

Philosophical Studies
Methodological Prolegomena to Proclus
Reference Text “About Plato’s Theology” (I, 5.6-8.15)

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RÉSUMÉ

Proclus, un prééminent philosophe néoplatonicien, a vécu au V^{ème} siècle après J.-C. (410-485). Né à Constantinople et ayant reçu son éducation à Alexandrie, Proclus a été un des derniers scholarques de l’Académie platonicienne avant sa clôture, en 529, par l’empereur Justinien et un des derniers grands philosophes (surnommé le Grand) de l’Antiquité. Parmi ses oeuvres, une des plus importantes est son *In Platonis Theologiae* ainsi que ses commentaires sur le *Timée*, la *République* et le *Parménide* de Platon et sur le *Premier Livre* d’Euclide et le *Tétrabiblos* de Ptolémée. L’article qui suit entreprend d’élucider, à partir de leur expression linguistique, quelques concepts fondamentaux du système hiérarchique de Proclus.

ABSTRACT

Proclus was a prominent Neo-Platonic philosopher who lived in the Vth century AD (410-485). Born in Constantinople and educated in Alexandria, Proclus was one of the last leaders of the Platonic Academy before its closing, in 529, by Justinian and one of the last philosophers of Antiquity. Among his works, noteworthy is his *About Plato’s Theology* (*Peri tês kata Platôna thelogias*) along with his commentaries on Plato’s *Timaeus*, *Republic* and *Parmenides* as well as his comments on Euclid’s *First Book* and Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos*. This brief article endeavours to explain, through the “appropriate linguistic material”, a few key concepts of Proclus’s hierarchical system as it relates to the “Platonic theology”.

One of the main characteristics of Proclus’s philosophical system is that it is based upon strictly limited and multiple hierarchical systems joined in a form of a rational and organic consequence. In other words, there is an invariable distinction in his texts between something superior and something inferior; between something perfect and something imperfect; between something that remains unalterable

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and something that alters. The factor of superiority is therefore predominant, since every ontological level - except the first one that is utterly transcendent - is inferior to the one preceding and superior to the one following. This characteristic is mainly noticed in his texts treating *The Metaphysics*. In almost every case the neoplatonic philosopher sets off his reasoning by describing a superior entity compared to some others. This entity is presented, initially at least, as unalterable, unchangeable and undifferentiated, as far as its ontological quality is concerned. It is identical to itself. In the next analytical stage, another entity is introduced which is inferior to the previous one and stems from the previous entity as a result. This entity has gradually begun to demonstrate the development of differentiations.

This process of always introducing inferior entities is continued until a system consisting of first, middle and last part is completed and until are established the preconditions or laws according to which it is altered or degraded.¹ What should be pointed out is that Proclus uses the appropriate linguistic material as well. His texts are dominated by a general use of verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs, which are suggestive of the sequential alterations and subordinations. We highlight and analyze some linguistic or grammatical elements in the reference text. Specifically, we will focus on adjectives, as they accurately state the properties, comparisons, and relationships as well as the permanent or altering qualities. We believe that through the meanings, derived from adjectives, Proclus' theoretical orientation will be illuminated. In other words, the principles on which he founds a very intricate and multi-scaled system will be illuminated. With this in mind, we have selected all the adjectives which declare the superior situations mentioned above and we present them systematically, according to their mutual relevancy. Lastly, we point out that our research will not have the character of a random term choice and will not function as a sampling. The chosen terms can be enlisted in a common and unified theoretical context.

The adjectives to be examined are the following:

Superior (*kreittôn*), good (*agathoeidês*), supernatural-transcendent (*hyperphuês*), big (*megalos*), pure (*agnos*), tranquil (*atremês*), authentic

(*gnêsiôitatos*), unalloyed (*katharôitatos*), prime (*exairetos*), perfect (*teleiô-
tatos*), complete (*pantelês*), high (*hupsêlos*), excellent (*aristos*), veritable
(*alêthinos*), divine (*theios*).

These adjectives, in a preliminary stage, declare the very state of an entity. In other words, they declare what they are according to themselves only. In a second interpretative stage, they can function comparatively or superlatively as an entity is co-examined with others since they indirectly declare contradictions or distinctions. What is very interesting, though, is that the above adjectives do not refer exclusively to entities. Through them Proclus describes and evaluates various past philosophical systems or philosophical methods through which entities are approached gnoseologically. Therefore, adjectives can function at both the ontological and gnoseological level. This is to be expected because an entity should, according to the status it has on the ontological system, be approached gnoseologically in an analogous way.² This analogy forms an inviolate scientific rule for the neoplatonic philosopher. Through this rule, is also indicated the most appropriate philosophical system which we must use in our descriptions. We must also note that in many cases Proclus uses his adjectives in pairs for reasons defined by what he wishes each time to declare or by the emphasis he places on his meanings.

