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Edited by Stephen Gersh

Excerpt

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One thousand years of Proclus *An introduction to his reception*

Stephen Gersh

To describe the reception of Proclus in European thought in either a narrative or an analytical form is undoubtedly a complicated task. It is well known that a substantial part of the history of Platonism – and indeed, the entirety of that history down to the seventeenth century – is the history of what we nowadays term “Neoplatonism” (together with that of the closely related phenomenon of “Middle Platonism”). It is less well known, although it is a demonstrable historical fact rather than a historian’s subjective view, that the influence of Proclus far outweighs that of any other Neoplatonist. That the name of Proclus’ predecessor Plotinus tends to come to mind when people who are not among the ranks of academic specialists think of the term “Neoplatonism” results from certain features of the current “hermeneutical situation.” These include the respective chronological positions of Plotinus and Proclus that bring the former into the purview of classicists and leave the latter outside it, the fact that – methodologically speaking – the essentials of Plotinus’ philosophical position need to be grasped before proceeding to the explanation of Proclus’ doctrine, and the two philosophers’ respective degrees of potential consistency with the monotheistic Christian worldview, which is greater in the case of Plotinus than it is in that of Proclus. However, there are also good reasons for re-evaluating or “rehabilitating” Proclus at the present time, not the least of which is the enormous extent of his influence in the medieval Latin and Byzantine worlds and in the Renaissance.¹

In order to avoid the danger of losing sight of the wood for the trees, I will frame a narrative of Proclus’ influence within European thought between approximately 500 and 1600 of the Common Era by working along two trajectories. After making a very brief summary of what might be termed the “Proclean diffusion” in both the Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking

¹ One should also not forget Proclus’ influence on the philosophy of the Islamic world. Some aspects of this tradition will be noted below.

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worlds, I will follow a first trajectory by considering certain general features of the assimilation of Proclus' philosophy without consideration of which the mechanism of the Proclean diffusion cannot be understood. Among these general features, the following seem to me to be the most important: (a) the reading of Proclus in conjunction with Syrianus and Damascius; (b) the concealment of Proclus' doctrine within the writings of "Dionysius the Areopagite"; (c) the exploitation of Proclus' ideas in the context of Aristotelian commentary; (d) the loss or suppression of Proclus' works; and (e) the paraphrasing of Proclus' text in the *Liber de causis*. Having considered these general features of the assimilation of Proclus' philosophy, I will follow a second trajectory by considering the extent to which the diffusion of these ideas was regulated by the availability of specific texts of Proclus either in Greek or in Latin translation. Arranged roughly in order of historical significance the most important texts are: 1. *Elements of Theology*; 2. *Three Opuscula*; 3. *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*; 4. *Platonic Theology*; 5. *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*; and 6. Other works. Since my intention is to demonstrate perhaps for the first time² that there is a "grand narrative" of Proclus' influence in European thought rather than to study the many separate elements that make up that narrative in detail, this introductory study will endeavor to avoid the cumbersome documentation that might obscure the general outline by stating the main facts in a quasi-dogmatic manner and simply referring the reader to the various chapters in the present volume for the more nuanced and more fully documented treatment. In fashioning my survey, I have obviously relied on all of these, although I have retained a certain editorial privilege in adding information from time to time in order to complete the picture and occasionally (albeit more rarely) in disagreeing with the findings of my colleagues.³

General diffusion of Proclus' writings

Regarding the general diffusion of Proclus, one should observe that in *late antiquity* when there was already a geographic and cultural division into

² There appear to be no earlier surveys of this question as a whole. A few publications have taken the first steps in studying specific areas within the more general diffusion of Proclus' ideas. See especially Imbach (1978), Kristeller (1987), and Sturlese (1987). The collective volume of Bos and Meijer (1992), although a laudable contribution in its day, made no attempt to identify central themes or cover the ground systematically.

³ I beg the indulgence of these colleagues on the rare occasions when I do this, pointing out conversely that they are not responsible for all the opinions expressed by their editor.

