



Hermes brings our intellectual endowments to light, fills everything with divine reason, moves our souls towards Nous, awakens us as it were from our heavy slumber, through our searching turns us back upon ourselves, through our birthpangs perfects us, and through the discovery of pure Nous leads us to the blessed life.

PROCLUS

The emergence of an increasingly powerful hierarchy in the expanding Christian movement threatened the political, social and philosophical foundations of the ancient Mediterranean world. During the second, third and fourth centuries of this era, church hierarchy came to justify itself as a theocracy without universal or equal access to the Divine. The attendant doctrine of salvation supported the subordination of women in society and their exclusion from religious office, where once they had been the backbone of Roman civil institutions and guardians of its collective religious life. The Graeco-Roman philosophical traditions, which advocated freedom of thought on the basis of the equality of human beings as seekers of divine wisdom, felt the growing pressure of dogmatism based upon the assumed identity of the ecclesiastical structure with a spiritual hierarchy.

The neo-Platonic movement founded by Ammonius Saccas, clearly articulated by Plotinus and disseminated by Porphyry, was tied to an understanding of the theurgic significance of classical myths and ceremonies and of the universal truths of the Mysteries. The emperor Julian attempted to refound the theology implied by the Mysteries, but his death in A.D. 363 after only three years' reign marked the end of all such attempts. Nevertheless, the Platonic Academies of Athens and Alexandria were inspired to new heights of philosophical activity by the neo-Platonists.

When the fifth century dawned, Plutarch, the first Platonic successor to advance the tradition of Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus, occupied the chair of the Athenian Academy. Hypatia taught the same tradition as successor in Alexandria until her murder in 415 by Christian monks. Hierocles, an Alexandrian trained in Athens under Plutarch, returned to his home to take up the chair, and the Alexandrian Academy remained neo-Platonic until its closure after the end of its Athenian parent. Plutarch thus succeeded in revitalizing both centres of philosophy, making them bright beacons of universal teachings in a rapidly darkening world. His great disciple, Proclus, was destined to become the apotheosis of the tradition.

Proclus was born in A.D. 410 at Constantinople to Patricius and Marcella, whose home was Lycia. According to Marinos of Neapolis (Nablus), the goddess Poliouchos, protecting spirit of the city, was present at his birth. Soon afterwards his family returned to Xanthus in Lycia, a town dedicated to Apollo. Marinos held that Proclus was favoured by the gods, as indicated even when he was young. Proclus fell seriously ill and was given up for lost. Suddenly a beautiful child appeared over his bed and, proclaiming himself to be Telesphorus, the messenger of Asclepius and spirit of recovery, he touched Proclus' head and cured him within moments. Except for two occasions, Proclus did not fall ill again in his life. After attending a grammar school in Lycia for a short period, he went to study in Alexandria, where his delicate perceptual sensitivity, graceful manner and pristine moral integrity charmed his teachers. There he studied under Leonas, an Isaurian philosopher who took Proclus into his own family, and Orion, an

Egyptian descendant of an ancient sacerdotal caste. Under Roman teachers he mastered rhetoric and was soon thought worthy to teach it.

Theodor, the Alexandrian governor, persuaded Leonas to undertake a diplomatic mission to Constantinople, and Leonas invited Proclus to join him. On his arrival the goddess of his birth came to him, by what means no one knows, and counselled him to study philosophy and attend the Athenian schools. When he returned to Alexandria he immediately undertook the study of philosophy exclusively, learning Aristotle from Olympiodorus and mathematics from Hero. Olympiodorus offered Proclus his daughter in marriage, but while admiring her attainments in personal dignity and philosophy, he chose to remain unmarried throughout his life. Ulpian of Gaza, a fellow disciple, recalled that Olympiodorus spoke very rapidly and indistinctly, making his complex discourses difficult to understand. Once when an especially long lecture had just been concluded and students complained that they had not grasped it, Proclus repeated it verbatim without missing a point. He soon exhausted his teachers' resources and found himself no longer satisfied with their explanations of classical texts, and so he decided to obey the injunction of the goddess and move to Athens.