The cases of the hierarchical use of the adjectives we present are as follows:

1) “*Tên tôn kreittonôn agathoeidê boulêsin*” (5,8).

A reference is made here to superior gods, something that indirectly states that inferior gods exist as well. This is the well known metaphysical hierarchy of Proclus according to which inferior gods must exist in order to bring the superior gods in touch with the world of experience.³ Moreover, the fine quality of the superior gods is stressed by characterizing their wish as good. Good in the ultimate grade is the One, namely the superior source of Everything. Therefore, whatever is the One in essence attributes it as properties to the rest metaphysical entities which become, in this way, its special appearances.¹

2) *“Tên peri autôn tôn theiôn mustagôgian en agnô bathrô katharôs hidrumenên”* (5,17-18)

At this point, Proclus refers to the ontological and ethical clearance and indirectly contra-distinguishes it from the opposite situation. Noteworthy is the fact that he brings out a strict analogy between the ontological and the ethical level. In order to achieve approaching realities of divine character, of excellent and unchangeable nature, untouchable by any perishable essence, one must have been ethically purified and follow a mystic course. In other words, one should transcend any situation that connects him with the tangible and, according to Plato's tradition, the changeable entities as well as transcend the gnoseological means by which he approaches them. Consequently, ontological hierarchies define the ethical or the anthropological ones.⁵

3) *“Tôn hyperphuôn kai megalôn agathôn”* (5,11-12)

In this part of the text, both the metaphysical interpretation (version) of good and the range of its quality and quantity are being brought out. As a first characteristic Proclus declares that the source of every good is located in the metaphysical world; at the same time he indirectly implies that the goods are categorized as superempirical and empirical. The first category is beyond the possibilities of the human knowledge while the second one can be known. The use of the second adjective stems from the meaning of the first. The goods are characterized as great and thus are contra-distinguished from some small or smaller ones than these. Apparently, the superempirical ones are great and the empirical are small. Nevertheless, regardless of the hierarchies or the discriminations, the quality of good is a catholic reality.⁶

4) *“To gnêsiôtaton kai katharôtaton tês alêtheias phôs”* (7,1-2)

Here hierarchies refer to the gnoseological level. The superlative forms of the adjectives are used in order that the properties of truth be declared. Truth appears as an absolutely authentic situation of describing the reality. It is not mixed by various added elements that would alter it. It illuminates with its absolute clearance and is thus differentiated from untruth. If Proclus described untruth, he would also use superlative adjectives but in the exactly opposite meaning.⁷

5) “*Tôn atremôn phasmatôn ôn metalimbanousi hai tês eudaimonos kai makarias zôês gnêsiôs antechomenai psuchai*” (6,5-6).

Here Proclus refers to immutable metaphysical expressions. This statement concerns cases which move in a mystic area, an area which is not approached by strictly ontological criteria. Nevertheless, this area is not inaccessible for the human soul. If a soul moves in a pure way, it will be able to enjoy the felicity and the prosperity of divine situations. Indirectly but clearly stated: if there is no purity in the human innermost, the metaphysical area is unapproachable. In this way, souls are graded ethically or evaluated according to the way of their lives.”

6) “*Kai telos to ariston exomen tês en hêmin ôdinos ên echomen peri ta theia*” (8,12-13).

Here Proclus refers to the quality of the outcome or the integration of a procedure for meeting that the Divine has. It is emphasized again that the end, compared with the outset and the middle part, has superior characteristics. The procedure is a grievous course during which the individual is purified from his passions and from his imperfections (demerits). The final communication with the Divine is hierarchically superior both to the state of non-Communication and to the states during the procedure. Extensibly, the individual who communicates with the Divine is superior to the one who does not communicate and the one who is proceeding towards communication. In other words, it is a kind of ethical hierarchy which is defined both by the existential preparedness or by the personal integration of human beings and by the quality of a metaphysical entity with whom these human beings must communicate so that their existence and their life be meaningful.”

7) “*Hup’ Hêgemoni tô tôn kath’ hêmas teleôtatô*” (7,15-16).