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Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking worlds, a variety of responses to Proclus' work can be discerned. These responses range between overt critique and silent appropriation. In the East we have John Philoponus' *On the Eternity of the World against Proclus* in which nineteen of Proclus' arguments for this important cosmological doctrine – not preserved as a group in any of his extant texts – are considered and refuted.⁴ It is unclear whether this document illustrates a conflict between paganism and Christianity or merely a debate among different factions within the classical Platonic tradition. However, it seems to initiate a tradition of controversy surrounding Proclus that definitely takes on the shape of a conflict between orthodox Christianity and "Hellenism" reaching a climax during the twelfth century in Nicholas of Methone's *Anaptyxis (Explanation) of Proclus' Elements of Theology*. Some scholars have suggested – probably on inadequate grounds – that Nicholas' controversial work is influenced by or plagiarized from a late ancient anti-Proclean treatise by Procopius of Gaza. But if Proclus is being overtly attacked in the East he is being silently appropriated in the West. The most important illustration of this is Boethius' use of Proclus' three *Opuscula* and *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (and possibly *Hymns*) in the *Consolation of Philosophy* in working out his doctrine of providence and other details of cosmology. Another illustration – albeit a less certain one – is Martianus Capella's possible use of Proclus' commentary on the *Chaldaean Oracles* in connection with the "twice-beyond" deity and the "flower of the soul."

Turning to the medieval *Byzantine tradition* in particular, we should note that Proclus' writings were continuously available in Greek, apart from certain inevitable losses resulting from the passage of time and occasional wanton destruction by hostile religious authorities, from late antiquity down to the Turkish conquest. L. G. Westerink has discovered much evidence regarding the early manuscript transmission of Neoplatonic works including those of Proclus, others have shown the extent of the knowledge of Proclus on the part of Michael Psellos and of several generations of thinkers influenced by Psellos – whether or not one endorses Podskalsky's notion of an actual *Proklos-Renaissance* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries⁵ – and others have drawn attention to the editorial activity of George Pachymeres in the late Byzantine period. From these researches it has become clear that "Proclus" was seen as a kind of *bête-noire* of philosophical secularism by the orthodox religious. Evidence of this attitude can be found in documentation regarding the trials of John Italos and Eustratios of Nicaea, in George

⁴ See Lang and Macro (2001). ⁵ See Podskalsky (1976).

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Tornikes' funeral oration for Anna Komnena, and in the literature generated by the controversies surrounding Hesychasm – especially the writings of Gregory Palamas, Barlaam of Calabria, and Nikephoros Gregoras – these controversies being echoed in the dispute between George Scholarios and George Gemistos Plethon.

In the medieval *Latin tradition*, Proclus' writings were more of a rarity because any diffusion of his works depended on translation. However, from the middle of the thirteenth century and in the wake of the Arabic and Greek translation movements of the previous century which had brought Aristotle and his commentators into circulation in the West, translators of Plato and Proclus came forward in the persons of William of Moerbeke, Ambrogio Traversari, Pietro Balbi, and George of Trebizond – the latter two responding to commissions by Nicholas of Cusa – and this tradition continued into the Renaissance with Marsilio Ficino and Francesco Patrizi da Cherso. The landmarks in the diffusion of Proclus' philosophy resulting from their translations are undoubtedly Thomas Aquinas' discovery of the dependence of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Book of Causes* upon Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, the use of Proclus in forging a kind of Platonic-Aristotelian synthesis in the work of Henry Bate of Mechelen (Malines), the work of thinkers in the German Dominican tradition such as Dietrich of Freiberg and Berthold of Moosburg, for whom Platonic thought as epitomized by Proclus begins to be elevated above Aristotle, and finally Nicholas of Cusa's *marginalia* on Proclus' texts and original works influenced by Proclus from *On Conjectures* onwards.

Of course, one has to recall that the medieval Byzantine and Latin worlds were not completely isolated from one another. Nicholas of Cusa reports that he achieved his great insight into the "coincidence of opposites" (*coincidentia oppositorum*) during a sea voyage back from Constantinople, and George Gemistos Plethon's presence in the Byzantine delegation at the Council of Florence-Ferrara was said to have given Cosimo de' Medici the idea of founding a kind of Florentine "Academy." The transmission of Proclus' ideas in particular in Eustratios of Nicaea's *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, books I and VI, which was translated from its original Greek into Latin, and in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, which was translated from the original Latin into Greek, may be cited as striking examples of cross-fertilization between the Byzantine and Latin traditions.

In connection with each of the five headings under which I have suggested that the features of the assimilation of Proclus' philosophy may be grouped,⁶ something should be said – as applicable – about the late ancient,

⁶ See p. 2.

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the medieval Greek, the medieval Latin, and the Renaissance versions of “Proclus.” In accordance with the current state of scholarship, or at least with the present writer’s knowledge, these remarks may be considered as sometimes more and sometimes less definitive.