Nicholaos of Lycia greeted Proclus upon his arrival in the Piraeus and escorted him into Athens. Once in the city, Proclus urgently requested water to quench his severe thirst. Nicholaos fetched some from the shrine dedicated to Socrates, only later seeing the symbolism of Proclus' first drink in Attica. When they came to the fortified gate leading to the Acropolis, Proclus asked permission to go inside. The gatekeeper responded, "If you had not come, I would have closed the gates", and this remark became famous as an omen referring to the fate of the Athenian Academy. Though invited by several teachers of rhetoric to join them, Proclus turned directly to the study of philosophy. He heard a lecture given by Syrianus and was soon his student. Upon taking Proclus into his home, Syrianus introduced him to the revered Plutarch, who was so impressed with the youth of twenty that he returned from semi-retirement to instruct him personally. Soon Proclus was invited into Plutarch's home and there treated as his own son. When Plutarch died two years later, Proclus returned to live with Syrianus, the new successor, who saw clearly that Proclus would follow him in the chair of the Academy.

Under the guidance of Syrianus, Proclus came to an immediate vision of the mysteries found in Plato's thought, "when the eyes of the soul are no longer obscured as by a mist, and reason, freed from sensation, may cast firm glances into the distance". By his twenty-third year, Proclus had composed a compendium of all he had learnt and written profound commentaries including one on the *Timaeus*. Finding his own thinking too abstract for immediate political application, and yet believing from his reading of the *Republic* and the *Laws* that the philosopher should not abandon civic participation, he advised and guided Archiadas, the grandson of Plutarch and disciple of Syrianus, in a noble political life. Archiadas came to be called "the most pious" and retained his close friendship with Proclus until the latter's death. Proclus' will gave all he had to the support of Archiadas, and, when he died, to the cities of Xanthus and Athens. Proclus' own integrity required him to speak out on some issues directly, and once he was forced to leave the city for a year. During that time he studied the ancient religious institutions of the Lydians, learning their doctrines and reforming their rituals in light of his philosophical understanding of their meaning.

Back in Athens, he encouraged those devoted to writing, securing financial support from the magistrates. But he expected those he helped to use his assistance. If they became lax, they were severely reprimanded. Once he took the successor's chair, his students and friends as well as their families came under his kind care in every detail. He came to be called "the great father". His own time was spent in teaching, writing and honouring the gods. His theurgic skill often manifested itself in his selection of remedies for ailments that left the physicians of the day helpless. He fasted on days sacred to the Egyptians, followed the rites of the Phrygian-Roman *Magna Mater* and wrote hymns to Greek deities as well as the Gaza Mars,

Asklepios Leontouchos of Ascalon, Thyandrides, the Arabian god of celibacy, and Isis of Philae. He held that the true philosopher "should watch over the salvation of not only a city, nor over the national customs of a few people, but that he ought to be the common hierophant of the whole world". In personal and public conduct Proclus became the example of the philosophical life. Marinus wrote that:

The soul of this blessed man went on gathering itself, and concentrating itself, separating itself, so to speak, from its body, during the very time when it seemed contained in him. This soul possessed wisdom, no longer only the political wisdom which consists in good behaviour in the realm of contingent things, but thought in itself, pure thought, which consists in return into oneself, and in refusal to unite with the body to acquire conjectural knowledge.

Proclus experienced a number of dreams and visions. On several occasions the deity appeared to him when he visited a temple for the first time, and once the Dioscuri appeared to him on the road. One dream revealed that he belonged to the Hermaic chain of beings who dwell in wisdom, and another convinced him that he was the reincarnation of the soul of the Pythagorean Nicomachus. Given to meditation, an epoptic initiate who had seen Hecate in her luminous form, Proclus understood theurgy in its deepest philosophical aspects. He wrote on the Chaldean Oracles and studied the Orphic writings. When he began to decline after his seventieth year, he returned to lecturing for the sake of his student Hegias, to whom he confided his manuscripts, and undertook to write notes on the Orphic hymns for the benefit of Marinus. He died in his seventy-fifth year, on April 17, 485. Astrologers noted that solar eclipses occurred exactly one year before and one year after his death. In accordance with the request of Syrianus, Proclus had built a joint tomb to hold them both. There his followers put away their master's mortal raiment and inscribed the verses he himself had written:

I, Proclus, am of Lycian origin;
Syrianus here nourished me with his lessons,
to succeed him as teacher;
This same tomb has received our bodies,
May our two souls find the same abode!

Marinus of Neopolis succeeded the chair and devoted himself to writing the *Life of Proclus*. He in turn became a teacher to Damascius, the last of the successors who headed the Academy when it was closed by order of the emperor Justinian in A.D. 532.

