insofar as it is the ultimate term of all desire. To discover its meaning, analogical reasoning is needed, whereby we ascend to ever higher forms of perfection, the soul beyond the body, the intellect beyond the soul, being beyond the intellect, until we reach what is the absolute Good beyond everything. The double name we use does not introduce a duplication in the First. 'We transfer those names to it considering what comes after, that is the processions from it and reversions to it in a circular way' (*Theol. Plat.* 2.6.41.2–5). Without this circular movement coming from and returning to it, we could never say anything about the One.

2.3 Procession and reversion

Since the One is also the Good, it will not only be a principle of unification, but also the origin of all multiplicity coming forth from it. For whatever is perfect and complete, as is the Good and what participates in it, is by nature productive (*El. theol.* 25; *Theol. Plat.* 1.22). If it were infertile, it would be the most inferior degree of reality, which is only produced and does not produce anything lower than itself. It is, however, impossible that the utmost multiplicity would proceed immediately from the first cause. Since every agent tends to produce something similar to it, all procession is accomplished through a likeness of what is produced to its producer (*El. theol.* 29). Of course, this likeness cannot lead to an identity with the cause, for otherwise the product could not be distinguished from its producer. The effect will preserve the character that its

cause had primitively, in a derivative and inferior sense, and so come down in the procession of beings. This secondary being will itself produce something similar to it, though inferior, and so on. The superior cause, however, remains the cause of whatever comes forth, though it can exercise its causality only through the secondary causes. At the end of the procession, we reach a reality which is almost in all aspects dissimilar to the first principle, yet derives from it through a series of intermediates. Therefore, notwithstanding the decline and weakening of the original character, there is continuity between the generative and the generated, the primary and the secondary. To preserve this continuity, the procession of reality cannot contain discontinuity, but has to pass through mean terms bridging the extremes (*El. theol.* 28, *De prov.* 20.16–17). Plotinus had already argued that from the One comes first the Intellect, and through the Intellect proceeds the Soul, and from the Soul the physical world. For Proclus, this understanding of the procession is unsatisfactory, in particular regarding the second level, the Intellect, which is for Plotinus identical with true Being and Life. If we respect the 'law of continuity' which governs the procession of all things along the 'chain of being', we cannot admit that the Intellect (which already contains the specific forms of all things) comes forth immediately from the absolute One. There must be 'mean terms' connecting the extremities. After the One comes first absolute Being, from this comes Life, and finally Intellect. In Proclus' interpretation, Being corresponds to the intelligible paradigm (*noēton*), Life to the intelligible and intellective level (*noēton kai noeron*), whereas the Intellect stands for the properly intellective (*noeron*). Of course, Life also is being, though in a secondary way and the Intellect is also Life, but in a secondary way, as it also contains the intelligible being in the many objects of its thought.

Because the effect is in a derivative manner (*kata methexin*) what its cause is in a primary manner, it can be said to pre-exist on the higher level 'causally' (*kat' aitian*) (*El. theol.* 65). The effect acquires, however, its proper existence (*huparxis*) when it proceeds from its cause and becomes distinguished from it as another being. Yet, this procession does not cancel its pre-existence in the cause. As Proclus says, while proceeding, everything 'remains' in the cause whence it 'proceeds'. Therefore, it can also revert upon the cause from which it proceeds, and it must do so because no procession can be infinite. Through this 'reversion' (*epistrophē*), as it were 'feed-back', the effect strives to be connected again with its cause and to become similar to it. If things have their being through procession, they attain their well-being or perfection through reversion. For the cause of their 'well-being' can only come from where they had the origin of their 'being'. The final cause being identical with the efficient, all things desire as ultimate end what is the principle of their procession. As Proclus formulates it:

'All that proceeds from something reverts upon that from which it proceeds' (*El. theol.* 31). And since 'all that is produced by a cause both remains in it and proceeds from it' (*El. theol.* 30), we may conclude that 'all that proceeds from a principle and reverts upon it has a cyclical activity' (*El. theol.* 33). We find this triadic dynamic structure of remaining, proceeding and returning on all levels of reality, Being, Life, Intellect, Soul.

