

The Human Life

Dirk Baltzly

Proclus' philosophy—like much of Neoplatonism—is widely thought to be focused almost exclusively on metaphysics. His best-known works seem to be principally concerned with mapping the metaphysical (i.e. theological) geography of the orders of gods. The right moral to draw, however, is not that Proclus was not interested in ethics or made no contribution to the field. It is rather that we, from our modern standpoint, don't see the ethical purpose of metaphysics.

Proclus' writings are an extended meditation on what he regarded as the great Platonic tradition. The point was not merely to *understand what these Platonists thought* or even to *learn the truth* about the subjects that they discuss—though one will do that too, of course. It was rather to have one's efforts at self-transformation guided by the divinely inspired teachings of those in the Platonic tradition. Success in this exercise of self-transformation makes a person good. But in Platonism to become good is to *become like god*. This is why so much of Proclus' writings is directed at understanding the various orders of gods—from the One, through the henads, to the encosmic gods, and ultimately to the daemons that mediate between humans and gods.¹ Since the understanding mind becomes like the object that it understands, and since the correct goal for a human life is to become good, and thus to become like the divine to the greatest extent possible, the overwhelmingly theological focus of Proclus' work makes enormous ethical sense. Proclus does not concentrate on metaphysics to the exclusion of ethics. Metaphysics *is* an essential component of ethics. Ethics consists not merely in theorizing about the good but in becoming good, and this is a self-transformation in which knowledge of the gods plays an utterly central role.

Proclus' philosophical writings emerge from an even wider project than that of *self-transformation*. His Plato commentaries in particular formed part of an institutional exercise in the psychic transformation of students within the school at Athens. Proclus' commentaries follow the order of dialogues in the

Iamblichean curriculum. From the anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* we can see that this order of dialogues was chosen precisely because it was supposed to contribute to a sequential progress through different gradations of the cardinal virtues. In my view, Proclus' entire philosophical corpus is best understood within the context of what Brian Stock (1983) has called a 'textual community'. Members of a textual community seek salvation through meditation upon what they regard as authoritative texts, the understanding of which unites them to god.

In section 13.1 we will look at the goal or telos according to Proclus and the other Neoplatonists: assimilation to the divine. In section 13.2 we will consider Proclus' account of the various gradations of the virtues through which one is assimilated to the divine. In section 13.3 we will look at how reading Plato makes one virtuous: the Iamblichean curriculum and the manner in which it was supposed to structure the acquisition of the different grades of the virtues. In section 13.4 we will consider Proclus' political philosophy. This investigation will, in the standard Neoplatonic manner, involve reversion to our starting point, for we will see that an abstruse metaphysical question, like the eternity of the cosmos, has a concrete political point.

13.1. THE TELOS: BECOMING LIKE GOD

While Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* sets out the canonical form for ancient moral philosophy, Proclus' treatment of the telos involves a dramatic generalizing of the answer to moral philosophy's central question. Let us pursue the contrast with Aristotle's ethics to set Proclus' views in context.

All Graeco-Roman moral philosophy subsequent to Aristotle starts from an identification of the telos or goal of living. This is a specification of what well-being or *eudaimonia* consists in, for *eudaimonia* is the goal of all that we do. Aristotle had exploited the semantic connections that exist in ancient Greek between what is done 'in accordance with virtue' (*kat'aretên*) and what is done 'successfully' or done 'well' (*eu* or *kalôs*) to argue that human happiness is the soul's activity in accordance with the virtues of practical and theoretical reason. The virtues of *practical* reasoning were, according to Aristotle, stable dispositions to act for the right reasons and to have emotional responses of the right sort. Correct patterns of choosing or feeling were those that fell between two opposed patterns of getting such matters wrong—the so-called doctrine of the mean. These *ethical* virtues of practical reason arose in the soul when proper habituation was perfected with philosophical understanding. The virtues of our capacity for theoretical reasoning, or the *theoretical* virtues, were presented as a less-unified laundry list of intellectual excellences. These

include knowledge or *epistêmê*, which is the capacity to produce demonstrations from first principles (*Eth. Nic.* VI 3, 1139b31–2); the capacity for apprehending the first principles of demonstration (*nous*); and wisdom or *sophia* which consists in having both *epistêmê* and *nous* (VI 7, 1141a19).

For all that has been said so far, there is no obvious connection between the ethical and the theoretical virtues. One of the most important of the theoretical virtues, however, serves to draw these two sides of Aristotle's moral thought together. This is practical wisdom or *phronêsis* and Aristotle insists that no one can have this virtue without having the ethical virtues, nor is it possible to have the full measure of the ethical virtues without possessing *phronêsis*. Nonetheless, there is apparently not a perfect symmetry in Aristotle's *Ethics* between the contribution that the ethical and intellectual virtues make to happiness. In chapter 7 of book X, Aristotle returns to his initial outline of what *eudaimonia* or happiness consists in. If happiness is the life of excellent (i.e. virtuous) activity, then it is reasonable that it should be the activity that is performed in accordance with the *highest* excellence in us—the excellent activity of that which is best in us. This, he asserts (without argument!), is intellect or *nous*, which is either divine or at least the most divine thing in us. Its activity is contemplation or *theôria*.