Proclus stood out in the later Academy as an original thinker who was an equally able systematizer. While elaborating teachings implicit in Plotinus and Porphyry and composing profound interpretations of Plato, he expressed a number of principles and perspectives not found elsewhere. His mathematically systematic *Elements of Theology* and *Platonic Theology* survive, along with commentaries on *Parmenides*, *Timaeus*, *Republic*, *Cratylus* and *First Alcibiades*, as well as shorter works on fate, providence, the existence of evils and the eternity of the world.

Proclus taught that Plato's Divided Line analogy, in referring to the levels of knowing and levels of being or becoming, must also refer to levels of consciousness. Dialectic, when rooted in intellection and expanded to include every aspect of one's conduct, so that the intelligence discerned the ethics and manifested it in morality, leads the individual towards apprehension of the Good, *Agathon*. But dialectic is only the reflection in individual consciousness of the supracosmic processes of emanation, which is the exercise of the intelligence behind all manifestation. Every level of being corresponds to a level of consciousness independent of any individual consciousness, the radical of which is a consciousness beyond all possible thought and yet containing the whole universe as a unity within itself. Proclus' objective idealism led him to assert that there is a state higher than gnosis. If knowledge is the result of

dialectic, what is direct awareness of the source of dialectic to be called? Proclus chose *pistis*, belief, because he came to see that the lowest in a sense reflects the highest, just as the chaos of utter heterogeneity is as indescribable as the absolute unity of the totally homogeneous. Thus there is a belief beyond knowledge which deals with the loftiest metaphysical abstractions without which there could be no dialectic or science of knowledge.

The crucial issue of the One and the many can only be resolved by recognizing that the many participate in the One in some sense. If there were no unity in multiplicity, then the many would consist of parts that are nothing in themselves, and hence would collectively form nothing, or of parts which are themselves composed of parts *ad infinitum*, an incomprehensible doctrine. The many, every multitude, is thus both one and not one, and so derives its existence from the One, *to auto en*. Since the reality of the many at every level is a derivative of that original One, its reality is always less than its source. That which emanates is superior in nature to that which is emanated, and so there exists a hierarchy of being. This ontological order is also the order of causation, which is necessary if knowledge is to be possible. Insofar as change is possible, there must be motion, and motion is the order of change in relation to the One. This means that all beings strive after the Good. Just as the One, in respect to intellection or pure consciousness, is Thought itself and thus not comprehended by any thoughts, all of which are derived from it, so in respect to being, the Good is the primal cause. Hence, taken simply, the One is the Good.

While visible actions do not reveal the whole nature of the actor, since visible actions are only a part of the act, it is inconceivable that the essential nature of a being could be separated from act. Just as there must be a first mover and that which is moved by another, there must be between them a self-moved. That which can turn back upon itself is separable from body, since that which is inseparable from body could not turn back upon itself because of its bonds with what lies outside itself in space. That which can turn back upon itself is inseparable from body in its essential nature, and therefore also in action. Hence it is incorporeal. Therefore,

Beyond all bodies is the soul's essence; beyond all souls, the intellectual principle;
and beyond all intellective substances, the One.

There is the One; the intellectual principle is the unmoved mover; the soul is self-moving; and the body is moved by another.

The triadic architectonic implicit in Platonic cosmology and psychology, clearly stated in Plotinian ontology, is elaborated in Proclus' conception of causation. Every distinguishable chain of causation has a unity, *monas*, which is the cause of all that is hierarchically ordered under it. Ordered after the One are henads, *henades*, 'ones'; after the first intellect, minds, *noes*; after the first soul, souls; and after Nature as a whole, individual natures. In each of these the one before all cannot be participated in, being beyond all that has it as their source, but there is also the one in all which is present in each under that one. Since the Good causes the existence of everything, the most perfect in its kind produces as many of its kind as possible, beginning with the more perfect, passing to the less perfect until that which is furthest from perfection produces nothing. Each thing produced is thus at once like and unlike that which produced it, and so the original mystery of the One and the many is reflected throughout being. Return to the source is the process of becoming more like the cause, for return is union and increasing resemblance unites. This process is cyclic, remaining within the cause, going forth and being separated from it and returning to it as a striving for its own good.