2.4 Causation and self-causation

In the procession of all reality from the One, first come beings that are cause of their own being, the so-called 'self-constituted' beings (*authupostata*), such as intellects and souls, and after them, at an inferior level, beings that are entirely produced from external causes, as is the sensible world and whatever it contains. Proclus defines a 'self-constituted' being as 'something that brings itself forth (*paragon heauto*)', 'that has the power of providing its own being', 'that is generated by itself' (*autogenētos*), 'that is self-sufficient (*autarkēs*) in respect of its existence' (*El. theol.* 40). Such a being is self-constituted because it does not need anything outside itself to exist, neither an external cause, nor a substrate or matter, nor a place. As 'cause of its own existence', 'it proceeds itself from itself'. Yet 'it remains in itself' and 'is contained in itself by itself', since it exists 'as its own product in itself as in its own cause' (*El. theol.* 42). Since such a being is perpetually 'conjoined with the cause of itself, or rather exists in itself as cause of itself', it lacks nothing to come to be. It is always self-sufficient (*autarkēs*) and complete in itself. Therefore, it can have no origin in time nor can it cease to be, as it is 'at once cause and effect'. Things perish when they are severed from their cause. 'But the self-constituted, being its own cause, never deserts its cause since it never deserts itself.' It is therefore a perpetual and necessary being (*El. theol.* 46).

It was Plotinus who first introduced the provocative notion of a '*causa sui*' when discussing the freedom of the first principle in *Enn.* 6.8 [39]. As there is no cause explaining the First, it may seem, Plotinus observes, that it just 'happens to exist'. Even if we admitted that the First 'makes itself', it somehow had to exist already before, if it is supposed to produce itself. Whence, then, did it receive this existence before being made by itself? Plotinus replies that the One has no being apart from its activity: it is a pure and absolutely free activity, 'not enslaved to substance'. 'In this way he [i.e. the first god] himself is himself from himself. For indeed, if he was kept in being by another, he would not be first self from himself; but if he is rightly said to hold himself together, he is both himself and the bringer of himself into being (*paragōn heauton*)' (6.8.20.19–23). In the case of the One, the 'self' is not an effect coming after the 'making', but the

'self' and its 'making' are concomitant, since he himself makes himself in an act of 'eternal generation'. Proclus, however, criticizes Plotinus for considering the One as a self-constituting principle. The notion of self-constitution introduces a distinction between cause and effect, which cannot be applied to the First itself, which is absolutely simple (*In Parm.* 7.1146.8–11). Therefore, self-constituted beings must come immediately after the One, imitating its absolute simplicity in their self-sufficiency. The One is beyond self-sufficiency, as it is also beyond willing and desiring.

But how is it possible to admit a multitude of self-generating principles coming after the First? If the One is really the first cause of whatever exists, how can there be a 'spontaneous causation' in the universe? Proclus' doctrine seems to go against the basic principle of all scientific explanation, as formulated by Aristotle: 'everything which is produced is produced by a cause other than itself' (cf. *In Parm.* 7.1145.28; Aristotle, *Phys.* 7.1, 241b34; 242a49–50). To defend his view Proclus refers to the existence of self-moving beings, which stand between the immobile movers and things that are moved only by an extrinsic cause. As Plato demonstrated in *Laws* 10, without self-moved movers there would be no motion in the universe. For a similar reason one has to admit that there exist not only beings produced by an external cause, but also beings which constitute themselves and which stand between the externally produced things and the first principle. That there exist self-constituting beings, can also be shown by the fact that some beings have the capacity to revert upon themselves. Self-reversion is precisely the case when 'the reverted subject and that upon which it has reverted become identical' (*El. theol.* 15). That reversion upon oneself is possible, is most evident in the process of knowledge. In every act of knowledge the knower not only grasps an object, but also knows himself as knowing the object. This is already the case on the level of perception: for we do not only perceive coloured objects, but are also aware that we perceive them. This reflexivity is more evident on the level of rational knowledge, where the object is assimilated to the subject knowing it. The reversion upon oneself is 'complete',[4] when knowing subjects not only know their own act, but also know themselves as knowing. If, then, some beings manifest this capacity in their activities, they must also be capable of reversion in their own essence (*ousia*), from which the cognitive activity proceeds. Reflexivity is therefore much more than an act of introspection, as the later empiricists thought, it is primarily a movement constituting the very being of the soul as self-movement. 'Everything that is primarily self-moving is capable of reversion upon itself' (*El. theol.* 17).

