

Dirk Baltzly

THE ETHICS OF CELESTIAL PHYSICS  
IN LATE ANTIQUE PLATONISM

Kant famously observed that ›Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.‹ For the Platonists of late antiquity these two things – the starry sky above and the moral law within – were intimately connected. The heavens were thought to provide a visible image of the proper functioning of the human soul. This idea, of course, is grounded in the text of Plato's *Timaeus* where Timaeus claims that the proper study of the movements of the heavenly bodies is the pathway to *eudaimonia*.

If a man has become absorbed in his appetites or his ambitions and takes great pains to further them, all his thoughts are bound to become thoroughly mortal. And so far as it is possible for a man to become thoroughly mortal, he cannot help but fully succeed in this, seeing that he has cultivated his mortality all along. On the other hand, if a man has seriously devoted himself to the love of learning and to true wisdom, if he has exercised these aspects of himself above all, then there is absolutely no way that his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp. And to the extent that human nature can partake of immortality, he can in no way fail to achieve this: constantly caring for his divine part as he does, keeping well-ordered the guiding spirit that lives within him, he must indeed be supremely happy. (*Tim.* 90b1–c6; transl. Bury)<sup>1</sup>

The immortality of the soul in Platonism is a given. Here, however, our choices in life determine the kind of *thinking* that our souls will do. We can have either mortal opinion (*dogmata thnēta*) or immortal and divine acts of cognition (*phronein athanata kai theia*). It depends on whether we invest our time and energy into our appetites and ambitions or into the love of learning and true wisdom. We do the latter by attending to the motions of the heavenly bodies and rendering our own psychic motions isomorphic to them.

Now there is but one way to care for anything, and that is to provide for it the nourishment and the motions that are proper to it. And the motions that have an affinity to the divine part within us are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe. These, surely, are the ones which each of us should follow. We should redirect the revolutions in our heads that were thrown off course at our birth, by coming to learn the harmonies and revolutions of the universe,

<sup>1</sup> Fowler, H. N./Lamb, W. R. M./Shorey, P./Bury, R. G. (1929).

and so bring into conformity with its objects our faculty of understanding, as it was in its original condition. And when this conformity is complete, we shall have achieved our goal: that most excellent life offered to humankind by the gods, both now and forevermore. (*Tim.* 90c6–d7)

These claims, of course, advert to the picture of the soul sketched earlier in the dialogue according to which it is composed from two circles of psychic stuff, each of which has its own motion: the circle of the Same whose motion is identified with thought of the Forms, and the circle of the Different whose motion is identified with true beliefs about sensible things (*Tim.* 37a5–c2). This psychic structure is common between the World Soul, where the motions of the two circles are always smooth, and the individual human soul where the motions of the circles are distorted by the soul's condition of embodiment (*Tim.* 43a6 ff.). In order to think the right kind of thoughts – that is, have the right kinds of psychic motions – we need to feed the soul properly.

This idea that the motions of the heavenly bodies provide a paradigm for the happy soul ought to strike readers of the entire Platonic corpus as odd. First, passages in the *Phaedo* urge the aspiring philosopher to turn his attention away from the sense perceptual faculties by means of which he would see the celestial paradigms (cf. *Phaid.* 65e6–66a6). In addition, passages in the *Republic* likewise urge us to turn our attention away from Becoming to Being, from the realm of sensibles to the higher realm of intelligibles (*rep.* 508d3; 518c5; 521d2). Finally, there are remarks throughout the dialogues that emphasise the great difference between the soul and the body (*Phaid.* 80a1 ff.). What sense can be made of the idea that a soul – a non-corporeal being – must emulate the local motion of a corporeal body in order to ›think immortal thoughts‹? So here are three obvious questions that any philosopher seeking to articulate a systematic Platonism grounded in a synoptic reading of the dialogues must ask himself:

1. The epistemological question: How is the paradigmatic function of the visible heavenly bodies to be reconciled with various Platonic misgivings about the faculty of perception?
2. The metaphysical question: How can »assimilation« to the motions of bodies in the realm of Becoming provide for the salvation of souls when souls are »higher« – a mid-point between Being and Becoming?
3. The psychological question: What can it *mean* for an incorporeal soul to utilise the motions of a body for an ethical and cognitive paradigm? Or to put it another way, what does the soul's assimilation to heavenly bodies really amount to?