Nearly all these points, which are made with Aristotle's characteristic clarity and explicitness, have antecedents in the Platonic dialogues. These parallels, plus the precedent of the Hellenistic schools of philosophy, made it quite natural that the re-emergence of dogmatic Platonism in the first century BC should see the provision of a Platonic moral philosophy articulated in terms of the structure of moral philosophy set out in Aristotle's *Ethics*. The exact specification of the goal of living or telos for Platonists might come as a surprise to modern readers of Plato. If we were to think about how one might present Platonic moral philosophy in the mould of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we would be inclined to look to the *Republic*—since, for the modern age, this is the principal source of Plato's moral philosophy—and identify the telos with psychic harmony. The Middle Platonists and Neopythagoreans who relaunched Platonism as a dogmatic school of philosophy, however, looked to the *Theaetetus* and the *Timaeus* for the identity of the Platonic telos. There they found the doctrine that the goal of living is assimilation to the divine. The crucial passage comes in the digression on the value of philosophy in the *Theaetetus*:

it is not possible, Theodorus, that evil things should be destroyed—for there must always be something opposed to the good; nor is it possible that evils should be found among the gods, but of necessity evils circulate among mortal nature and this place down here. It is for this reason that one ought to make haste to flee. But flight means *becoming like God as far as possible*, and likeness to God is to come to be just and holy in company with wisdom.

(*Tht.* 176a5–b3; cf. *Tim.* 90b1–d7)

The Middle Platonists and Neopythagoreans were thus not inventing a telos for Platonism out of whole cloth. It has a clear foundation in the Platonic texts—though it is not an aspect of Platonic thought that has found much favour with modern interpreters.²

When we turn to Neoplatonism, the centrality of the *Theaetetus* text for Platonic ethical reflection was accepted by Plotinus, who mentions it both in connection with happiness in *Enn.* I 4 [46] 16.10ff. and at the beginning of his discussion of the virtues in I 2 [19] 1. However, Plotinus' adumbration of the Platonic theme that the good life consists in assimilation to the divine is extremely paradoxical. In order for a subject to have a good life, it must be fully *alive*. Now, on Plotinus' view the Forms or Intelligibles are alive in the primary manner of being (*Enn.* I 4 [46] 3.33–40; cf. Plato, *Soph.* 248e6–249a10). Other things are alive only as dim images of this pure noetic life. So if a subject must be fully alive in order to have a life that is fully good, then he must live the life of intellect. If this cannot be done, then we must attribute *eudaimonia* to the gods alone. But Plotinus thinks it is obvious that we can be happy too. The solution is that each of us is *identical to* intellect or *nous* in actuality—and not merely potentially (*Enn.* I 4 [46] 4.12–17). Everything apart from this is *not me*, but merely something I wear. If I do things, like living among my fellow human beings or feeding myself, I perform these necessities not for myself, but for the sake of the living body joined to me.

In short, in Plotinus' version of the Platonic aspiration, the happy subject does not become *like* the divine intellect. Rather, he *is* divine. This will be Plotinus' infamous 'unfallen soul' that does not descend from the intelligible realm into the body. Paradoxically, happiness is not something that human beings enjoy qua humans. Instead, we transcend our humanity when we identify with the divine element that has been present in us all along.

Proclus certainly accepted the proposition that human *eudaimonia* consists in assimilation to the divine.³ Like most subsequent Neoplatonists, however, he rejected Plotinus' notion of the unfallen soul (*El. theol.* § 211). The soul descends into the body in its entirety. While it has *logoi* of the intelligibles within it, it is not currently a part of, or engaged in, the divine life of intellect.⁴ Its relation to these intelligible gods or Forms is mediated by divinities that are subordinate to the intelligibles. As a result, our assimilation to god will (at least initially) require us to become like divinities that are significantly more causally proximate to the visible universe into which our souls have descended. Proclus gives a special role to the 'leading gods' that he thinks are discussed in Plato's *Phaedrus*.

In *Phaedrus* 252c ff., Socrates tells Phaedrus how different souls, prior to embodiment, followed different gods in their tour of the super-celestial place of the Forms. In Plato's dialogue, Socrates uses this to explain the different manners in which different souls react to the experience of *love* and the different kinds of lovers they seek. Thus, for instance, those who followed

Ares will be jealous, potentially violent lovers. Proclus and his fellow Neoplatonists, however, generalized beyond the immediate context—whom we love and how—to the general lifestyle for different individuals. Different gods play different roles in the administration of the universe (*El. theol.* § 125; *in Tim.* I 36.7–14). So, since different souls have been followers of different gods in the *Phaedrus* myth, we should choose individual vocations that match the role that our ‘leading god’ plays in the gods’ providential care for the world. So if I have been a follower of Helios, then I will be most closely assimilated to my leading god if I pursue medicine (*in Tim.* III 279.14–19). For a soul of my sort, this is what happiness consists in. This claim is explicit in the notes taken by Hermias on Syrianus’ lectures on the *Phaedrus* 252d:

For this very thing is *eudaimonia* for a soul—to be able to imitate the appropriate god so far as each one can.