[4] Cf. *Liber de causis* prop. 15: *omnis sciens qui scit essentiam suam est rediens ad essentiam suam reditione completa*. This proposition is based upon *El. theol.* 83 and 44.

Only incorporeal beings have this capacity, as it is not the nature of a body to revert upon itself. If, then, the rational soul knows itself, and if whatever knows itself reverts upon itself, is neither a body nor dependent upon a body, 'it will follow that soul is neither a corporeal substance nor inseparable from body' (*El. theol.* 186).

The analysis of self-reflection thus contributes to an understanding of what self-constitution means. As we have seen, every being reverts upon the principle from which it originates, because it finds its own 'well-being', its own good, precisely in the return to its origin. If, then, there are beings with a capacity of reverting upon *themselves* – as are the intellect and the soul – they must find their well-being in themselves. However, the well-being of a thing comes from the very source of its being. Therefore, beings that revert upon themselves to find in themselves their own good must also be the origin of their own being. 'If, then, a being is the source of its own well-being, it will certainly be also the source of its own being and master of its own subsistence.' As Proclus formulates it, 'All that is capable of reversion upon itself is self-constituted'; or conversely 'All that is self-constituted is capable of reversion upon itself' (*El. theol.* 42–3).

Contrary to what is commonly believed in modern philosophy,[5] the fact that a being produces its own being does not exclude that it also depends upon a superior cause, and ultimately upon the first principle. What is *authupostaton* is for Proclus not a being that exists only from and by itself, but a being that constitutes itself in its procession from a superior cause. As Proclus says, 'they subsist in a self-generated way from their own causes' (*In Parm.* 7.1151.17–18). Therefore, the role of the first principle cannot be understood in the Christian sense as a divine creator. Only the demiurgic intellect can be said to have made the reality below it, the physical universe (*In Tim.* 1.261.19–28). The One, however, does not 'create' being or the intellect or the soul. They proceed from the One in producing their own form of being. Therefore, they are truly self-subsistent beings, *hupostaseis*, and not just products resulting from an external causality, as are the physical phenomena. Only self-constituted beings are true 'substances' as they do not find the cause of their existence in something outside themselves, in an 'alien seat' as matter or substrate.

[5] Descartes considers God, and only God, as 'cause de soi-même', but observes that 'cause' should not be taken here as an efficient cause exercising a real and positive influence. The expression only indicates that God's essence is such that it is impossible that he does not exist (*Meditations*, Responses to the first objections (Adam and Tannery 7.109; French: Adam and Tannery 9a.86) and Response to the fourth objections (Adam and Tannery 7.236 and 242; French: Adam and Tannery 9a.182 and 187)). Cf. Spinoza's opening definition of the *Ethica*: '*per causam sui intelligo id cuius essentia involvit existentiam*'. Later philosophers criticized the notion of a '*causa sui*' as contradictory.

2.5 *Real causes and subsidiary causes*

Causes in the proper sense can never be constitutive parts or intrinsic elements of the things they produce but must transcend them. Therefore, the material and the formal cause, on which the Aristotelians mostly rely in their explanation of the physical world, cannot be considered as true causes. In Proclus' view, they are nothing more than what Plato in the *Timaeus* (46c–d) called 'concurrent causes' (*sunaitia*), 'subservient to the proper causes in the generation of things', as is said in the *Philebus* (27a8–9), tools or instruments used by the real producers of things, as we learn from the *Politicus* (281c–e).