In what follows I'll look at the manner in which the Platonists of late antiquity addressed these challenges, concentrating on Proclus. The Greek text of Proclus' commentary on the *Timaeus* breaks off at 44d. Nonetheless, a fragment of the

commentary on *Tim.* 89e3–90c7 has been preserved in Arabic.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, however, it sheds only a little light on these broader issues since the key notion of the soul's assimilation to the motions of the heavenly bodies is treated only briefly. Rüdiger Arnzen, who has provided a recent analysis and translation of the Arabic text, hypothesises that the excerptor has omitted all but the last few paragraphs of Proclus' introductory remarks to the entire last section of the dialogue. In spite of the somewhat disappointing nature of the Arabic fragment – at least for the purposes of addressing the questions I've outlined – I think that we can construct some answers from the wider Proclean corpus. I think these answers suggest that we need to attend to the transformative intention in Neoplatonic commentary writing.

### I. The Epistemological Question

Plato's dialogue already hints that souls that seek *eudaimonia* ought not simply stare at the stars, slack-jawed and vacant. It is suggested that it is no ordinary astronomical study that feeds the soul with the ›nourishment and motions‹ that it needs to return to its original good condition. To illustrate that it is not merely star-gazing that corrects the soul's motions, Timaeus tells us that the souls that are now birds studied the things in the heavens in the wrong manner (*Tim.* 91d6–e1). These souls were previously morally blameless but naïve men who were led through perception to suppose that the senses provide the most accurate and authoritative account of the heavenly motions. This casual remark echoes the *Republic's* distinction (*rep.* 528e3 ff.) between true astronomy and its less than proper counterpart – albeit without shedding much light on the other, very obscure distinction.

Rather than take on the question of the proper role of perception in the right form of astronomy, we can gain some insight into Proclus' likely approach to this issue by noting that there are four gradations of perception according to him. The highest form is had by the cosmos itself and is similar in its nature to *noêsis* since in this case the sense and its object are one. The second highest is that had by the stars and planets themselves. The sense perception that seems relevant to us – and thus to the proper study of the visible heavens – is a mixture of *pistis* and knowledge that originates in *pathos*, but ends up in knowledge.

Proclus' view about the nature of human perception is complex, but we can briefly say this. First, he does not think that perception is exclusive to humans and animals. The universe and the celestial bodies have a capacity for perception. So the faculty of perception *per se* is not an impediment to the blessed life. Second, Proclus at one point suggests that even animal perception has some small share of intellect (*Theol. Plat.* III 6, 23.2524.2). Thus if even the lowest forms of

<sup>2</sup> Arnzen (2013). I am grateful to James Wilberding for drawing my attention to Arnzen's thorough and useful study.

perception are permeated with some trace of *nous*, there is little to worry about from Proclus' point of view with the idea that *looking* at the motions of the heavenly bodies could assist souls to regain their proper cognitive functioning. Perception in and of itself is not a bad thing. Indeed, the kind of perception enjoyed by the cosmos, as well as the celestial beings that inhabit it, contributes toward making their lives blessed and happy. So there are ample resources in Proclus' views on cosmic and celestial perception to allay any worries that a student of the dialogues might have about being advised to utilise the perceptual faculties to study the motions of the stars.

## II. The Metaphysical Question

I have formulated the metaphysical question in a way that is somewhat vague. Readers of Plato who have not been influenced by developments in Neoplatonism might find the idea of a soul directing its attention *downward* toward Becoming rather than *upward* toward Being puzzling. But for a Neoplatonist like Proclus, the metaphysical question will present itself with a certain urgency.

For a Neoplatonist, souls are *per se* substances that exist always. As such, they are self-constituted (*Inst.* 189). Every self-constituted being ought to revert upon *itself* and find its good *in itself* (*Inst.* 42). But the *Timaeus* 90b–e passage seems to be recommending that souls should revert upon – or at least attend to – the motions of *visible bodies* in the heavens in order to find their good.

Metaphorically, this seems like gazing *down* at bodies, rather than gazing *up* at intelligibles. A Platonist like Plotinus might put the point this way:

[The soul's] reasoning part, if it is damaged, is hindered in its seeing by the passions and by being darkened by matter, and inclined toward matter, and altogether looking towards Becoming and not Being; and the principle of Becoming is the nature of matter, which is so evil that it infects with its own evil that which is not in it but which *merely directs its gaze* upon it. [...] The perfect soul, then, which directs itself toward intellect, is always pure and turns away from matter and neither sees nor approaches anything undefined, unmeasured and evil. (*Enn.* I 8, 4 [51], 18–27)

Thus a Platonist like Plotinus could find grounds for regarding *Timaeus* 90d–e with some discomfort, for this passage seems to suggest that an embodied soul ought to look toward Becoming rather than Being.