(a) The reading of Proclus in conjunction with Syrianus and Damascius

The intellectual relations of Proclus to Syrianus, who preceded him in the ancient Athenian school of Platonism, and to Damascius, who followed him in that school, are of radically different types. There is broad agreement between the teachings of Syrianus and Proclus, the former being cited reverently as “my teacher” (ὁ ἡμέτερος καθηγμεών) by the latter. Any differences between the two philosophers that are apparent to us stem largely from the fact that Syrianus is represented mainly by his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics* whereas Proclus is known to us mostly through commentaries on Plato and original treatises.⁷ The relations between Damascius and Proclus are, however, extremely complex in ranging between broad agreement and outright critique.⁸ In his *On First Principles* and *Commentary on the Parmenides*, Damascius on the one hand follows Syrianus and Proclus in maintaining the doctrine of a hierarchy of hypostases consisting of the One, Intellect, Soul, Body, and Matter held in place by the threefold causality of remaining, procession, and reversion. He also follows his predecessors in preserving the exegetical system based on the harmonization of Plato with the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the Orphic poetry together with a belief in the consummation of philosophy through theurgic ritual. On the other hand, Damascius exploits certain internal tensions within the metaphysical approach of Syrianus and Proclus by using an *aporetic* method in order to introduce surreptitiously doctrines that are novel to the Athenian School. These include a more comprehensive interpretation of the nine hypotheses of Plato’s *Parmenides*, the notion of an “Ineffable” prior to the One in connection with which he appeals to the authority of Iamblichus, and the notion of the partial soul as becoming temporal even in substance.

A reading of Proclus together with Damascius is characteristic of the Christian theological writings circulating under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite at the end of antiquity. Although the existence of textual parallels between this *pseudo-Dionysius’ On Divine Names* and the three *Opuscula* of Proclus became part of the case for the definitive dating of the

⁷ The extant fragments of Syrianus’ most important commentaries on Plato are now conveniently accessible in Klitenic Wear (2011).

⁸ On Damascius see the chapter by S. Gersh in the present volume.

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Corpus Dionysianum to the fifth to sixth centuries made by nineteenth-century scholars, and although numerous further “liens objectifs” between the two writers – as H.-D. Saffrey has called them⁹ – have been disclosed since then, it remains true that certain doctrines of central importance to the Dionysian theology such as the more extreme variety of apophaticism emerging in the final chapter of *On Mystical Theology*, where the Trinity is elevated negatively above both being and non-being, are closer to Damascius’ than to Proclus’ mode of thinking. Now, it is true that in the writings of medieval Byzantine intellectuals Proclus tends to reappear either on his own as the author of the *Elements of Theology* or else in mere lists of names that reveal very little in a doctrinal sense. However, a case of Proclus appearing together with Syrianus in which the latter takes on an independent role can be found in Barlaam of Calabria’s *Solutiones ad Georgium Lapithen*. Here, the discussion turns to the nature of demonstration and illuminative knowledge, and Syrianus’ *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics* is the definite albeit unacknowledged source. A case of Proclus together with Damascius according an independent role to the latter occurs in a letter of Cardinal Bessarion to George Gemistos Plethon which mentions both of the ancient philosophers by name. The issue here is the relation between “self-constituted” (αὐθυπόστατα) principles and the First Cause, and the association of this notion with the highest intelligibles follows Damascius rather than Proclus. In the Renaissance, Proclus and Damascius are equally important sources for Francesco Patrizi, whose *Nova de universis philosophia* envisions a hierarchy of first principles in which Proclus’ notion of horizontal and vertical series is combined with Damascius’ emphasis on the primary role of the “One-All.” It is to be noted that Patrizi, instead of considering the deconstructive elements in Damascius’ project, adopts a primarily harmonizing view of the relation between the two ancient thinkers.

(b) *The concealment of Proclus’ doctrine in the writings of
“Dionysius the Areopagite”*

It was definitively established during the nineteenth century that the Christian theologian who adopted the name of St. Paul’s first Athenian convert “Dionysius the Areopagite” as his pseudonym was actually a writer of the fifth to sixth centuries whose doctrine has affinities with those of Proclus and Damascius. It is also well known that the writings of pseudo-Dionysius

⁹ See Saffrey (1966) and Saffrey (1979).