> If a cause were immanent in its effect, either it would be a complementary part of the latter or it would in some way need it for its own existence, and it would in this regard be inferior to the effect. That which exists in the effect is not so much a cause as a concurrent cause being either a part of the thing produced [sc. matter or form] or an instrument of the producer . . . Therefore every cause properly so called . . . transcends the instruments, the elements [matter and form] and in general all that is described as concurrent cause.
>
> (*El. theol.* 75)

Such are indeed the three primordial causes which Plato introduces in the *Timaeus*, the efficient or productive cause (i.e., the Demiurge), the paradigmatic cause (the ideas) and the final cause (the Idea of the Good). Therefore, the *Timaeus* presents the most accomplished form of *phusiologia*. To be sure, Aristotle, too, makes use of final and efficient causality in his natural philosophy and he introduces nature as principle of movement and change. But in Proclus' view nature, as Aristotle understands it, cannot really be a productive or creative principle, because it is devoid of all formative principles (*logoi*), which proceed through the Soul from the immaterial Forms in the Intellect. By rejecting the Platonic Forms as paradigmatic causes, Aristotle abolishes the creative character of nature, reducing it to nothing but an intrinsic moving force in material things. Following Plotinus, Proclus places nature between the material form and the soul (*In Tim.* 1.10.13–12.25). As a creative and productive principle, it must somehow transcend the body it organizes through its inherent *logoi*. It is, however, inferior to the soul, because it is divided in the body, cannot detach itself from it and has no capacity of reflexivity. Nature is thus the last of the really creative causes, the ultimate limit of the presence of the incorporeal in this sensible world, informing all things with the reason-principles and powers received from above. In this sense, it may be said to be the 'instrument' (*organon*) of the Demiurge in the creation of the world, whereby the Demiurge works in a transcendent manner, nature as it were being 'submerged in bodies' (cf. *In Tim.* 1.143.19–22).

According to Proclus, Plato is the first to have introduced the properly efficient cause, namely the demiurgic Intellect. As Aristotle did not accept the paradigmatic Forms, he was forced to abandon the creative causality of his first cause, making the divine Intellect only a final cause of the universe (*In Parm.* 3.788.8–19; 5.972.29–973.11; 7.519.2–14; *In Tim.* 1.266.21–268.24). As Proclus argues, such a position will force him to admit either that the world has the capacity to produce itself or that it owes its origin to chance. However, to admit that this universe is self-constituted will lead to numerous absurdities, for only incorporeal beings have the capacity to act upon themselves, to move themselves and to generate themselves. But how could this sensible world be self-constituted? Although the physical world is eternal – on this point Proclus fully agrees with Aristotle – it cannot find the cause of its being in itself, as no body is capable of receiving at once its infinity of being. Therefore, Plato was right in considering the world as generated (*genētos*), as it depends for its existence on another superior cause, which cannot be a body. Proclus carefully distinguishes between eternity in the sense of everlasting existence without a beginning or an end and eternity in an absolute sense as having its being all at once without being spread over time. The physical universe is eternal in the first sense, whereas the intelligible Forms have eternity in the absolute sense (*In Tim.* 1.252.11–254.18 and 294.28–295.19).

2.6 Participation

To explain the relation between the Forms and the many things that are similar to them, Plato introduced the metaphor of 'participation'. Participation, however, raises as many problems as it solves, as Plato shows in the aporetic discussion of the *Parmenides* (which offered ammunition for Aristotle's subsequent criticism). The metaphor seems to suggest that the many things that 'share' in the same Form, take 'parts' of it. But how could a Form still preserve its universality if it is present in the many things and therefore also divided? To solve this problem Proclus introduces a distinction between the participated and the unparticipated (*amethekta*).[6] What is participated by many particular things of a same type is not the ideal Form itself, but a form that comes forth from it and is present in them. These immanent forms serve the same function as the Aristotelian forms in matter. But whereas Aristotle rejected the transcendent Forms as an unnecessary duplication, Proclus argues that the unparticipated Forms are necessary to guarantee the universal character of the forms in matter. For the participated form entirely belongs to the particular by which it is participated,

[6] This distinction was first introduced by Iamblichus: cf. *In Tim.* 2.313.15–23 (fr. 60 Dillon).

and to all things of a similar nature. In order to explain that the different particulars participate in the same common principle, there must be a form prior to all participated, which is 'common to all that can participate in it and identical for all'. This common form cannot itself be what is received by the participant and subsists in it, as it would then give something away of itself. On the other hand, it cannot remain purely in itself 'fixed in sterility and isolation'. Therefore, 'the unparticipated brings forth out of itself the participated; and all the participated hypostases are linked upward to the unparticipated' (*El. theol.* 23; 24).