The short answer to this is that Proclus is not a Platonist like Plotinus. The dispute between Plotinus and his successors about the undescended soul (cf. *Enn.* IV 8, 8 [6], 1–11) affects this issue too. For Plotinus, the human soul has the option of attending directly to the intelligibles, since some aspect of our souls has never fallen into a body. Iamblichus and the subsequent tradition emphatically reject this view. Our souls are not *divine souls*.

In contrast to human souls, divine souls have immediate participation in the divine *henads*, which are the occult source of intelligibles. There are further souls that *always* follow these divine souls. They participate in intellect, but not in the *henads*. Human souls, however, are not even souls of this sort. Human souls are particular or partial souls and it is characteristic of partial souls to sometimes engage in *noêsis* and sometimes not. A consequence of this capacity to engage in *noêsis* only intermittently is that partial souls do not participate in intellect *proximately*, as do the souls that are always attendant upon the gods (*Inst.* 185; 202). Thus the access of human souls to the divine intelligibles is always *mediated* by superior, divine souls or by their inevitable attendants. Thus there simply is no question of our turning the vision of our human souls directly upon the realm of intelligibles. Moreover, these superior souls always have *bodies* (*Inst.* 196). These are the astral bodies that form the primary vehicles for all souls and with this condition of embodiment, even divine souls have the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul. Granted, these psychic parts are the highest gradation and the causal origin of their counterparts in our souls. They do not have the potential for psychic dissonance that these psychic faculties introduce in us. But they are nonetheless present.

The upshot of all this is as follows: we human souls simply do not have the option that Plotinus supposed. It is not open to us to direct our gaze upon the intelligibles directly. Our access to the intelligibles is always mediated by divine souls. Moreover, when we attend to these divine souls and participate in intellect through them, we attend to *embodied* souls. Our choices are not to revert upon enmattered things or intellect. Our choices are to revert upon higher bodies rather than lower ones.

### III. The Psychological Question

Thus far we have considered only potential objections, drawn from the rest of the Platonic corpus, to the idea that souls might achieve likeness to god by studying the stars. Now, however, we come to the most difficult philosophical question: what could it *mean* for the motions of the celestial bodies to provide a visible paradigm of the proper motions of the soul? We can divide this question into two parts.

First, let us ask about what sense can be given to psychic »motions« at all. Clearly we can speak of psychic *changes*: now I am thinking about Plato, later I will be thinking about lunch. The motions of the heavenly bodies involve change, but this is change of position or *local motion*, for it is characteristic of bodies to be located in a place and characteristic of the heavenly bodies that they undergo no other kind of change save local motion. If we take seriously the idea that souls are incorporeal, then it is very mysterious how the latter kind of change can function as a paradigm for the former.



Second, what is special about the local motion of the heavenly bodies? All kinds of bodies move and they move in all manner of ways. What makes the motions of the stars and planets a visible paradigm for proper psychic motion while the motions of other bodies are not a suitable pattern for our souls to imitate?

It turns out that the second of these questions is easier than the first. Or at least, its answer is easier to *state*. *Understanding* it will take us into the first question.

The motion of the fixed stars – as opposed to the motions of other bodies – serve as an appropriate paradigm for human souls because they move *circularly*. In particular, the totality of fixed stars' motions resembles the motion of a sphere around its axis. In the case of the stars, this axis is the celestial pole. But the motion of a sphere around its axis, Plato tells us, is the visible analogue of the motion of intellect. This claim occurs in the *Timaeus*, the *Laws*, and *Epinomis* (982c).

He assigned it [sc. the cosmos] appropriate for its body – of all the seven kinds of motions, the one that pertains especially to *nous* and *phronêsis*. (*Tim.* 34a; my translation)

Later *Timaeus* assigns the same spinning motion to each of the visible heavenly bodies. He describes these bodies as living things, constituting a fourth genus alongside terrestrial, aquatic, and flying creatures:

Assimilating [the celestial living beings] to the universe, he made them well-rounded [...] He assigned two motions to each, one in the same and around the same (since each always thinks the same thing for itself concerning the same things), the other going forward (since each is dominated by the motion of the Same and the Similar). (*Tim.* 40a–b; my translation)

The *Laws* reiterates the connection between the motion in place had by the rotation of a sphere on its axis and *nous*.