(*in Phdr.* 190.9–10 Couvreur = 198.30–1 Lucarini–Moreschini)

Proclus himself carries the notion of well-being or *eudaimonia* and leading gods ‘further down’ the series of divinities from the gods of the *Phaedrus*, who are described as liberated leading gods, to the messengers through which gods interact with humans—the *daimones*. In his commentary on *Timaeus* 42b3–5, Proclus writes:

The *eudaimôn* life [literally, ‘the well-daimoned life’] is one determined in accordance with the distinctive feature of the leaders, for the leaders who detain human souls [here in the sensible] or conduct them toward the intelligible realm belong in the order of *daimones*, just as the leaders among the liberated [gods] also [lead] them [up to the intelligible]. (*in Tim.* III 290.30–292.2)

There is no real tension here with Syrianus’ view, since Proclus is at pains to explain that, in one sense of the word ‘*daimôn*’ (δαίμων), anything that plays the role of exercising providential care for that which is proximately dependent upon it counts as a *daimôn*. Thus, presumably, the spiritual beings we normally call *daimones* have some more liberated divine souls that exercise providence over them so that they count as ‘well-daimoned’ or happy because of their leaders.

Proclus also regularly stresses the divinity of the sensible cosmos considered as a whole. The universe is a god that we, as embodied souls, should come to resemble. In what respects should we seek to resemble it? First, we should see that our psychic vehicles⁵ share a shape with the cosmic body: both are spherical. The cosmos, however, is perfectly spherical and smooth. The souls of individual human beings acquire ‘accretions’ in their descent into Becoming (*in Tim.* III 297.16–24). Our assimilation to the universe requires that our vehicles should become ‘pure and naked’ (*El. theol.* § 209).

The universe also thinks, and even has a certain kind of sense-perception that closely resembles thinking.⁶ The cosmos’ activity of thought arises from the perfectly circular psychic motions of the circles of the Same and the

Different within the World Soul whose nature Plato describes in the *Timaeus*. This is a *divine* paradigm for our own psychic activity: ‘Revolving within itself, it initiated a divine beginning of unceasing and intelligent life for all time’ (*Tim.* 36e4–5). In order to resemble the cosmos and the heavenly visible gods that inhabit it (i.e. the stars and planets), not only must our psychic vehicles be smooth and rounded, like the world’s body, but the psychic motions of the circles of the Same and the Different in us must also resemble the motions of the World Soul. To become assimilated to the divine and also purified of these accretions we require the virtues.

13.2. GRADES OF VIRTUES AND ASSIMILATION TO THE DIVINE

In the key passage from the *Theaetetus*, Socrates says that the goal of becoming like god is achieved through ‘coming to be just and holy in company with wisdom’. Justice and holiness are, of course, among the five cardinal virtues in classical Greek thought. To work out the implications of their conception of the telos, the Neoplatonists had to come to terms with a puzzle. The notion of likeness or similarity (*homoiôsis*) seems to imply that the two things that are alike should share one or more properties. But if we become like god by becoming *just*, then this suggests that god is just. But surely the gods don’t do what just *people* do—returning deposits or fairly dividing the profits of business deals. Aristotle makes this very point (*Eth. Nic.* X 8, 1178b7–22). Furthermore, when we consider what Plato says about the divine lifestyle, it looks overwhelmingly intellectual. In a passage from the *Laws* much cited by Proclus, Plato claims that the circular motion of the heavenly bodies is a visible analogue of the invisible activity of divine Intellect (*Leg.* X 898a). Aristotle, of course, claims that divine activity is self-intellection and that the human activity of philosophical contemplation or *theôria* most closely resembles this. If divine activity is so abstract and intellectual, how can it be that virtues like justice or self-control or courage make us resemble god?⁷

Proclus is the inheritor of a long-standing Platonic programme addressing this question. From Plotinus onward we find the idea that there are *gradations* of the cardinal moral virtues. This programme culminates in seven grades of the virtues distinguished by Iamblichus and Proclus. This seven-level scheme of virtues is described in the notes reporting the content of Damascius’ lectures on Plato’s *Phaedo* (I 138–51).⁸

- (i) Natural virtues—the result of good bodily conditions. They are reflexes of reason when reason is not impeded by some disorder. Natural virtues can come into conflict; e.g. natural wisdom might be at odds with natural courage. Cf. *Statesman* 306a; *Laws* VII 807c; XII 963e.

- (ii) Ethical virtues—acquired by habituation and right belief. They belong to both reason and the irrational soul simultaneously. Since ethical virtues are not reflexes that depend upon bodily conditions, they do not clash with one another. Cf. *Laws* II 653a.
- (iii) Political or civic virtues—these are virtues of reason, but virtues that reason exhibits in its relation to the irrational part of the soul. The rational soul possesses civic virtues when it puts these irrational parts into order and uses them as its instrument. The virtues are said to be discussed in the *Republic*, presumably IV 434d ff.
- (iv) Purificatory or kathartic virtues—like the civic virtues, these belong to reason, but reason insofar as it withdraws from relations to other things. It discards the body as its instrument and restrains activities that depend on this instrument. Cf. *Phd.* 69bc.
- (v) Theoretic virtues—these exist in the soul when the soul has forgotten itself and turned to what is above it, i.e. intellect. They are a kind of mirror image of the civic virtues, since they indicate the soul's activity in relation to something other than itself, but in this case that other thing is higher (intellect), not lower (the irrational soul). These virtues are said to be discussed in the *Theaetetus*, presumably 173c–176c.
- (vi) Paradigmatic virtues—exhibited by soul when it is no longer *contemplating* intellect, but when the soul is established by participation in the intellect which is the paradigm of all things.
- (vii) Hieratic virtues—exist in the godlike aspect of the soul. 'When they are extended alongside the aforementioned grades of virtue, each one of them is rendered substantial, since the hieratic virtues are surely pre-existent unities.'⁹

The virtues that are really of interest to the philosopher exhibit the kind of relational individuation that is common in Proclus.¹⁰ Damascius' presentation (in *Phd.* I 144.3–4) probably represents a systematization on the part of Proclus of Iamblichus' basic idea.