Strictly speaking, participation only exists between the intelligible Forms and the sensible particulars in the physical realm. Proclus, however, interprets the principle in such a way that it can be used on all levels of reality, the Soul, the Intellect, and even the One. Within each realm (or *diakosmos*) we have to distinguish between the unparticipated monad and the 'series' or multiplicity of beings of a similar nature co-ordinated with it. Thus, besides the many souls that are participated on different levels by different bodies – the human soul, the souls of demons, the planetary divine souls – there must also exist an unparticipated Soul, which is as it were the monad of that co-ordinate series. In fact, 'every monad gives rise to two series, one of self-complete hypostases, and one of radiations which have their subsistence in something other [than themselves]' (*El. theol.* 64). Thus, from Soul come forth not only, as its 'radiations', the different forces of life subsisting within the living beings, but also the whole series of self-sufficient souls. Those souls are not just illuminations of the one universal Soul but have their own existence as souls. When taken in this sense 'participated' does not mean an immanent shared property – this would be a radiation – but a principle that is self-subsisting and transcendent vis-à-vis the participating entities (cf. *El. theol.* 81; 82).

Similarly, besides the many intellects participated by human and divine souls in different ways, there also exists the absolute unparticipated Intellect, which comprehends in itself the totality of all Forms. The many intellects proceed from this absolute Intellect and form together with it a co-ordinate series of a similar intellectual nature. The intellectual powers present in the souls participating in these intellects are as many illuminations from them. Following the same line of reasoning, we must also posit after the One, which is absolutely transcendent and can in no way be participated by the inferior levels, a manifold of 'ones', 'units' or 'henads' consequent upon the primal One, wherein the different classes of being participate. Those henads are not the modes of unity acquired by beings, but self-subsisting unities which remain transcendent above the beings that depend upon them. Like the primal One, in which they remain co-united, they are themselves beyond being and beyond knowledge, but their

distinctive properties can be inferred indirectly from the different classes of beings dependent upon them. 'For differences within a participant order are determined by the distinctive properties of the principles participated' (*El. theol.* 123). The henads are the different self-subsisting forms of unity manifested in the different grades and characters of being that come forth from the One. In view of the different classes of beings dependent upon them, we can distinguish them as intelligible, intellectual, hypercosmic or encosmic henads. This doctrine of the henads is of crucial importance for understanding Proclus' theology.

2.7 God and gods

When the term 'God' is used in a strict sense, it has the same meaning as the term 'One'. With the term 'God' we indicate the supreme principle in reality; nothing, however, can be superior to the One; therefore the One and God are identical. The Good, too, is identical with God, since 'God is that which is beyond all things and that which all things desire', and the Good is 'the whence and the whither of all things' (*El. theol.* 113). As we have seen, the first One is not just the origin of all beings in a descending order, but also the monad of a horizontal divine series, a plurality of henads resembling it, co-united in and around it. Therefore, there is not just one God, but a plurality of gods. Every god is a self-complete henad, subsisting on itself as a unity, not as a unified being, such as are the lower hypostases. As the first One, the henadic gods all transcend being, but only the first One is imparticipable, whereas every god is participable (*El. theol.* 116). Insofar as they are gods and united to the One, the henads remain one and undifferentiated, but they can be distinguished through the various classes participating in them. In fact, the different classes of being participate, each on their own level, in a distinctive form of unity, which is the measure of their being. As henads, the gods are ineffable and unknowable as much as the One itself, yet their distinctive properties may be inferred and known 'from the beings which participate in them' (*El. theol.* 123).

Plato not only speaks of gods, but also of divine beings, and sometimes even calls those beings, for example divine souls, 'gods'. Thus the Athenian visitor in the *Laws* calls the divine soul a god (*Leg.* 10. 899a7–c1), and in the *Phaedrus* (248a) Socrates speaks of a procession of the divine souls around the heaven as 'the life of gods'. In some places Plato calls even the demons 'gods', though they are by nature posterior to the gods. Therefore, in a systematic theology, we need to make a distinction between the gods in the strict sense, which are self-sufficient henads, and the different classes of divinized beings, ending with the divine souls and the three superior classes, the angels, demons and heroes.