Take *nous* on the one hand and motion in a single location on the other. If we were to point out that in both cases the motion was determined by a single plan and procedure and that it was (a) regular, (b) uniform, (c) always at the same point in space, (d) around a fixed centre, and (e) in the same position relative to other objects, and were to illustrate both by the example of a sphere being turned on a lathe, then no one would ever show us up for incompetent makers of verbal images. (*leg.* 898a; transl. Saunders)<sup>3</sup>

It is important to stress that the motion of the sphere on the lathe is an *image* of *nous*. The stranger has already stressed that »we mustn't assume that mortal eyes will ever be able to look upon *nous* and get to know it adequately« (*leg.* 897d). So Plato seems well aware that at this point we are in the realm of metaphor. The list of items above looks as if it is intended to make explicit the analogy that ancient

<sup>3</sup> In Cooper (1997).

writers regard as central to successful metaphor.<sup>4</sup> It enumerates the respects in which *nous* and the spinning sphere are alike but it does not require that intellect resemble the spinning sphere in every respect.

Do the Neoplatonists recognise that we are in the realm of metaphor here as well? Certainly Proclus argues that each individual heavenly body has both corporeal and *psychic* motions that allow it to imitate the whole of which it is a part (*in Ti.* III 120.10). On the one hand, the star's body is carried along with the motion of the circle of the Same, here equated with the motion of the sphere of the fixed stars. It also spins on its axis.

[Each] is moved towards those who are in the lead in conjunction with the revolution of the whole, though it also has its distinctive motion which is impelled from itself and bears an image [*indalma*] of the activities of discursive thought and of eternal and intellectual motions. (*in Ti.* III 120.30–3)<sup>5</sup>

But the *soul* that is associated with the celestial body also has a pair of psychic motions that mirror the forward progress and the spinning of its body. Its psychic spinning is equated with having the same wisdom about the same matters and always cognising in the same manner. This »motion« is obviously related to Plato's remarks in the *Laws*. The psychic counterpart to the star's motion as it is carried along with the sphere of the fixed stars is the fact that it »goes back up to the highest intelligibles«. Recall that divine souls enjoy an unmediated awareness of the intelligibles. This unmediated awareness is now characterised as »following« the wholeness of which each divine soul is a part in much the same manner in which the star's body »follows« the sphere of which it is a part.

So here is the first step in the resolution of our puzzle about what it could mean for me to liken my soul to the motions of the heavenly bodies. It is characteristic of Proclus' philosophy that he puts intermediate steps in that smooth the jagged boundaries between different orders of beings within his ontology. This »law of mean terms« is probably an Iamblichean inheritance, but it is an inheritance that Proclus cherishes. If we think about Plato's admonition to have our souls imitate the motions of the stars, then we are confronted with a seeming puzzle: what can it mean to liken the motion of my *soul* to the motion of a *body* in the heavens? Proclus fills in the gaps. To liken my soul to the heavens is, strictly speaking, to liken my soul to the *soul* of one of the heavenly bodies. It is a soul–soul assimilation that is being urged: not a soul–body assimilation.

Nor is there reason to think that likening my human soul to the soul that animates one of the celestial bodies is a matter of my soul *spinning* in the same manner as the star's soul does. Proclus rejects the idea that the Platonic account of the composition of the soul from two circles of »psychic stuff« is meant literally.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle *Poet.* 21, 1457b9–16 and 20–22: a metaphor is »the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is, proportion.«

<sup>5</sup> Baltzly (2013).

Therefore it is necessary to conceive this life-engendering shape of the soul as shapeless and lacking in extension, unless we intend to infect ourselves and the theory of Plato with many absurd consequences such as Aristotle introduced. (*in Ti.* II 250.8–11)<sup>6</sup>

If the psychic circles are not extended, then there is no sense in which they exhibit local motion. The soul's »motion« is the activity of an unextended incorporeal substance.

But though this solves one problem, it raises another. True – I am now instructed to do something that is much more readily understandable (for a Platonist at least): I am to assimilate the activities of my soul to the activities of the divine souls that animate the heavenly bodies. But the psychic activities of those celestial souls bring it about that their perfect spherical bodies both spin in place and move along in conjunction with the sphere of the fixed stars. If I get my psychic circles to imitate the movements of the celestial souls, will my body spin in place and follow the sphere of the fixed stars? Are the Sufi dervishes the most successful Platonists?

