Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An important implication of this approach is that the quality of a philosophical system is not necessarily proportional to its logical sophistication. A good illustration of this is the contrast between Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic systems. As we shall see in ch. 1.1, the former are generally far vaguer and less logically coherent than the latter, and we might be tempted to see this as a sign of their inferiority. Historically, however, such a verdict would be unjust. If we regard each worldview as an instance of a Wittgensteinian language game, the criterion of its success will lie in its functionality rather than its logical coherence. The game is good if playing it seems meaningful enough, i.e. if it provides a convincing framework for orienting oneself in the world. Philosophical games certainly do try to present this framework as logically coherent, yet every such coherence has its limits. How far they extend, depends on the nature of the game in question. If one worldview (e.g. the Neoplatonic one) shifts its limits far beyond that of their predecessors, it attests to its different preferences, not necessarily to its philosophical superiority.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER I

Historical background

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

I.I NEOPLATONISM AND THE PLATONIC TRADITION

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

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

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

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

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

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