Next to all the classes of gods we should also consider the classes of souls which are divinized and have been distributed among the gods. For in the ultimate processions of the gods also the first class of the souls appears which is conjoined with the gods. . . . We finally reach the terminus of the whole organization of the superior beings: the classes that follow upon the gods and are divided in a three-fold manner [i.e., angels, demons, heroes] by the three parts of time.

(*Theol. Plat.* 2.12.71.13–17; 72.4–7)

3 A PLATONIC THEOLOGY

It is Proclus' ambition to give under the guidance of Plato a systematic exposition of all classes of gods and divinized beings proceeding from the One-Good. But where in Plato's work do we find the principles of such a scientific theology? Theological questions do not seem to occupy a primordial place in Plato's philosophy, nor have they been developed by him in a systematic way, but only make an episodic appearance and are developed not for their own sake, but to confirm or illustrate other doctrines, mostly ethical (cf. *Theol. Plat.* 1.6). There are many mythical stories dispersed all over the dialogues, but they are difficult to interpret and are always a function of the main subject of the dialogue. What Platonists call a Platonic theology seems nothing but an artificial construction, resulting from the manipulation of texts, taking theological doctrines out of their original context, nothing but an amalgam 'heaping together different parts from different dialogues, as if we were eager of collecting together many streams into one mixture, which do not derive all from one and the same source' (*Theol. Plat.* 1.6.27.4–7). Why then turn to Plato for a theological doctrine? Is it not better to follow the guidance of some philosophers posterior to Plato, as Aristotle or the Stoics, 'who have composed a unique and perfect form of theology and transmitted it in their writings to their disciples' (*Theol. Plat.* 1.6.28.9–12). Yet it is Plato, Proclus argues, who developed the most perfect form of theology, but in a dialogue one would not expect, namely in the *Parmenides*. If one knows how to interpret this sublime dialogue, one finds here the fundamental axioms and the concepts (such as one, multiple, limit, unlimitedness, to be in oneself or in another) needed for the development of a scientific theology.

In the second part of the dialogue, Parmenides examines in a dialectical exercise his own hypothesis about the One, considering the consequences following both from the position of the One and from its denial, both for the One and for what is other than the One. If we posit the One, only negative conclusions follow: the One has no parts and is not a whole, it is not in something nor in itself, it is not similar and not dissimilar, it is not in time. One cannot even

say that it 'is' or 'is one': in short, no names, no discourse, no knowledge of it is possible. Parmenides therefore has to restate his original hypothesis, now emphasizing that the One 'is'. Of this One-that-is all possible attributes can be predicated that were denied in the first hypothesis. The interpretation of the different hypotheses of the *Parmenides* (of which we only mentioned the first two) gave rise to a lively controversy in the Platonic school, as we know from Proclus' commentary (*In Parm.* 6.1051.27–1064.14). Following his master Syrianus, Proclus defends a theological interpretation of this dialectical exercise. Such an interpretation of the hypotheses is not evident, as the term 'God' or 'divine' is not even mentioned in the whole discussion. If, however, one takes the terms 'One' and 'god' to signify both the first cause of everything, then the overall meaning of the dialectical discussion on the One and the other than the One becomes clear (*In Parm.* 1.641.6–8). The first hypothesis is about the absolute One of which it cannot even be said that it 'is', the second considers the One-that-is and deduces from it the different attributes of being one.

That the first hypothesis reveals by means of negations the ineffable first principle, the One beyond all being and beyond all discourse, was a view circulating already in Middle Platonism. But it is Syrianus who deserves the credit for having developed a coherent theological interpretation of the second hypothesis, which since Plotinus was usually understood as referring to the second hypostasis, the Intellect. Proclus repeatedly praises his master for having discovered the true meaning of the correspondence between the negations in the first and the affirmations in the second hypothesis (*Theol. Plat.* 1.11; *In Parm.* 6.1085.10–1086.7; 7.1142.9–15). Whatever is denied in the first hypothesis of the One, namely that it is not a whole, has no parts, is not in itself, is not in another, is not similar nor dissimilar, etc., is affirmed of the One in the second hypothesis. It seems at first that the dialectical discussion of the hypothesis of the One leads to a series of mutually contradictory conclusions, making thus the hypothesis itself impossible. But Syrianus had a ingenious idea for solving what seemed to be a contradiction. If one accepts the identification of the One and God, one may easily recognize in the different attributes of being one (such as being similar, being a whole) the properties of the different classes of the gods. Considered in themselves, all gods are henads beyond being, unknowable and ineffable. We can infer, however, indirectly their distinctive characters through the diverse classes of being depending on them. The series of attributes, which are demonstrated in a series of deductions from the hypothesis of the One-that-is, 'show the ordered procession of all the divine classes, their difference from one another, the properties that are common to whole orders and those that are particular to each' (*Theol. Plat.* 1.4.20.20–3]. The corresponding series of negative conclusions in the first hypothesis demonstrate that the absolute

