

Offering to the Gods: A Neoplatonic Perspective

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At one time it was common for scholars to lament the “irrationalism” or “superstition” they saw in the recourse to ritual activity—known as “theurgy,” “teletic,” or the “hieratic art”—advocated by pagan Platonists of late antiquity such as Iamblichus (c. 250–325 CE) and Proclus (c. 410–85 CE).¹ Contemporary scholarship, however, has brought much greater understanding to this aspect of Neoplatonism and has returned it to its systematic context.² Platonic ritualism is no longer seen as an opportunistic and superficial attempt to salvage a pagan legacy doomed by Christian hegemony by clothing it in philosophical guise, but as a response to profound theoretical motives. The physicality of ritual has been recognized as affirming the essential goodness and divinity of the material cosmos against strains of thought in late antiquity that saw it as irredeemably fallen. Something remains incomplete, however, in our understanding of Platonic ritualism so long as ritual is seen purely as a response to the “problem” of matter and embodiment. In this view, the purpose of ritual is to elevate the particular to the universal. Certain aspects of Neoplatonic metaphysics allow us, however, to see in ritual activity instead an affirmation of the *primacy of particularity*.

Moreover, the concreteness of ritual is not merely a question of the use of material objects, but also of ritual’s *cultural* particularity. Neoplatonic philosophers did not invent their own rituals, but sought rather to provide an explanatory superstructure for traditional pagan ceremonies. There has been a

1. A typical and widely quoted example of such scorn is E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), Appendix 2, “Theurgy.”

2. A particularly valuable recent contribution is Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

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tendency to exaggerate the importance of the *Chaldaean Oracles*—the apparent source for the term “theurgy” (literally, “God working”)—as the “sacred text” of Neoplatonic ritualism, as if the Neoplatonists turned to ritual as a result of being converted to some new, exotic religion.³ On the contrary, Neoplatonic ritualism is not the expression of any narrow religious viewpoint, but of a philosophy of pagan religion in general—a “philosophical theory of myth,” as Pierre Boyancé terms it, “that overflows the confines of this or that ritual and has a more general scope.”⁴ Different philosophers brought to this endeavor their own peculiar religious preoccupations. Thus Iamblichus writes *On the Mysteries* in the pseudonymous guise of an Egyptian priest and privileges Egyptian and Assyrian traditions; Proclus draws equally from the *Chaldaean Oracles* and from traditional Hellenic sources such as the *Orphica* and the Eleusinian mysteries, while, according to his biographer Marinus, his personal religious practice involved the worship of Gods from several pantheons; Hermias (fl. late fifth century CE), as Boyancé points out, seems to focus more exclusively on the Hellenic tradition.⁵ Damascius (c. 462–538 CE), the last scholarch of the Academy at Athens, displays a more than superficial knowledge of, as well as a profound respect for, Hellenic, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Levantine theologies,⁶ and his account of the Alexandrian Platonists in his *Philosophical History* portrays a similar religious diversity among the pagan academicians there. Marinus reports a disagreement among the pupils of Syrianus, Proclus’s teacher, over whether they preferred Syrianus to conduct a special seminar on the *Oracles* or on the *Orphica*.⁷ That Syrianus left the choice up to his pupils and that there was such divergence of opinion indicates that these texts were of equal significance, and the question of which to study more closely was a matter of taste as much as anything else.

But what was the precise significance of such religious—and hence ritual—diversity within the broad framework of a pagan Platonic philosophy of religion? If the metaphysical justifications for ritual were thought to lie in the particular’s striving toward the universal, although for its own part ritual re-

3. A tendency criticized by Pierre Boyancé, “Théurgie et Téléstique Néoplatoniciennes,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 147, no. 2 (1955): 189–209.

4. Boyancé, “Théurgie,” 193.

5. Boyancé, “Théurgie,” 194.

6. See *Damascius: Traité des premiers principes*, ed. L. G. Westerink, trans. Joseph Combès, 3 vols. (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1986–1991), 3:165–67; alternately, *Damascii successoris dubitationes et solutiones de primis principiis*, ed. C. E. Ruelle, 2 vols. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1889), 1:321–24.