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were suspect in the minds of Christian authorities from the earliest days of their circulation, although they had come to be generally accepted thanks to the efforts of such figures as John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor. Subsequently, this perceived apostolic status gave the *Corpus Dionysianum* the highest theological authority in the Christian churches of both East and West, this authority not being shaken until Valla and Erasmus showed that the style of theological language and the liturgical practices described were quite inconsistent with the early Church.¹⁰

Given that the author of the *Corpus Dionysianum* for obvious reasons concealed his debt to Proclus by not mentioning the latter's name – although there are some veiled allusions to a teacher called “Hierotheos” who bears a certain resemblance to the Proclus whom we know – medieval Byzantine or Latin readers were placed in a peculiar position regarding the question of how to interpret these texts. The answer to this question depended on whether they also knew Proclus or did not also know Proclus. Medieval Latin writers before the late thirteenth century, when writings of Proclus first became available in Latin translation, simply read Dionysius without having to consider any relation to Proclus. On the other hand, medieval Byzantine writers or medieval Latin writers from the late thirteenth century onwards with some access to Proclus' works had to adopt specific hermeneutical strategies. These involved placing Proclus chronologically after Dionysius and accusing him of plagiarizing and distorting the latter and sometimes also explaining the non-appearance of Dionysius' writings before the late fifth century by saying that the pagan Platonists concealed these works after copying them. This explanation appears first at the end of antiquity in the prologue to the *Corpus Dionysianum* by John of Scythopolis, although the most relevant passage is possibly an interpolation by Philoponus. Subsequent Byzantine writings either treat Dionysius as expounding a spiritually superior version of doctrines that were later stated in a more dialectical form by Proclus – for example, Michael Psellos' *About Theology and the Distinction among the Greeks' Doctrines*, the Aristotelian commentaries of Eustratios of Nicaea, and George Pachymeres' preface to the works of Dionysius – or else establish a radical opposition between the Christian truth of Dionysius and the pagan distortion by Proclus – for example, Nicholas of Methone's *Explanation of Proclus' Elements of Theology* and Gregory Palamas' *150 Chapters*. Latin writings of the later Middle Ages and Renaissance also exemplify these contrasting strategies for dealing with the relation between Dionysius and Proclus, Nicholas of

¹⁰ On pseudo-Dionysius see the chapter by J. M. Dillon in the present volume.

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Cusa and Marsilio Ficino stressing the agreement and Thomas Aquinas the disagreements between the two authors.

In actual fact, Dionysius' appropriation of Proclus' teachings is combined with significant transformations of the latter in accordance with the requirements of a Christian theology that also owes a debt to the Cappadocian Fathers. Among these doctrinal modifications are the transformation of Proclus' multiplicity of self-sufficient henads into a multiplicity of divine names, the heightened apophaticism of *On Mystical Theology*, and the substitution of Christian sacraments for the natural symbols of Proclus' theurgy. However, despite these clear distinctions between the two thinkers, Byzantine scholars were always operating at a disadvantage because of their faulty understanding of Dionysius' historical position. For example, much confusion regarding the question of precisely which doctrines belong to Proclus and which to Dionysius is characteristic of the later Hesychast controversy and especially of the exchanges between Nikephoros Gregoras and Gregory Palamas, given that the distinction between the uncreated and unknowable essence of God and the divine energies that can be known or participated, which was so important for the orthodox theology of the day, actually has no real basis in either Dionysius or Proclus.

(c) *The exploitation of Proclus' ideas in the context of
Aristotelian commentary*

Among the major questions that arise in ancient Aristotelian commentaries and continue in their medieval Greek and Latin counterparts, of particular importance are those of establishing the right relation between Aristotle's and Plato's doctrines concerning Forms and universals and of properly understanding the nature of causality in Aristotelianism and Platonism. Proclus is often brought into these discussions as a kind of paradigm of Platonic thinking, recourse to his doctrine being either acknowledged by the mention of his name or indicated by the adoption of technical terminology peculiar to his work. This process of assimilation begins in late antiquity with such works as Ammonius' commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories* and *On Interpretation*.

In the medieval Byzantine world, the *Commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics, Books I and VI* and the *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics* by Eustratios of Nicaea provide some of the most important examples.¹¹ In

¹¹ Among Byzantine Aristotelian commentators, Michael of Ephesus also derives material from Proclus albeit with less further philosophical elaboration than in the case of Eustratios.