One or first God is above all the divine orders proceeding from it. The first hypothesis thus offers a negative theology of the ineffable absolute One, the second a positive theology of all henadic gods and all divinized beings following upon them.

In reading the second hypothesis in this way, we can demonstrate the procession of all the divine classes from the highest, which are revealed in the first deduction, to the most inferior, which are indicated at the last. The superior order, the intelligible gods, Limit and Unlimitedness, come close to the absolute One itself, the subject of the first hypothesis, whereas the lowest divine classes, i.e., the divine souls and the superior classes (angels, heroes and demons), which always follow the gods, make the transition to the subject of the third hypothesis, which is about the human souls which only intermittently follow the gods. We can thus admire how Parmenides, in his logical deduction of all the divine orders from the One-that-is, follows the most fundamental principle of procession, the law of continuity. There can be no sudden and sharp transition from one level to another. In each order the highest classes are connected with what precedes them, and the lower with what follows them (*El. theol.* 122).

> If then Plato begins from the One-that-is but ends in that which participates in time, he proceeds downwards from the first to the last degree of true being. Hence, the first conclusions are to be referred to the first orders, the middle, for the same reason, to the middle orders, and the last, as is evident, to such as are last. For it is necessary, as our discourse has evinced, that different conclusions should be assigned to different natures, and that a distribution of this kind should commence from such things as are highest. But likewise, the order of the hypotheses, as it appears to me, is a sufficient argument of the truth of our assertion. For the hypothesis about the One which is exempt from all multitude, is allotted the first order, and from this the development of all arguments originates. But the second order after this, has the hypothesis about true beings, and the henad in which these participate. And the third order in succession has the hypothesis about soul.
>
> (*Theol. Plat.* 1.11.49.3–18)

The *Parmenides* thus offers a unique opportunity to compose a scientific theology, employing concepts and demonstrations regarding the different divine orders with an almost geometrical precision. This does not mean that the *Parmenides* is the only source for this theology. Plato reveals his views about the gods in many other dialogues, for instance, in the celebrated tenth book of the *Laws*, or in the second book of the *Republic*, and in the *Timaeus*. Scattered over all dialogues are references to gods and divinities often in a mythological context. However, it is only within the framework of the *Parmenides* that all those arguments and references can be systematized. The same holds for the mathematical *theologoumena* of the Pythagoreans, the theological revelations

from the *Chaldaean Oracles* and from the Orphic theogonies, the many stories told by Homer and Hesiod; only when connected to the deductions of the second hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, can they be properly interpreted.

In his *Platonic Theology*, Proclus thus offers the very first and also ultimate '*summa theologiae*' of the complex religious tradition of late antiquity that Christians too easily amalgamated and designated under the simple term 'paganism'. The *Theology* is divided in three parts (see the plan announced in *Theol. Plat.* 1.2.9.8–19). In the first part (book 1.13–29), Proclus assembles from all dialogues of Plato the common notions about the gods, which apply to all divines classes without distinction. It is a treatise on the divine attributes or the divine names, as pseudo-Dionysius will later call it. Thus, from the *Laws* we learn that the gods exist, that they exercise providence, that they are inflexible in their providential care; from the *Republic*, that they are causes only of what is good, immutable, simple and true, and so on. In the second part (books 2–6), Proclus examines the procession of all the classes of the gods from the first God, the absolute One (book 2). After a transitional section on the henads (3.1–6), which play a crucial role in this theology, he discusses subsequently the intelligible gods (3.7–28), the intelligible-intellective gods (book 4), the intellective gods (book 5), the hypercosmic gods (book 6). Missing in this systematic exposition are the inferior classes of the gods (encosmic gods) and the divine souls and the 'superior beings' following upon the gods. Lacking is also the third part of the *Theology* that would have dealt with the individual gods who are mentioned occasionally by Plato, and would have interpreted them in accordance with the general notions about the divine established before. Did Proclus leave the *Theology* unfinished or did he change his original plan at the end?