- (iii) Political = rational soul standing in a relation (*schesis*) to irrational parts in a *kata logon* manner.
- (iv) Kathartic = rational soul unrelated (*aschetos*) to anything and remaining in itself.
- (v) Theoretic = rational soul related to intellect in a contemplative (*kata noun*) manner, i.e. as contemplating something distinct from itself.
- (vi) Paradigmatic = rational soul related to intellect in a participatory (*kata methexin*) manner, i.e. as *being* (albeit in the manner of participation) the very thing it contemplates.

- (vii) Hieratic = godlike part of the soul containing the rational part's virtues in an anticipatory-causal or *kat'aitian* mode of being.

All these gradations are as unified as any series of metaphysical ascent is in Proclus. Each one *is* the higher order virtue at a lower level of realization. After giving Proclus' systematization of the Iamblichean grades of virtue, Damascius says:

all reveal their constant universal character in a way peculiar to each level: thus the character of courage is unwavering firmness with respect to the inferior, of temperance the turning away from the inferior, of justice an activity that is proper to the subject and truly belonging to it, and of prudence the ability to choose the good and reject the bad. (*in Phd.* I 149; tr. Westerink)

This insistence that *some* sort of similarity is preserved among all the gradations of, say, courage is somewhat plausible if we confine our attention to the purificatory and political virtues, but so little is clear about the theoretical ones that it is hard to see how this common thread is manifested in the soul's relation to intellect.

Proclus also tells us that the individual political virtues—which all belong to the same grade—correspond to different *vertical* grades of virtue:

Self-control (*σωφροσύνη*) especially characterizes ethical virtue (since there is nothing so appropriate to those who are being instructed as self-control). Justice, however, especially characterizes political virtue (for the ordering of other things [that is the function of justice] in particular requires determining the relative value of each one). Courage [corresponds to the level of] kathartic virtue (for it especially pertains to this virtue to be invulnerable to the passions that have been established within us as our true opponents). Wisdom [corresponds to the level of] theoretic virtue, for the distinctive feature of contemplation (*θεωρία*) is to think that which must be thought about the things that are. (*in Remp.* I 12.26–13.6)

This gives us a nice illustration of the Iamblichean and Proclean dictum: 'all things in all, but in each in a manner appropriate to the subject'.¹¹ Considered vertically, each of the cardinal virtues is (somehow) present in each of the gradations. On the horizontal level, each of the virtues at the political level is (in some sense) one of the gradations of virtue.

When we turn to the account of the civic virtues in Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic* (Essay VII) we see a similar use of relations to distinguish virtues and parts of the soul. Strictly speaking, the virtues are qualities that allow something alive to perform its function well and thus to live well. So virtues will correlate with a way of life or a *zôê*. Plato's *Republic* frequently treats the parts of the soul as if each were a sub-personal agent. Proclus follows this at least to the extent of treating each of the parts of the soul as if it were an internal psychic counterpart of the lifestyle or *zôê* characteristic of different

types of persons—the classes of Guardians, Auxiliaries, and Producers.¹² He distinguishes the function or *ergon* of each part of the soul considered in itself or *kath'hauto* from its function within the quasi-community of the *psychê* considered as a whole. Thus, the reasoning part of the soul or *logistikôn* performs its *kath'hauto* function when it lives in a manner that is purified and contemplative (*in Remp.* I 208.5–10)—i.e. when it manifests the kathartic and theoretic virtues. But when we consider reason's function within the psychic polis, its relational *ergon*—and thus its virtue—is to rule the spirited and the appetitive parts. Similarly too for the spirited part: when it is concerned only with its own business, it functions well when it inclines the person to visit honourable revenge for slights to his or her dignity. However, considered as a citizen of the inner polis, the spirited part or *thumos* is both ruled by reason and collaborates with reason in ruling over appetite or *epithumia*. This yields a typically Proclean instance of the law of mean terms. The general pattern of metaphysical descent through a middle term that combines both extremes—A : A&B : B—is exhibited by Ruling (reason) : Ruling-and-Ruled (spirit) : Ruled (appetite).

These examples provide something of the flavour of Proclus' engagement with Platonic texts where the virtues and happiness are at issue. We can see how he brings principles from his metaphysics to bear on the project of constructing a Neoplatonic virtue ethics in which the virtues are dispositions that make one resemble the gods.¹³ But Plato's dialogues are not the only raw materials for the construction of this Neoplatonic virtue ethics. Another important source is the *Chaldaean Oracles*. The highest gradations of the virtues and the assimilation to the gods through theurgic ritual is discussed by Van den Berg in Chapter 11. Note, however, that this division of labour in our *presentation* of Proclus' views on the virtues is not matched by any sharp division in Proclus' own thinking on the subject. Philosophy and theurgy are intertwined at every level of moral progress to unification with god.

13.3. THE PHILOSOPHICAL CURRICULUM AND THE VIRTUES

How do we acquire the different gradations of the virtues? The natural virtues are, of course, natural bodily endowments. The ethical virtues, we are told, arise from habituation and true opinion (Dam., *in Phd.* I 139). Since the political, purificatory, and theoretical virtues are virtues *of reason* it is initially plausible that we might gain them by means of *learning* something. But what?