7. *Vita Procli* 26, ed. J. F. Boissonade (Leipzig: Teubner, 1850).

mains fused to a cultural context—or indeed to a *multicultural* context, a context that the pagan Neoplatonists showed no desire to transcend—then one would be left with the impression of an unresolved tension. Are the ancient and diverse religious traditions of which pagan Platonists saw themselves as the inheritors merely a ladder to be thrown away once one has climbed up to a transcendent enlightenment? Taking better account of the *nondualistic* trend in Platonic metaphysics—by which I mean the trend against seeing the opposition between matter and form as fundamental—can help us to understand the value pagan Platonists accorded to such cultural contents, not as a means to an end, but for their own sake. Furthermore, the type of ritual I shall be discussing is not of a sublime variety only suited to the philosopher—not, that is, some set of mystical exercises for an elite circle of initiates. Rather, it is the most basic sort of ritual known throughout the world, namely the presentation of offerings to a deity, which is illuminated by a passage from the commentary by Simplicius on Epictetus’s *Encheiridion* on the proper spirit in which to make offerings to the Gods.



Before taking up Simplicius, however, it is necessary to explicate further the general position of ritualism in Neoplatonic thought. First, then, a word ought to be said about the notion of a distinction between a “higher” and a “lower” theurgy that certain authors have seen in the Neoplatonists.⁸ No Platonist explicitly draws such a distinction; it is, rather, a modern construct answering to a perceived lack of coherence in the things Platonists do say about ritual, and accordingly there is no consensus about how it is to be drawn. In my opinion, the importance of any such distinction, if it existed, has been greatly overstated. Neoplatonists do distinguish, although not systematically, between the different purposes for which ritual might be undertaken—for example, more “mundane” or more “spiritual”—and which accordingly call for the use of different methods.⁹ However, the unity and thematic continuity of theurgy seems to be more significant to the ancient thinkers than these differences. The clearest programmatic statement of this unity is probably the reference by Proclus to “the theurgical power, which is superior to all human wisdom and science since it gathers together the bene-

8. For example L. J. Rosán, *The Philosophy of Proclus* (New York: Cosmos, 1949); and Andrew Smith, *Porphyry’s Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1974).

9. For example Iamblichus, *Jamblichi de mysteriis liber*, ed. G. Parthey (Berlin: F. Nicolai, 1857), 224–25.

fits of divination and the purificatory powers of ritual and all the activities whatsoever of divine inspiration.”¹⁰ In some cases, it appears that modern authors press a distinction between a “higher” and a “lower” theurgy in order to find in the pagan Platonists something answering to Dodds’s prejudicial and anachronistic distinction between “rational mysticism” and “vulgar magic,” in which the latter signifies virtually anything connected to actual pagan religiosity. In this dispute, it seems that commentators are, once again, troubled by how to understand the relationship between culturally dense ritual and abstract philosophical categories—between the particular and the universal.

The understanding of ritual in late pagan Platonists was informed by a metaphysics for which beings are sustained by two kinds of causation. On one hand, the logical subsuming of particulars by universals represents beings’ successful assimilation to their formal causes. In this respect, the taxonomic diagram sometimes known as “Porphyry’s tree” represents a living reality for beings, in which the particular secures its being by transcending its particularity, and to the degree it can identify itself with more universal principles, it shares in their broader and deeper mode of being; but the degree of assimilation cannot, by definition, be total for the total entity. Thus, although Neoplatonism’s most developed form is clearly monistic rather than dualistic and there is no absolute substrate for the procession of Being, nevertheless the opposition expressed by the “upward tension” (*anatisis*)¹¹ beings experience toward more universal beings is increasingly powerful the more particular a being is. The other kind of causal relationship constitutive for beings, however, is to entities superior to Being Itself, and hence superior to form, namely the Gods, who are “supraessential” (*hyperousios*). While in the formal relationship the particular is subordinated to the universal, the particular possesses by virtue of its very particularity a kinship with the Gods, because the Gods transcend form just as particular beings express the limits of formal determination at the other end of the hierarchy. In this sense, we and the Gods mirror one another: they are “nonbeings” in a superlative sense, we, qua particulars, in a privative sense.

The practice of “theurgy” or “teletic” (from *teleō*, to make perfect, i.e., to consecrate), that is, ritual work directed toward the Gods, is grounded in

10. *Proclus: Théologie Platonicienne*, ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink, 6 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968–97), 1.25:113, lines 6–10.