A modern reader not sharing the religious convictions of Proclus will probably not very much regret that we have lost what was supposed to come after the sixth book. And even someone with a real interest in ancient religion will remain perplexed by this extravagant attempt to give a full rational justification of all divinities and posit them within a metaphysical system. He will like to quote the famous comment of E. R. Dodds: 'That Homer's Olympians, the most vividly conceived anthropomorphic beings in all literature, should have ended their career on the dusty shelves of this museum of metaphysical abstractions is one of time's strangest ironies' (1933: 260). Much could be said to defend Proclus against this ironic comment, most of all that Proclus' attempt to justify metaphysically what the gods are did not exclude that he worshipped them with an authentic personal devotion, neither did Thomas Aquinas' five ways to prove the existence of a first cause make his God a metaphysical abstraction. It should also be noticed that in Proclus' theological system Homer's Olympians only appear on a lower level, where there is a multiplicity of divinities. They

do not correspond to the highest metaphysical principles, the One, the Limit, the Unlimited, Being.

CONCLUSION

Proclus' explicit theological motivation makes much of his work difficult to appreciate for moderns, though they may admire his grandiose, even heroic attempt to establish on premisses taken from Plato's philosophy the complex tradition of pagan religion, falling apart and threatened in a culture dominated by Christianity. They will also resent his attempt to systematize beyond measure the philosophical tradition and for that reason prefer Plotinus among the later Platonists, less systematic to be sure, sometimes even chaotic in his writing, but philosophically more authentic and provocative. Even Dodds, Proclus' best modern exegete declares: 'Proclus is not a creative thinker but a systematizer who carried to its utmost limits the ideal of one comprehensive philosophy that should embrace all the garnered wisdom of the ancient world.'[7] However, no philosopher in late antiquity (including Plotinus) wanted to be original, but all tried to be faithful to a tradition of wisdom they inherited. The way Proclus 'systematizes' the tradition, by formulating and demonstrating the fundamental principles that were often implicit presuppositions of his predecessors is in itself a remarkable example of philosophical 'creativity' and it set the agenda for centuries of philosophical and theological speculation, as Dodds recognizes. Systematizing and articulating with an unsurpassed clarity and rigour the innovative Platonism that had started with Plotinus, Proclus' philosophy possesses speculative power that reaches far beyond its connection to Hellenic religion. Therefore, his philosophy is much more than an ideology in defence of pagan polytheism. Otherwise, one could not understand why so many authors sharing in no ways his religious convictions have been fascinated and inspired by his thought and have developed it in a creative way, such as the Christian author writing under the pseudonym Dionysius the Areopagite and the Arabic Muslim, who used the *Elements* to compose what would become known in the Latin Middle Ages as the *Liber de causis*. Through the mediation of these two anonymous authors Proclus contributed much more to the formation of the Platonic tradition in the Middle Ages than Plotinus. In the Renaissance, Ficino found inspiration in Proclus' theology to compose his own Christian Platonic theology on the immortality of the soul. Thanks to Ficino, Proclus also became for centuries the leading commentator on Plato and thus contributed to the standard Platonic interpretation of the dialogues until the early nineteenth

[7] Dodds 1933: xxv.

century. Proclus' speculations on the triadic circle of remaining, procession and return fascinated Hegel. Even if we have taken some distance from this interpretation, Proclus' commentaries remain of invaluable help for anyone trying to understand the dialogues as they were read and discussed in antiquity.

Ammonius of Alexandria summarizes excellently what he and we owe to

> our divine teacher Proclus, successor to the chair of Plato and a man who attained the summit of human nature both in his ability to interpret the views of the ancients and in his scientific judgement of the nature of reality.
>
> (*In De int.* 1.7–11)