The answer, of course, is that the virtues are correlated with the reading order of the Platonic dialogues introduced by Iamblichus:¹⁴

Introductory

Knowledge of the self—*Alcibiades I*

Ethical virtues

Political virtues—*Gorgias* [and *Republic*]¹⁵

Purificatory virtues—*Phaedo*

Theoretical virtues

Concerning names—*Cratylus*

Concerning the objects of thought—*Theaetetus*

Concerning things

Nature—*Sophist* and *Statesman*

Gods—*Phaedrus* and *Symposium*¹⁶

Synoptic

Concerning the good as immanent—*Philebus*

Two capstone dialogues then formed a second cycle in which the student achieved the highest level of physical understanding (*Timaeus*) and theological understanding (*Parmenides*).

How are Plato's dialogues meant to relate to the various gradations of the virtues? The absence of any dialogue corresponding to the natural or ethical virtues recommends the hypothesis that the dialogues *tell us* about these virtues. Given a strongly cognitive theory of virtue—perhaps one that treats them as a kind of knowledge—this might appear sufficient for the acquisition of these virtues. But this, I think, would be a mistake. First, even if one takes virtues to be knowledge of a certain sort, it is not clear that merely acquiring some information is sufficient for having that virtue. In the Stoic view, the virtue of, say, courage is identified with a kind of knowledge: it is 'the *epistêmê* of things that are fearful and things that are not' (Stobaeus II 59.4 = SVF 3.262). Simply reading a book about what is to be feared is not sufficient for having the *epistêmê*, for an *epistêmê* differs from mere assent to a true and reliable impression (*katalêpsis*) because the latter involves a systematic pattern of firm and infallible judgements. One does not get that merely from a book. Moreover, Proclus himself warns against consuming the books of Plato without a proper teacher (Mar., *V. Proc.* § 38). I think this is not merely a concern that readers are apt to misunderstand Plato and thus fail to correctly identify the information contained in the dialogues—information which, when assimilated thoroughly, would endow the reader with political or kathartic or theoretical virtues. In his *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, Proclus distinguishes explicitly between the theme or *skopos* of the dialogue—what it is about—and the *telos* or goal of understanding it.

Even if one were to say that the *telos* for the dialogue is the *care* of the self and the understanding of this—though this is rightly said—let such a person understand that this [care of the self] applies to us as an end (*τέλος*) or as the good that results

from what is demonstrated [in the dialogue]. But what is sought is a subject for research (*πρόβλημα*) and that for the sake of which the syllogisms in the dialogue exist—the *knowledge* of the self, for it is one thing to know the *skopos* of the dialogue but another to know the good that results from its having such a theme. (in *Alc.* 9.16–10.3)

We might add that to *possess* the good that results from each dialogue's having such and such a theme is yet a third thing. How does reading a text with a master such as Proclus bring it about that the young philosopher's soul comes to possess the necessary virtues?

To bridge this gap, I would like to recommend the notion of a 'perlocutionary hermeneutics'. I think Proclus believed that parties to his readings of the canonical texts within the school were psychically transformed for the better through the act of reading and interpreting the texts of Plato with a master. In support of this contention, one should consider the opening remarks of Proclus' *Platonic Theology*. Proclus tells us that Plato's philosophy contains not merely theology—a true *logos* about the gods—but is a *mystagôgê* concerning the very gods themselves. Rather than simply *telling* us the truth, it *initiates* such souls as are capable of being liberated into the real mysteries. Those who genuinely cling to the blessed and happy life will participate in the culminating revelation of the mystery ceremony, but in a way that is stable and perfect in every way (*Theol. plat.* I 1, 5.16–6.7).

The mystagogic character of Plato's texts fits well with the notion of textual communities. When Brian Stock, who coined the term, described such communities he said that:

Within the movement, texts were steps, so to speak, by which the individual climbed toward a perfection thought to represent complete understanding and effortless communication with God. (Stock 1983: 90)

The notion of texts as steps, however, is ambiguous. On the one hand, it could mean that the authoritative texts *tell us what we need to know* in order to effect communion with god, e.g. how to pray, or what kathartic virtues are. On the other hand, it could mean that *through* the act of interpreting the texts members of the community are *changed* in such a way as to be assimilated to god. In the case of the Platonic schools, I think it is the latter and that this change comes about through *internalizing ways of seeing oneself and the world that are in Plato's dialogues*. Members of the community seek to live 'in and through' ideals and concepts found in the Neoplatonic understandings of the dialogues. This idea of living 'in and through' texts warrants a fuller exploration.

Brown (1992) conveys the way in which an educated Roman's ability to model his written and spoken speech on ancient paradigms and to allude to the canonical texts of a 'gentleman's education' in late antiquity created a class identity. To be educated—to be a participant in *paideia*—was similarly a matter of transforming oneself in accordance with a text. The educated

gentleman was one who had fashioned his written and spoken speech after the exemplars of Homer, Demosthenes, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Plato. (Though a gentleman need not have studied Plato with a philosopher. A school of rhetoric, like that of Libanius, could endow one with a reasonable acquaintance with Plato as a stylist.) An educated man would have acquired a sense of decorum that could be articulated through selected classical allusions. Thus Libanius (*Or.* 46.3) could assess the cultural credentials of the newly arrived governor of Antioch by posing this question about his intentions: ‘How did Odysseus rule when king of Ithaca?’ The newly arrived governor could then display his membership card in the class of cultural elites by quoting the relevant line of Homer: ‘Gently as a father’ (*Od.* 2.223). Each party to the conversation shows that he shares a common stock of knowledge that sets both participants apart from *hoi polloi* and in so doing each makes a claim upon the other to be treated in a certain way.