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quoting or utilizing Proclus in his commentary on *Ethics I*, Eustratios mounts an important defense of Plato's ideal world in the face of Aristotle's critique in which he argues that if all things desire the Good, the Good itself must be above Being. Similarly in commenting on *Ethics VI*, he establishes a clear distinction between Aristotle's abstracted ideas and Platonic transcendent Ideas and endorses the latter understood as the contents of Intellect in the manner of Proclus.¹² In quoting or utilizing Proclus in commenting on both books of the *Ethics*, Eustratios goes to great lengths in maintaining the obviously un-Aristotelian distinction between the discursive thinking of Soul and the non-discursive activity of Intellect in which the discursive thinking engages in a kind of circular dance around a center represented by non-discursive thinking. In connection with the discussions of the theory of Forms, Eustratios is dependent on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, whereas in connection with that of non-discursive and discursive reason he relies on both the *Elements of Theology* and the *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*. Of course, Eustratios retains the standpoint of a Christian commentator, sometimes quoting Proclus without issuing a value judgment, sometimes contrasting his view with the Christian one, and sometimes silently assimilating Proclus to his own position. When bringing Proclus into a comparative relation with Christian authorities, Gregory Nazianzen is undoubtedly his favorite point of reference, although in one passage the doctrine of the "flower of the intellect" (νοῦ ἄνθος) is transferred directly from Proclus to Dionysius. Eustratios' *Commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics* together with their tapestry of Proclean borrowings represent some of the most philosophically sophisticated writing ever to emerge from Byzantium, their importance for the future history of philosophy being increased by their translation into Latin by Robert Grosseteste in the early thirteenth century and their subsequent use as a counterweight to Aristotelianism especially by members of the German Albertist school.

In the Renaissance we can find another striking example of Proclus' doctrines being transmitted by way of Aristotelian commentary in Francesco Patrizi's notion that space is equivalent to light and that both are bodies.¹³ Space is equivalent to light because the former and the latter share the three properties of being impassive, extended in interval, and penetrable. This space/light is a body which is, on the one hand, immaterial – because it has the least on a scale of degrees of bulk – and, on the other hand, universal – because it contains the whole cosmos. The argument here is based on a

¹² On Eustratios see the chapter by M. Trizio in the present volume.

¹³ For a good discussion of this question see Deitz (1999).

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doctrine that is seemingly peculiar to Proclus, being reported in one of Patrizi's favorite texts: the *Corollarium de loco* of Simplicius' *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*.

(d) *The loss or suppression of Proclus' works*

Among the writings of Proclus, the *Commentary on the Chaldaean Oracles* and the *Commentary on Plotinus' Enneads* are two works whose loss is particularly to be regretted. The importance for Proclus of the *Commentary on the Chaldaean Oracles* is underlined by the report of Proclus' successor and biographer Marinus that his master wanted to leave only the *Timaeus* and the *Chaldaean Oracles* in circulation among ancient books and that he had composed his own commentary on the oracles in the wake of Syrianus' writings on the same topic. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Proclus' commentary in a complete or abridged form was still available in the time of Michael Psellos, who used it in connection with his own project of reconciling the oracles with Christian dogma,¹⁴ and that, although numerous oracles continue to be cited by later Byzantine authors such as Nikephoros Gregoras in his commentary on Synesius, whatever remained of the work was probably incinerated by the religious authorities at the time of John Italos' condemnation. Eventually, a completely new commentary was put together by George Gemistos Plethon – which was in its turn the source of the oracular texts inserted by Marsilio Ficino into his own *Platonic Theology* – although there is evidence of material from Proclus making its way into the Plethonian commentary via Psellos' notes. The differences between Plethon's and the earlier treatment are that Plethon attributes the *Oracles* to “*magi* in the tradition of Zoroaster” rather than to the two Julians mentioned in the *Souda*, removes the Christianizing tendencies of Psellos' version, and maintains the relative simplicity of the original *Oracles'* hypostatic structure in contrast to the increasing ramifications of the Proclus–Psellos version. In addition to the *Chaldaean Oracles*, Proclus also held Plotinus in the highest esteem, quoting him frequently and applying to him the epithets of “the divine” (ὁ θεῖος) or “the most divine” (ὁ θεϊότατος). It was shown convincingly by L. G. Westerink that Psellos incorporated phrases taken from *Enneads* I together with short glosses couched in Proclean terminology into his theological treatise *De omnifaria doctrina* and that a commentary by Proclus on all or part of the *Enneads* must therefore have been still extant in his day. There is also some evidence

¹⁴ On this point see the chapter by D. O'Meara in the present volume.