Only that which is self-moving can be self-subsistent, for it alone is incorruptible, being the cause of its own continuity. Further, what is true within any plane of being, and therefore any level of consciousness, is true between planes of being. The Good stands in causal relation to intellect, the intellect in causal relation to soul. The Good is thus the cause of whatever the intellect is the cause of, and the intellect is the cause of whatever is caused by soul. In the order of causality, therefore, the universal precedes the

particular. First there is being, then life, then living being followed by particular living beings. Matter, being the extreme from the One, is directly caused by it, for insofar as it can be separated from living beings, it falls outside every other causal chain. In this sense, the lowest reflects the action of the highest. What is eternal is a simultaneous whole, whatever is infinite is infinite in potency. Both terms are relative, being applicable to something only in respect to what is below it, but not to what is above. Being infinite in respect to the members of the causal chain, the primal cause transcends it. Hence there must be transition stages which connect the transcendent with the particulars. Within intellect there must be the descending triad of being, life and mind, linking intellect with being above it and with the minds dependent upon it. Similarly, since eternity and time cannot share in each other, there must be that which is eternal in essential nature and temporal in act. Thus the whole grand hierarchy of existence is linked. But only the highest terms of any causal chain are linked to the unitary principle in the chain above. Thus only the highest minds are linked to a divine unity, only the souls of greatest intellection participate in mind and only the most perfect corporeal natures have a soul present to them.

Above the divine unities or henads is the One, which being the Good is *Theos*, God. The divine henads are thus *theoi*, gods. The One, which is divinity, cannot be known by anything that comes after it, but since all things are linked by participation in that which is superior to it, save for the One which is "imparticiple", even the One is indirectly intimated through the divine henads by participation in them, and the order of divine henads is graduated from the more universal to the more particular. Through the linkages of the causal chain, the divine henad communicates its power (since all being is reality and reality is power) to mind, and mind makes it present to soul, and soul can give a resonance of its own to body. Hence the gods are present in all things and at every level, but that presence is obscured by the limiting natures of things.

Applying this metaphysical and logical schema to knowledge, Proclus holds that intellect has only itself as object of its thought, and so mind can turn back upon itself. Mind therefore knows that it thinks. Mind constitutes what is derived from it by thinking it.

Every intelligence gives rise to its consequents by the act of intellection. Its creative activity is thinking, and its thought is creation.

Ideas, the Platonic forms, have their own existence, but are also contained in minds. The number of minds is finite, as required by the principle of unity, but each mind is a whole, at once united with other minds and distinguishable from them. Since thinking is creative, minds that contain more universal ideas exercise greater causal efficacy than minds with more particular ideas. Thus at once the divine henads directly form the providential order of the world, while individual minds forge their own destinies. There are grades of souls corresponding to levels of minds, and since they are able to turn back upon themselves, are at once linked to body while being indestructible. Every soul may therefore descend into incarnation repeatedly, depending on its drawing nearer the Divine or falling away from it.

The vehicle of every particular soul descends by the addition of vestures increasingly material; and ascends in company with the soul through divestment of all that is material and recovery of its proper form, after the analogy of the soul which makes use of it: for the soul descends by the acquisition of irrational principles of life; and ascends by putting off all those faculties tending to temporal process with which it was invested in its descent, and becoming clean and bare of all such faculties as serve the uses of the process.

For Proclus, knowledge cannot be achieved except by recognizing the metaphysical principles upon which it rests, and those metaphysical principles have ethical correlates. If all things strive towards the Good, knowledge goes hand in hand with right conduct or the cultivation of the virtues, which are, in

truth, levels of reality and therefore powers. Evil is always incidental to the pursuit of some good, a limitation of the process. Matter alone is not the cause of evil, for matter does not explain the differences in inclinations among incarnated souls. The reality of the soul is not affected by incarnation, but its ability to express its essential nature is. Thus discipline is required to escape the bonds of suffering or privation of soul expression. Souls are not incarnated in their circumstances by chance, but through their actions in previous lives. Thus each soul, in receiving what it deserves, so to speak, also receives exactly what it needs. What men call fate is only the destinies of souls witnessed by those who do not understand their causes.

Since the universe of mental realities is always greater than the universe of physical realities, the gods are powers of hierarchies taking part in the providential order. These powers are beyond the human being who does not develop the virtues which allow him to participate knowingly in the hierarchies. Love is the power which draws man towards the Divine and also irradiates the world, encouraging all in the effort which arises from the impulsion, the principle of unity, within them. Love is thus an action, not a passion, the end of which is justice, the condition in which unity, the fulfilment of all moral virtue, is possible.

Every divisible thing is an obstacle to our returning upon ourselves, every formed thing disturbs our formless knowledge, and every feeling is an impediment to passionless activity. Consequently when we remove these hindrances we are able to know by understanding itself the ideas that it has, and then we become knowers in actuality, that is, producers of genuine knowledge. But so long as we remain in bondage, with the eye of the mind closed, we shall never attain the perfection to which we are adapted.