Here too the circular motions of the heavenly bodies are only a metaphor for the incorporeal motions of the souls that animate those bodies. Proclus supposes that the most fundamental causal process – that of a cause remaining in itself and proceeding from itself, and the reversion of the effect upon the cause – describes a *circle* (*in Ti.* II 248.15–18). The stars and planets that Plato's *Timaeus* identifies as the instruments of time provide a visible image of the circular flow of incorporeal time.

The procession of time is not some single linear process, like a line drawn indefinitely in either direction. Rather it is something definite and circumscribed [*perigegramenos*], dancing around [*peri*] the Father of wholes and the monad of time, spelling out the strength of creation, and bringing it about that a complete revolution is performed again and again. (*in Ti.* III 29.3–7)

Accordingly, when the bodies visible in the night sky move along their circular paths, they imitate the movement of the first moving thing in the order of emanation.

The voice of Plato himself has said that »these are forms of time that have come to be, imitating Eternity and revolving according to number« (Tim. 38a7–8), for among the things that are in motion, time is the first thing to be moved in a circle, proceeding into the things external to it in virtue of its own activity, and the first to return to its starting point after the entire unfolding of its own power. As a result of this, it brings the cycles of the other things back to their starting points too. (*in Ti.* III 29.15–21)

<sup>6</sup> Baltzly (2009).



The outward »motion« of procession from a cause is equated with the exercise of providence by that cause. Proclus supposes that the stars and planets exercise providence over the domains that they have been allotted by the Demiurge. Both the divine soul that animates the heavenly body and the body itself bring about effects that contribute toward the good. Thus at *in Ti.* III 65.15 ff. Proclus discusses the specific roles that Venus and Mercury play in their collaboration with the Sun. The effects they bring about are drawn from the astrological literature. So while it appears to the eye that what the bodies of the celestial souls are doing is moving in circles, a more systematic understanding of the role of these bodies would reveal that what their circulation motions do is to implement specific aspects of divine providence in specific contexts.

If I successfully assimilate my own soul's incorporeal non-motions to the incorporeal non-motions of celestial souls, then my *body* ought not imitate *their* bodies in simply moving on its axis. Rather, my body should imitate theirs in serving as a co-cause of my mental efforts to bring divine goodness to the part in the cosmos that has been allotted to me. Assimilation to the celestial gods does not require me to be a whirling dervish. But it does require me to imitate the celestial gods beneficent administration of the cosmos, to the extent that it is within my power to do so. This is the imperative that is expressed metaphorically through Timaeus' admonition to assimilate ourselves to the motions of the heavenly bodies. As usual in Neoplatonism, this admonition is only superficially to do with bodies and motions in space. But this is to be expected because bodies and their motions are, for the Neoplatonists, merely spatial and material reflections of more ontologically fundamental spiritual motions.

This conclusion (largely drawn from what Proclus says elsewhere in his commentary about the role of the visible celestial gods in administering providence) is consistent with, but goes beyond, what is said in the Arabic fragment of his commentary *in Ti.* 90c4–7. The Arabic fragment is perfectly general in its treatment of assimilation to god. It notes that the »agent cause of assimilation is participation in something«. Presumably for human beings, the relevant »something« is intellect since we are immediately told that the agent cause of participation is »amazement«. Presumably the original Greek here is *thaumazein* or something similar, probably as an allusion to Plato's *Theaetetus* 155d.<sup>7</sup> The sentence that follows, however, seems not only so broad as to be uninformative, but also rather confusing:

The reason is that knowledge of the divine things makes us turn into amazement, and amazement makes us turn into participating in something, because man desires what he is amazed about and in order to participate in it in some [respect], he assimilates to it.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Proclus, *in Alc.* 42.9–11.

<sup>8</sup> Translation from Arabic by Anzen (2013), 39–40.

At this point the excerpt from Proclus' commentary breaks off and we are left somewhat puzzled. Surely it is *thauma* that *motivates* us to seek knowledge: it is not that which *results* once we have it. Perhaps the thought is that in the case of divine things, our understanding deepens our *thauma* rather removing it and in this process we are in some way assimilated to the divine object of knowledge. Our initial incomprehension of the divine was, perhaps, superficial and results in a deeper kind of *thauma* that arises from the proper awareness of the gods' genuine incomprehensibility.

Nonetheless, the connections that the Arabic fragment draws between knowledge and amazement, on the one hand, and participation and assimilation on the other are perfectly general. They concern divine things in general. The passage gives us no reason to single out the motions of the heavenly bodies as a paradigm to which our souls should be assimilated. It is possible that Proclus went on to discuss the reasons why the visible motions of the celestial gods make a particularly good object of amazement, but if he did this further discussion has not come down to us.