Let us say that the educated elite of the late Roman empire lived their lives *around* a canon of classical authors rather than *in* and *through* them. Many who had the benefit of *paideia* did doubtless see themselves and the world in terms of beliefs and concepts derived from the canonical authors. How could this education not have *some* effect upon one’s outlook? But *paideia* functioned principally as an *external marker* of class distinction. By contrast, the Neoplatonic textual communities sought to internalize ideals, concepts, and images from the dialogues in order to change the way that members of the community thought—not in order that they might be *seen to be* people with a certain kind of learning, but in order to ascend to the divine.

This difference does not simply mark a distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical engagement with texts. As Hadot taught us, *all* ancient philosophies were also ways of life. However, we can contrast the psychic transformation that Epictetus sought to effect in his discourses with the Neoplatonic aim of living in and through the texts of Plato. Epictetus sought to use images and analogies to get his auditors to think differently. At various points he urges his audience to conceive themselves and things around them in one way or another. For instance, imagine your loved ones as being like any breakable object—a cup perhaps—so that when they die you are not surprised or distressed (*Ench.* § 3). These reimaginings are drawn from reflections on life for the purpose of training the power of assent so that it operates in accordance with the precept that one should not assent to things that are incognitive.¹⁷ Compare this with a rather typical passage from Proclus’ *Alcibiades* commentary, 189.15ff., where Proclus wishes to call our attention to a similarity between the wise person and the fool. Neither one ‘goes outside himself’ in search of anything—the former because he has the *logoi* of the Forms within and in knowing himself knows them, the latter because he is simply unaware that he is ignorant. The relation of the latter to the former is thus like the relationship between god and matter. This is the ‘likeness of unlikeness’. God

is formless as superior to form, matter is formless as the last dregs of being. In the next few lines, Proclus equates the wise person with Resource or *Poros* in Plato's image from *Symposium* 203b. Here again, the theme of the wise person's self-sufficiency is elaborated in terms drawn from Plato's dialogues—or rather, in terms drawn from the Neoplatonic reading of Plato's dialogues.

The auditors of Proclus' lectures are invited to see themselves and the goal of their striving 'in and through' the Platonic dialogues. Unlike Epictetus, who uses images drawn from life to discipline his students to a goal that can be described independently of any inspired and authoritative text, Proclus' lectures are mystagogic. They initiate the audience into patterns of semantic association, and thus ways of seeing, whose successful internalization *cannot be fully articulated independently of the text in which they are based*.

This, at least, is the hypothesis that I wish to recommend. The argument for it is essentially an inference to the best explanation. Proclus (as well as the other Neoplatonists) produced their commentaries as part of an educational process married to the idea of progression through gradations of virtues. But the written products of that educational process bear no obvious connection to these virtues, nor are the virtues themselves ever described—as the Stoic virtues are—as an *epistêmê* set over any subject matter. One possible explanation, of course, is that the Neoplatonic curriculum and the grades of virtue are merely a pretext for an arid scholasticism that bears no relation to any ethical goal. I have sought to provide a more charitable explanation: the commentaries serve to assist the members of the textual community to live in and through the Platonic canon. This alternative hypothesis might gain support through further analysis of Proclus' commentaries that is not merely philosophical, but rather rhetorical or psychagogic. This, however, is work for the future.

13.4. POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Thus far we have been concerned with the moral progress of the *individual* towards the goal of becoming like god. But it seems initially plausible that a Platonic philosopher should have something to say about political philosophy too, since Plato himself wrote two lengthy dialogues outlining the political and educational arrangements that should obtain in the ideal polis. Much could be (and has been) said about Neoplatonic political philosophy.¹⁸ I will focus only on one small puzzle that will serve to take us back to our beginning: metaphysics and its relation to ethics.

A standing puzzle about Plato's *Republic* concerns the motivation for the philosopher-rulers to return from their contemplative activities—activities that are objectively most pleasant and fill the soul with what is truly real—to engage in the political life of the polis. It might initially seem that Proclus

would inherit this problem in a particularly vexed form since so much of what he writes concerns the soul's ascent up from the world of Becoming to the contemplation of intelligibles. The absolutely central role of the *Timaeus* in his Neoplatonism, however, provides a ready resolution of this Platonic puzzle. The figure of the Demiurge provides a suitable paradigm for the philosopher who has been assimilated to the divine. The Demiurge exercises an effortless providence over the sensible universe that eternally depends upon him. Yet he does this without ever turning his attention from the intelligible paradigm on which the sensible copy is modelled. It turns out that the philosopher does the same thing.