11. E.g., *Proclus: The Elements of Theology*, ed. and trans. E. R. Dodds, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), prop. 35: “each thing has a natural appetite of its well-being and of the Good, and an upward tension towards its begetter.”

the fundamental nature of the soul, which is related at once to the order of forms and to the order of the “henads” or Gods (from *to hen*, the One). As Proclus explains it:

The soul is constituted from intellectual *logoi* [reason-principles] and from divine symbols [*sumbolón*], of which the former come from intellectual forms, the latter from the divine henads; and we are images [*eikones*] of intellectual essences but statues [*agalmata*] of nonconceptual tokens [*agnóstōn sunthêmatōn*]. And just as every soul is the totality [*plêrōma*] of all the forms, but subsists universally according to a single causality, likewise it participates of all the tokens through which it is connected to things divine, but the existence [*huparxis*] <of it> is defined in unity/in the One [*en hení*].¹²

A soul exists, so to speak, as a bridge between these parallel series, which we may call *formal* and *existential*, respectively. According to the former, it is a particular instance of a universal, namely its form or species, while according to the latter, it is a unique or “existential” individual. *En hení* does not here mean in an hypostatized “One,” because the Neoplatonists’ First Principle, the One Itself, is not *one*.¹³ Rather, to be defined *en hení* means to exist through *the principle that makes things units or individuals*. These two series join the soul in turn to two distinct organizations: the former to the conceptual organization of the Forms (the *plêrōma*, as Proclus calls it here), the latter to the Gods. The Gods are not Forms but individuals—henads. The objects of theurgy—and thus the *subjects* of theurgy as well—are *huparxeis*, “existences,” while the objects of knowledge (and its subjects, too, according to the principle that “like knows like”) are *ousiai*, “substances” or “essences.” While *ousiai* are formal, and thus universal, *huparxeis* are unique; hence the comparison of the individual soul to a cult statue. A cult statue depicts any number and

12. Proclus, *De Philosophia Chaldaica* 5, in *Oracles Chaldaïques*, ed. and trans. Edouard des Places (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971).

13. Cf. Proclus, *In Timaeum commentaria* (see *Procli Diadochi In Platonis Timaeum commentaria*, ed. Ernst Diehl, 3 vols. [Leipzig: Teubner, 1903–6], 3:14–15), on Plato’s description of Eternity (*Aiōn*) as “abiding in unity [*en hení*]” (*Tim.* 37D): “We may ask, in what one? Is it in the Good [i.e., the First Principle] . . . ? But the Good does not even abide in itself, on account of its simplicity. . . . Much less therefore can anything else abide in it. . . . This is to abide in one: to have the whole present at once and the same immutable existence [*huparxis*]. Every divine nature thus begins its activity from itself; and so Eternity will establish itself in unity . . . prior to eternal beings [i.e., prior to its participants].” To be established *in the One* is thus to be established *in oneself*.

combination of natural species, but what makes it an object of theurgic intentionality is its necessarily particular consecration, as well as its relationship to a certain deity, a relationship also of *particular to particular* and not of particular to universal or image to form. This is especially important since the *formal* series exhausts itself before it reaches the individual, who therefore represents the nadir of intelligibility and of being for this series, while the *existential* series serves to determine a unique individual qua individual—and hence in a certain respect does not share the formal series’ sharp declination.¹⁴

A foundational moment for the contrast between formal and existential determination in Platonic thought can be seen in the debate on the subject of translating names that occurred between Porphyry (233–c. 305 CE) and Iamblichus, who is often seen as the father of the ritualistic trend in Platonism.¹⁵ The issue between the two philosophers concerns the status of what Porphyry calls *aséma onomata*, “nonsignifying” or “meaningless” names, that is, the untranslated names of foreign deities as they occur in the sacred texts of non-Hellenic pagan cultures, the profile of which had risen as a direct expression of the polyglot and multicultural nature of the Roman Empire. An eclectic religious marketplace was thus fostered. The debate between these two philosophers, in fact, although taking place in Greek and utilizing Platonic philosophical concepts, is also exemplary of the multiculturalism of the Empire insofar as it occurs between two men, neither of whom is ethnically Greek nor probably had Greek as his first language.

In his *Letter to Anebo*, Porphyry inquires why Greek-speakers should perform ceremonies using “barbaric” names, for “if the hearer [of the names] looks to the signification, it is sufficient that the conception remains the same, whatever happen to be the names. For he who is invoked is not Egyptian by nationality, nor, if he is Egyptian, does he use the Egyptian, or any human language.”¹⁶ Porphyry’s question really concerns the implications of a common language and a partially shared tradition in a culturally diverse environment. He seeks an answer, however, through an implicit theory of language that seems wholly formal or conceptual, insofar as it regards the names of deities as *translatable* in the same way as ordinary words expressing the same

14. For further discussion of the technical issues and critical debate surrounding the parallel series, see the appendix to this article.

15. On this exchange, see also Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), chap. 6, “Iamblichus and the Defense of Ritual.”