#### IV. *The Psychagogy of Celestial Physics*

If my reconstructed reading is correct, then the motions of the heavenly bodies provide a *symbolic* paradigm for the life of an aspiring Platonist philosopher in late antiquity. We are not being advised to twirl on our axes or to move always in a circle. Something else is being conveyed through Plato's text.

Proclus' lectures on the *Timaeus* functioned in many ways. They were simultaneously an interpretation of Plato and a series of philosophical arguments, but also a step in the educational program of the Neoplatonic schools. Remember that the reading order of the Platonic dialogues was supposed to correlate to an ascent through different gradations of the cardinal virtues – the political, the kathartic, the theoretic, etc. – to the ultimate goal of communion with the divine. Let us conclude by assessing Proclus' remarks on all three of these criteria.

As an *interpretation of Plato*, Proclus' reading of the sense in which *Timaeus* directs us to improve ourselves by likening our soul's own motions to the movements of the heavenly bodies is not unreasonable. The key move in this interpretation is to read the whole notion of psychic motions non-literally. It may be objected that this key move is historically untenable – that Plato did, in fact, suppose that souls are composed of spinning circles – because Aristotle criticises him in *De Anima* for holding just this view.<sup>9</sup> But Aristotle characteristically criticises Plato for expressing his views by ›mere metaphors‹ and founds many of his objections on interpreting Plato very literally.<sup>10</sup> So while Proclus' reading

<sup>9</sup> *An.* I 3, 406b26 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Met.* XIII 5, 1079b29.

of Plato is perhaps not one that you yourself would regard as *obviously right*, it is not obviously wrong either. It is, I think, at least defensible.

As a *piece of philosophical reasoning*, Proclus' understanding of assimilation to the divine through the imitation of the heavenly bodies is less than convincing. Stripped of its metaphorical elements, it comes down to the descriptive claim that the stars and planets are living beings that simultaneously enjoy uninterrupted contemplation of the intelligibles and also exercise an effortless providence over the portion of the sensible cosmos that they have been assigned to administer. This descriptive claim is then coupled with the normative claim that we human beings ought to aspire to do the same thing in so far as this lies within our power. The evidence for the descriptive claim is largely the authority of Plato. No new argument is offered that the stars and planets are themselves living beings. Presumably Proclus would have supposed that *Laws X* has already adequately settled this matter. Similarly, no independent argument is offered for the normative claim that contemplation is the core of the happy life for human beings – though Proclus could perhaps claim that this has already been shown by both Plato and Aristotle in his *Ethics*. What needs argument, however – and gets none – is the idea that the combination of *theôria* and providential care is possible and desirable. Indeed, one only need look again to Aristotle's concerns in *Nicomachean Ethics X* about the political and the contemplative life to see that it is far from obvious that these things go comfortably together.<sup>11</sup> The Epicureans thought that even gods could not manage the exercise of providence without spoiling their fun.<sup>12</sup> If the *gods* cannot do both, what hope have we?

I do not think, however, that Proclus would be too concerned to have offered no new, independent arguments. His *Timaeus Commentary* is linked with the practice of teaching Plato and he takes his audience to be already committed to the authority of Plato's text. What they will gain from Proclus' commentary is not so much independent reasons for thinking that Plato is right. Rather, the act of reading the *Timaeus* with the master of the school is an activity that I have elsewhere called ›perlocutionary hermeneutics‹.<sup>13</sup> In learning to see the movements of the stars and planets as a symbolic representation of the double activity of uninterrupted contemplation and beneficent cosmic administration the aspiring Platonist learns *to live in and through certain metaphors*. That is to say, he or she will not merely interpret Plato's text so that circular motion connotes the activity of intellect contemplating the intelligibles; he or she will allow this metaphor (and other related ones) to structure the interpretation of her own experience in the pervasive manner that Lakoff and Johnson argued in *Metaphors We Live By*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *EN X* 7, 1177b26 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Cicero, *ND* I. 51–4.