Proclus uses this common expression when he refers to Plato, or to his teacher Syrianos. Here the point of the distinction among the philosophers is raised as far as the range of their work is concerned. Namely, we can use any philosopher but someone must function as the final yardstick in order to judge the accuracy of our views. The

epistemological commitment introduced is obvious. Since we have reached the conclusion that one philosopher holds the most eminent position among the others, we are obliged to follow him with no detours. Every contravention of this principle can lead to either errors or approximations of truth which are of an inferior level.¹⁰

8) *“To tês Platônîkês philosophias exaireton agathon”* (7,12-13).

Despite the fact that Proclus considers the Platonic philosophy the leading one, he distinguishes within its interior graded levels. He considers superior those included in the dialogue *Parmenides* which, according to Plato's estimations, describes the superior metaphysical realities. It is concerned with realities that surpass all the others and, consequently, can not coexist. We should therefore approach the supreme good of Plato's philosophy by using our most authentic gnoseological powers.¹¹

9) *“Eis to panteles kai hupsêlon telos tês Platônîkês theôrias”* (7,20-21).

In this point too, there is a reference to the hierarchy existing in the interior of the actual (very) Platonic philosophy. Proclus most probably means that Plato had gone through various evolutionary stages in order to be directed to the final expression of his thought. These stages are evaluated according to their results which have conquered the utmost grade of superiority and are, by this time, incomparable to anything proceeding. Namely, it refers to what is theoretically most creditable, but it also implies our need to comprehend the sequence of specific methodological procedures. Therefore, the reference to integration or to a conclusion presupposes the existence of primary and intermediate stage.¹²

10) *“Tôn alêthinôn teletôn, has telountai chôristheisai tôn peri gên topôn hai psuchai”* (6,3) – *Hupo tinôn hierôn alêthinôn* (6,11).

Here, the meaning of truth coincides with the very reality, or with anything considered authentic. Some references are made to procedures or abilities, which presuppose purity from any material or corporal status. These are spiritual qualities, which are obtained by those

persons who have transcended their commitments from those powers, which alter or perish them. We would add that is put on the ethical purity or on an anthropological property which joins the purified subject with secret situations and metaphysical powers.¹³

11) “*Tôn peri autôn tôn theiôn mustagôgian*” (5,17) — “*Tàs tôn theiôn phasmatôn ellampseis*” (6,14) — “*Peri tôn theiôn hupêgêseis*” (6,17) — “*Tês peri tôn theiôn mustikês alêtheias*” (7,7-8) — “*Oute noêsai to theion allôs dunaton ê tô par’ autôn phôti telesthentas*” (7,24-8,1) — “*Tên tôn theiôn onomatôn anelixin*” (8,4) — “*Telos to ariston exomen tês en hêmin ôdinos, hên echomen peri ta theia*” (8,11-12).

The meaning of divines illuminates and sets the rest of the meanings we have elaborated to their real extent. It refers to three levels: a) to the metaphysical world (Ontology), b) to the procedure of approaching it (Methodology) and finally c) to the expressive ways through which it is described (Gnoseology). As far as the first level is concerned, Proclus declares the ontological and evaluative superiority of the metaphysical world as compared to the physical. Regarding the second, he refers to the required ethical presuppositions of ethical and mental clearance (lucidity) so that an authentic world, like the metaphysical one, be approached in a systematic way. Regarding the third, he defines the lingual means by which a person can describe nicely the experience he has had with the divine conditions. All these passages declare that there may be a relation, a strong relation indeed, between the human and the divine as long as the preconditions of an existential purification are provided. Whoever does not ensure these preconditions is cut off from the divine.¹⁴

According to the examined facts, we reach the following three conclusions:

1) All the adjectives Proclus uses are directly incorporated within the context of the same theory. In other words, they serve his systematically based view that the divine world is being situated within a distance of the tangible one, a distance though that can be covered in a level of both deed and thought by the human efforts. In this

sense, the philosopher uses those strict epistemological and methodological criteria which do not infringe upon any element of his theory or discredit it.

2) Each adjective acquires its meaning in two ways. The first way is its unique significance through which it is differentiated from the rest (notional autonomy). The second is its relevance with some or all of the other adjectives through which it leads to the formation of a unified notional unity (notional supplementarity). That is to say, that the adjective's definition is complete, once considered from these two points of view.