Proclus frequently presents the cosmos as an analogue to the well-governed political community (cf. O'Meara 2003: 94–8). Specifically with reference to the *Republic*, the philosopher-rulers are analogous to the gods who are the causes of all things, while the auxiliaries are analogous to the *daimones* who serve these gods as intermediaries (*in Remp.* II 3.5–10). The more numerous producers in the ideal city are analogous to the souls that are elevated or dragged down by the daimonic intermediaries (*in Remp.* II 99.13–14) in accordance with the laws of fate that govern the whole cosmos. Perhaps echoing *Timaeus* 90b–d, Proclus regards the movements of the celestial gods (i.e. the stars and planets) as a visible model of political justice:

The *politeia* among the things that circulate around the heavens is of this character [i.e. just] since it is one where injustice is neither perpetrated nor suffered, but everything in the cosmos is borne along by an order and life lived in common with one another. Each provides its own contribution toward constituting the whole when it *does its own [task]*, and each has a ready propensity for being one. (*in Remp.* II 325.24–9)

The visible cosmos also provides a suitable paradigm for the philosopher-statesman since the most basic elements of the cosmos are bound together by geometric proportion (*Tim.* 31c5–32c4) and the World Soul that animates it includes the harmonic and arithmetic proportions as well (*Tim.* 35b2–36b5). Each of these proportions is endowed by Proclus with a moral and political significance.¹⁹ Thus the arithmetic proportion is Peace, since it involves equality—something which placates the *dēmos*. Geometric proportion is said to belong to *Eunomia* or Good Order, which Plato himself called ‘the judgment of Zeus’ (*Leg.* VI 757b6). This proportion orders the cosmos and includes within itself the science of politics. Justice corresponds to the harmonic proportion since it assigns the greater proportion to the greater and the lesser to the lesser. So both the behaviour of the heavenly bodies and the proportions that structure the World Soul provide abstract paradigms which the philosopher-statesman must imitate in acting as Demiurge for a political micro-cosmos.

The political community described in the *Republic* provides the first and most divine image of the cosmic *politeia* (*in Remp.* I 10.4–8; II 8.15ff.), while

that of the *Laws* is a second, less perfect one. The Neoplatonists in general regarded *Laws* V 739b as the key text for clarifying the relation between Plato's works. The ideal *politeia* of the *Republic* is ideal precisely because it is more *unified* and thus more closely approximates the single divine organism that is the cosmos. The *Laws* passage also mentions a third, even lower *politeia* (739e5), and this affords Proclus the opportunity for lining up three demiurges with three progressively less unified paradigms for the ideal political community: Zeus, Dionysus, and Adonis. Every statesman models himself on one of these demiurges. The one who imitates Zeus seems to play a unifying role, while the one who imitates Dionysus—who was himself torn apart—engages in drawing distinctions. (Perhaps this statesman's role corresponds more closely to the judicial branch of the political art, while the former corresponds to the legislative one.²⁰) The statesman who imitates Adonis, the sublunary demiurge, seems to engage in some sort of remedial work on things here in the realm of Becoming.²¹

I suspect that this Adonis-type statesman may correspond to Proclus' own political and educative role as head of the Athenian School.²² Within the context of an officially Christian Empire—at least notionally—the ability of the Platonic Diadochus to aim at the more ambitious forms of statesmanship would have been seriously compromised. Marinus tells us that Proclus addressed the Assembly and guided their decisions about matters of justice (*V. Proc.* § 15). In addressing the Assembly he exhorted them and compelled them by his frankness of speech—not, notably, by any other kind of authority. What matters of justice could he have discussed with them? In the next sentence Marinus tells us that he took an interest in the orderly conduct of teachers and students in the sleepy university town that was Athens in the fifth century AD. I suspect that such influence as Proclus may have exercised over matters beyond those pertaining to the schools was exercised through powerful Athenian benefactors such as Rufinus, Asclepiodotus, and Theagenes. In spite of these powerful allies, it appears that, at some point in his tenure as head of the Academy, Proclus overstepped some mark and went into exile for a year. The circumstances of this are not known, but the fact that Marinus tells us that Proclus retreated from 'vulture-like men' suggests some problem with Athens' Christians.²³ It is possible that he spoke out too loudly against the desecration of the Parthenon or the conversion of the temple of Asclepius.

Whatever the exact circumstances, there is little doubt that Proclus would have regarded a Christian Empire as a terrible political development. This is not merely because of the Christians' incursions into specific sites of *civic* cult such as the Parthenon, as bad as this might be. More generally, Christianity undermines the whole political project from Proclus' point of view. The goal of political activity is making the state resemble the divine through political unity and *homonoiia*. But because Christianity draws a sharp line between the Creator and the world He produces, the most proximate paradigms for the

demiurgic statesman to consult—the heavens and the sensible cosmos as a whole—are regarded as void of divinity and organic unity. Worse yet, the Christians regarded the sensible cosmos as temporally created and, further, subject to an actual dissolution. Yet nothing modelled upon such a perishable paradigm could be made well (cf. *Tim.* 28a9–b3). If the universe is no longer a visible god (*Tim.* 30b7–8), the statesman has no compass by reference to which he could steer the ship of state. Considered from this perspective, a work of pure metaphysics like Proclus' treatise *On the Eternity of the World* has a political point. To preserve the visible cosmos as eternal (and thus divine) is a precondition for the possibility of the art of politics—at least for souls such as ours, which are entirely descended into Becoming and thus separated from intelligible paradigms for political unity and justice.