<sup>13</sup> Baltzly (forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> Johnson/Lakoff (1980).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposes that relations among objects, properties and processes are organised in lexical fields in the ›source domain‹. The items in the source domain tend to be concrete and familiar to us through perception. Thus there are various connections among entities like paths, roads, obstacles, the passage of time, the expenditure of effort and so on linked together in the lexical field around the idea of a journey. Through metaphors, relations among objects in the source domain are projected to things in a ›target domain‹. Often the things in the target domain are abstract, complex and not easily apprehended in one or more sense experiences. Thus, for instance, the concept of a person's lifetime is understood or constructed through metaphors relating it to a journey. A person can have a hard start to life, can lose his way, find companionship along the way, and so forth. When we live in and through the metaphor of life as a journey, we come to interpret our experience of the events of our lives in terms of the relations among objects in the source domain. The metaphor of life as journey can sustain us in adversity (since we know that individual concrete journeys can involve some unpleasant episodes prior to finally arriving at our desired destination); it assures us that somehow we are going somewhere even when we feel directionless (for, after all, even an undirected Sunday drive in the car may result in a stop at a café or a winery); and so on.

Natural languages typically do not understand a single complex target domain in terms of a single source domain. Thus in English at least games and competition provide another metaphor that structures our understanding of long-term trajectories of lives. Sometimes this metaphor intersects with and competes with that of life as a journey. Being retrenched from one's job may ›go down in the loss column‹ of an otherwise successful ›sporting season‹ in which one got married and had a fantastic honeymoon. The same event may be interpreted in terms of the journey metaphor as a turning aside from the expected career path. The emotional valence associated with each metaphor is different. Thus the metaphors that we currently live by may conflict and leave us unsure how to ›read‹ our lives.

Let us now consider the motions of the celestial gods as a source domain for metaphors for a good life. The turning of a sphere upon its axis is not part of the usual range of source domains for ancient Greek metaphors for the good life. Indeed, one of the most common metaphors is the very un-Platonic notion of a ›good flow‹ (*eurhoia*). I say it is un-Platonic because of the fact that Plato himself connects Heraclitus' metaphysics with words for flowing,<sup>15</sup> while Plato's world of intelligibles is partially constituted precisely by its exemption from flow and change.

The metaphor of a good life as one that flows well is not unrelated to our own idea of life as a journey, since the flowing stream has both an origin in the mountains and a terminus when it meets the sea. Like the journey metaphor,

<sup>15</sup> *Krat.* 401b; 411b.

a good flow of life is a *linear* idea. In this respect it is diametrically opposed to the connection that Platonism seeks to draw between the good life and the motion in the same place that is characteristic of the spinning sphere. The Platonic metaphor does not require that the happy person *get somewhere* (metaphorically speaking). He only needs for his own internal activity to be directed upon the intelligible objects that are everywhere and nowhere (though this must happen through the mediation of the celestial gods).

But the heavenly bodies that are to serve as our paradigms of the good life do not merely move on their axes. They also *progress* along circular paths through the heavens – though this forward progress returns to the same point at the end of a cycle or *apokatastasis*. This forward or linear progress Proclus equates with the phase of emanation from the cause and the exercise of providence. Consider in this respect his *Hymn to Aphrodite* (i.e. to Venus):

But, goddess, for you have a far-hearing ear everywhere,  
 whether you envelop the great heaven all-around,  
 where, as they say, you are the divine soul of the everlasting cosmos  
 or dwell in the aether above the rims of the seven orbits  
 while pouring unyielding powers forward into your series.  
 (lines 14–18; transl. van den Berg, my emphasis)<sup>16</sup>

Or his *Hymn to Helios* (i.e. the Sun). After praising Helios for filling all things with ›intellect-awakening providence‹ Proclus proceeds to the Sun's assistants: the other planets.

The planets girdled with your ever-blooming torches,  
 through unceasing and untiring dances,  
 always send life-producing drops down for earthlings.  
 Under the influence of your chariot's returning courses,  
 everything that is born has sprouted up according to the  
 ordinance of Seasons. (lines 8–12; transl. van den Berg, my emphasis)

The circular route is associated with the planetary gods' outward effects – their exercise of providence. They do a job that benefits us – though they do it *effortlessly*.

This effortless work through circular motion cuts across another Greek metaphor for the good life: that which understands the happy life through metaphors of wealth and the absence of toil. The adjective *olbios* can, of course, simply mean rich. But, enmeshed in metaphors of exchange and advantage, it also means one who is happy. The following passage from the *agôn* between Hermione and Andromache in Euripides' play both illustrates the intimate connection between the metaphorical wealth of the happy person, her use of things to her advantage, and the happy life's opposite: ignoble and degrading toil:

<sup>16</sup> van den Berg (2001).



the temple of the Nereid here will profit [*oninêmi*] you not at all, not its altar or its sanctuary, but you will be put to death. If some god or mortal means to save your life, you must cease from those rich proud thoughts [*olbion phronêma*] you once had and cower in humility, fall at my feet, and sweep my house, scattering Achelous' water by hand from my gold-wrought vessels, and know where in the world it is you live. (Euripides, *Andr.* 161–8; transl. Kovacs)<sup>17</sup>

Theognis' *Elegi.* I 1013–14 illustrates similar semantic connections between the notion of blessedness and the freedom from hard work.