3) Proclus is indirectly introducing the rules of constructing a system. Despite the fact that he uses plenty of words, he unifies concepts and describes ontological areas which are characterized by their inner indissoluble relevance. He brings out the variety of an area maintaining at the same time its unity (cohesion). In other words, his system has an inner vigor but it does not bring out some strictly set limits. It is self-defined which means that, even if it is externally intervened, it assimilates the interventions by using its own properties. Thus, we could claim that the Neoplatonic philosopher founds the pattern of self-reliance at least according to the prospectives he sets.

NOTES

1. Suggestively, see About **Plato's Theology** (*Peri tês kata Platôna theologias*) I, 83.20-99.23. We have to notice that both in this text and in the rest of the texts dealing with the same subject Proclus marks the entities with philosophical terms, as *homoion-anomoion* (like - unlike), *tauton-heteron* (same - opposite), *ison-anison* (equal - unequal), etc. In this way, he indirectly scales the terms of the Platonic (mainly) and Aristotelian tradition.

2. About the Gnoseological Methods of Proclus, see **Commentary to Plato's First Alcibiades** (*Eis ton Platônos Prôton Alkibiadên*), 21.8-22.15 and 140.16-141.4. see also **Commentary to Plato's Timaeus**

(*Eis ton Timaion Platônos*) III, 296.7 - 325.13. P. Bastid, **Proclus et le crépuscule de la pensée grecque**, J. Vrin, Paris 1969, pp. 414-446. Also L. Siassos, **The lovers of Truth**, Salonica 1984, pp. 31-35.

3. See **Elements of Theology** (*Stoicheiôsis theologikê*), pr. 97-112, 86.8-100.4. See also **Commentary to Plato's Parmenides** (*Eis ton Platônos Parmenidên*), 1089.17-1239.21. S.Gersh, **From Iamblichus to Eriugena**, Leiden 1978, pp. 141-151.

4. See **About Plato's Theology**, II, 40.2-43.11. **Elements of Theology**, pr. 1-6, 2.1-8.34. Also St. Breton "Le Théorème de l'Un dans les *Éléments de Théologie de Proclus*", **Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques**, 58 (1974), pp. 561-583.

5. See **About Plato's Theology**, II, 64.11-65.26. About Proclus' view on ethics, see L. J. Rosan, **The Philosophy of Proclus**, New York 1949, pp. 193-217.

6. See **Elements of Theology**, pp. 7-13, 8.1-16.8

7. For an analytical view on the subject see Ev. Moutsopoulos, **Les structures de l'iminaire de Proclus**, *Les belles lettres*, Paris 1985, pp. 98-175.

8. About Proclus's views on souls see **Elements of Theology**, pp. 184-211, 160.21-184.20. Also J. Trouillard, **L'Un et l'âme selon Proclus**, Paris 1972, pp. 27-67, 111-131 and 155-170.

9. On human's relation with the divine suggestively see *Eis ton Platônos Prôton Alkibiadên*, 67.19-083.16.

10. We should point out that in all his texts Proclus either directly or indirectly claims that Plato is the most eminent thinker of the entire Ancient Greek Philosophical tradition. Suggestively see **About Plato's Theology I**, 12.11-17.7. *Eis ton Platônos Prôton Alkibiadên*, 1.1-30.4.

11. On the meaning that Proclus renders to the Platonic **Parmenides** see his extended memo on Plato's Parmenides. Also H.D Saffrey, **Recherches sur le Néoplatonisme après Plotin**, J. Vrin, Paris 1990,

pp. 173-184, where we can read "*C'est donc le Parménide qui ramène à l'unité tout le corps de doctrines de la théologie platonicienne*" (183).

12. On the way Proclus presents the evolution of the Platonic thinking, see **About Plato's Theology**, V, 78.26-148.25, where, referring to the mental gods, he detects their indications in various Platonic dialogues to finally argue that they are mainly completed in Parmenides and secondly in **Timaeus**.

13. On mystical Neo-Platonic ceremonies, see P. Bouancé, "Théurgie et téléstique néoplatoniciennes", **Revue de l'histoire des religions**, 149 (1955), pp189-209. J.Trouillard, **L'Un et l'âme selon Proclus**, pp.171-189.

14. We could claim that the entire philosophy of Proclus is an initiation. The terms and names he uses stem from the tradition of mystical theology and attempt to describe super-empirical situations. See J. Trouillard, **La mystagogie de Proclus**, "Les belles lettres" Paris 1982.