With this observation about the moral and political salience of the world's eternity, we return to where we began. Proclus' philosophy seems to be dominated by metaphysics, and in particular by accounts of the various levels at which divinity is manifested from the One to the stars and planets who are visible gods. We can see that metaphysics and theology have an ethical as well as a political point when we consider that the good consists in assimilation to the divine. We need to understand that which we are to become like. Hence the centrality of these subjects in Proclus' works. Our becoming godlike, however, is not merely a matter of having some abstract understanding of what a god is like. Rather, we become godlike through living in and through the texts of Plato's dialogues. These works are not merely a source of information that could be acquired elsewhere. Rather, the Platonic canon, broadly conceived, is mystagogic. The Platonic diadochus acts towards his students as the *Timaeus'* Demiurge acts towards the world. By unifying their experience of reading Plato with the inspired tradition of the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the Orphic poems, he seeks to transform the very categories in terms of which they think and experience. The acquisition of the various grades of virtues is the series of psychic transformations that is supposed to result from coming to see oneself and the world in and through the Platonic dialogues. This participation in a textual community is a deeper and more personal version of the late antique notion of *paideia*—an education through which the elites of the Roman empire came to speak and write in ways that alluded to classical texts more generally.

NOTES

1. For the various orders of gods in Proclus' metaphysics, see Ch. 10 in this volume.
2. For the modern rediscovery of this aspect of Plato's thought, see Sedley (1997a, 1999), Annas (1999), Russell (2004), and Armstrong (2004).
3. *Theol. plat.* I 16, 80.4; in *Tim.* I 5.29–6.6; *De mal.* 43.11.

4. Cf. Steel (1978) for the response to the unfallen soul in Iamblichus, Damascius, and Priscianus. See Steel (1978: 69–73) for Proclus in particular.
5. For the idea of the soul's astral and pneumatic bodies, see Ch. 6 in this volume.
6. For the cosmos' perception, see Lautner (2006) and Baltzly (2009a).
7. For an exploration of this tension, see Baltzly (2004).
8. There are some complications with this list. Marinus' biography of Proclus begins by listing all the gradations of virtues. He seeks to show in his biography how his subject enjoyed them all. The paradigmatic virtues are missing from Marinus' enumeration: the theoretic virtues are followed by the 'theurgic' virtues. The latter are presumably synonymous with the hieratic virtues in Damascius' report. Marinus then says 'as to those that are higher even than these we shall keep silence, because they exceed the human condition'. Edwards (2000: 60 n. 34) supposes that these higher virtues must be paradigmatic ones, citing Porphyry, *Sent.* 32, where Porphyry says that whoever has the virtues relating to the intellect is a god, while the one who has the paradigmatic virtues is the *father* of a god. If, however, we look forward to Olympiodorus' *Commentary on the Phaedo* a rather different picture emerges. According to Olympiodorus, the paradigmatic virtues are initially distinct from the human subject, just as the human eye is initially distinct from the source of sunlight when it is illuminated by the sun. It is merely a recipient. Subsequently, however, 'it is in some way joined to it and becomes as it were one [with it] and "sun-like", so too our soul is at first illuminated by nous and is active due to intellect in accordance with theoretic virtues but afterwards it becomes in a way that which is the source of the illumination and acts in a uniform (*henoeidôs*) manner in accordance with the paradigmatic virtues' (VIII 2.15–16 Westerink). Olympiodorus gives us a pithy division of labour: the job of philosophy is to *make us intelligent* [or intelligence—*noun poiêsai*], while the job of theurgy is to *unify us with* the intelligibles.
9. Dam., in *Phd.* I 144.1–3: Ὅτι εἰσὶ καὶ αἱ ἱερατικαὶ ἀρεταί, κατὰ τὸ θεοειδὲς ὑφιστάμεναι τῆς ψυχῆς, ἀντιπαρήκουσαι πάσαις ταῖς εἰρημέναις οὐσιώδεσιν οὐσαι ἐνιαῖαί γε ὑπάρχουσαι. Westerink translates: 'they correspond to all the categories mentioned above, with this difference that while the others are existential, these are unitary'. I myself have a hard time seeing how γε provides the required opposition or what work Westerink supposes οὐσιώδεσιν to be doing.
10. Even the natural virtues can be thought of in something like this manner. In his biography of Proclus, Marinus insists that natural endowments like keen eyesight or a sturdy physical constitution are corporeal reflections of the cardinal virtues. Keen eyesight is the 'wisdom of the body', while a strong physical constitution is the bodily counterpart to the soul's courage. Cf. *V. Proc.* § 3.
11. For this general principle, see Ch. 3 in this volume.
12. I find that I am not persuaded by Perkams (2006) that Proclus regarded the parts of the soul as distinct substances. For what seems to me one telling criticism of this view, see MacIsaac (2009: 123 n. 127).
13. For more along these lines, see Abbate (2006).
14. See Ch. 2 (on the Platonic tradition) in this volume.
15. Cf. in *Remp.* I 206.6–7. The *Republic* appears in brackets here because it was not a part of the normal course of study.

16. Westerink (1962: p. xl).
17. Hadot (1992) examines Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* as a set of spiritual exercises, not as a repository of Stoic doctrine.
18. See the ground-breaking study of O'Meara (2003).
19. *In Tim.* II 198.14–25 and 316.29–317.3. More generally see Ausland (2006).
20. On this distinction, see O'Meara (2003: 87–115).
21. *In Remp.* II 8.17–21 On the levels of demiurgy in Proclus, see Opsomer (2000a: 123), as well as Ch. 7 in this volume.
22. The *διάστροφον εἶδος* that the Adonis-like statesman corrects is likely to correspond to the distortion of the individual soul's circle of the Different as a result of its descent into the sublunary realm of Becoming; cf. *in Tim.* III 340.8–12.
23. For coded references to Christians in Proclus, see Saffrey (1975).