Ah, blessed [*makar*], happy [*eudaimôn*], and well-off [*olbios*] is he who goes down to the dark house of Hades without having experienced labours [*athloi*].

The possession of wealth and the things that this permits are the source domain. The target domain is the happy life. Just as the wealthy person derives monetary profit from his invested funds, so too a person can become happy to the extent that she »profits« from circumstances at hand. As the wealthy person is released from degrading and painful labour, so too the happy person enjoys *aponia* in the sense of freedom from such toil.

Now, no toil is so bad as endless toil and this is where the *oblios/aponia* source domain intersects the metaphorical presentation of the heavens in interesting ways. Penelope's nightly unweaving of the results of her daily labour is proverbial for a task that is *anênutos* or never-ending. She is invoked by Plato as a symbol of endless toil (*Phaid.* 84a). Plato also makes use of the phrase »going around in circles« as a metaphor for pointless labour (*polit.* 283b2). Similarly Sisyphus and Plato's water-carriers in Hades (*Gorg.* 493c) are people engaged in pointless labour whose pattern is clearly cyclical – like the repeated cycles of the heavenly bodies.

When Proclus' audience comes to see the motion of the stars and planets through the heavens as a symbol of the effortless exercise of divine providence, they are implicitly invited to reassess the metaphors built upon cyclical activity. These celestial cycles are the antithesis of Sisyphus' or Penelope's labours. First, they are effortless, even though they are ceaseless. Second, they bring about the very best of products in the sensible world. Though the stars and planets are »going around in circles« they are very much *getting things done*.

Proclus' understanding of the manner in which the planetary gods' exercise of providence is symbolically represented by the effortless motions of the planets in the night sky sheds new light on the existing metaphorical understanding of happiness in terms of wealth and in terms of a »good flow of life«. While the celestial gods are rich in happiness, they are not idle. Their providential administration of the cosmos is an effortless by-product of the right use of their *scholê*. Of course,

<sup>17</sup> Kovacs (1995).

those who are uneducated in the ways of astrology do not understand how, for instance, Mars' journey into this region of the sky governs the nature of the births that will take place at this time. To the uninitiated, this looks like idleness.

Similarly, to the uninitiated the activity of the students of Proclus' school in Athens may look like idleness: reading, lecturing, composition, prayer, and the quiet bit of theurgy. It probably appeared every bit as pointless to outsiders then as the present activity of academics does to politicians who complain about the drain they impose upon the public purse when they only teach six hours a week. Yet Marinus' *Life of Proclus* is filled with the many ways in which Marinus thought that Proclus' activities benefitted Athens and kept those associated with the school in the right relation to the gods.

Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus* does not tell aspiring Platonists *exactly* how to move from the source domain of the visible motions of the heavenly bodies to the target domain of the good life. But in identifying these celestial motions as a potential source domain, it invites Proclus' audience to construct for themselves new metaphors correlating one semantic field with the other. The provision of the tools for seeing one's life in and through ideas derived from Plato's text is, I claim, one of the many functions of Proclus' philosophical writings. I do not think that we fully understand these works until we see their psychagogic dimension. The ethics of celestial physics is, I have argued, one case in point.

#### *Literature*

- Arnzen, R. (2013), »Proclus on Plato's *Timaeus* 89e3–90c7«, in: *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 23, 1–5.
- Baltzly, D. (2009), *Proclus: Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, vol. 4, Cambridge.
- (2013), *Proclus: Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, vol. 5, Cambridge.
- (forthcoming), »The Human Life«, in: D'Hoine, P./Martijn, M. (edd.), *Proclus, Successor of Plato*, Oxford.
- Cooper, J. (ed.) (1997), *Plato. Complete Works*, Indianapolis.
- Fowler, H. N./Lamb, W. R. M./Shorey, P./Bury, R. G. (1929) (edd.), *Plato. In Twelve Volumes*, Cambridge.
- Johnson, M./Lakoff, G. (1980), *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago.
- Kovacs, D. (ed.) (1995), *Euripides*, Cambridge.
- van den Berg, R. M. (2001), *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary*, Leiden.