16. “Porphyrii epistola ad Anebonem Aegyptium,” in *Jamblichi de mysteriis liber* (as n. 9 above), xl.

concepts in different languages. The names by which the Gods are known, along with virtually all the rest of their culturally specific iconic, mythic, and cultic manifestations, would thus be rendered merely contingent. What would be the status, then, of this culturally specific material? Is it simply a means of ascent to a universal and transcendent divine that is either undifferentiated or not differentiated in a manner coinciding with the manifest differences between cultures? Is engagement with this culturally determinate material perhaps even a hindrance to attaining this transcendent viewpoint? Ontologically, Porphyry's approach also implies that the opposition of matter and form—in this case, multiple “words” and singular “meaning”—extends all the way from the lowest of beings to the Gods themselves. There is no room, in Porphyry's understanding, for anything really corresponding to what we think of as proper names, which have in principle a one-to-one relationship to their bearers, an understanding that we manifest on the level of practice by not translating proper names embedded in foreign-language texts.

Iamblichus replies to Porphyry's question in his book *On the Mysteries*, and in this reply, he invokes a wider sense of signification, in which divine names possess a suprarational efficacy transcending the conceptual sphere altogether:

They [the names] are not, however, without signification as you believe; but though to us they [the meanings] may be unknown (though some are known to us, the explications of which we receive from the Gods), nevertheless to the Gods all of them are meaningful [*sémantika*], though not in an articulable way [*ou kata rhêton tropon*], nor in such a way as that which is signifying and informative for humans through imagination,¹⁷ but either intellectually according to the divine intellect in humanity, or ineffably, in a superior and simpler way according to the intellect united to the Gods. It is necessary, therefore, to keep separate from divine names all discursive conceptions and any rational account, as well as language's inherent physical imitations of natural things. Rather, an intellectual and divine symbolic mark [*sumbolikos charaktêr*] of the divine likeness [*tês theias homoiotêtos*] must be posited within the names. And moreover, though it [the signification of the name] is unknown to us, yet this is what is most holy about it, for it is superior to cognitive analysis.¹⁸

This suprarational function of names places clear limits upon translation: “Names do not entirely preserve the same meaning in translation; rather,

17. “Imagination” here has something like the Kantian sense of schematism, i.e., the grasping of a particular, usually sensible, object as an instance of some universal.

18. Iamblichi de mysteriis liber, 255.

there are certain idioms in each nation which cannot be signified by language to another nation.”¹⁹ Porphyry and Iamblichus hold contrasting theories of language, and, by extension, of cultural diversity. In Porphyry, language is simply a “veil originating from our affections, which we attribute to the divine,”²⁰ while for Iamblichus, language’s bond with the divine lies precisely in its materiality, in the particularity of names and texts—that is, in that very dimension of language which drops out in the Porphyrian analysis as simply “nonsignifying.”

It was the Iamblichean view rather than the Porphyrian that was in general adopted by later Neoplatonists, although with characteristically Neoplatonic attempts at conciliation. The issue of translation and proper names forms one part, albeit a crucial one, of the broader problem of particularity and universality resolved in later Neoplatonists through the notion of parallel formal and existential organizations both depending on the Gods. The influence of this doctrine of parallel series coinciding in the particular will be discerned in Simplicius’s account of the act of offering to the Gods. The offering is at once an instance of a species and also a unique individual, just as the human worshipper is at once a unique individual (who, moreover, worships within a particular cultural context) and also an instance of universal humanity. We can already see this way of understanding worship in another passage from *On the Mysteries*, in which Iamblichus is defending certain forms of traditional magic in which the operator appears to *command* entities that, so to speak, outrank him or her. Iamblichus explains that

Theurgy as a whole has two aspects: the one as applied by humans, which observes our natural order [*taxin*] in the totality [*en tōi pantī*], and the other which is made mighty by divine tokens [*tois theōis sunthēmasi*] and elevated through them to the superior beings to whom it [theurgy] is united, and harmoniously conducts itself in accord with their organization [*diakosmēsīn*], in which respect it can reasonably assume the aspect of the Gods. In accord with such a distinction, it [theurgy] appropriately invokes the powers from the totality as superiors insofar as the operator is a human, but on the other hand commands them, since through the ineffable symbols [*aporrētōn symbolōn*] he is in a certain respect invested with the hieratic aspect of the Gods [*to hieratikon tōn theōn proschēma*].²¹

It is not a question here of a displacement within the natural hierarchy that would render a human superhuman, but which would manifest at the same

19. Iamblichi de mysteriis liber, 257.

20. “Epistola ad Anebonem,” in *Iamblichi de mysteriis liber*, xli.

21. Iamblichi de mysteriis liber, 184.

time a *rejection* of the natural world; instead, the operator participates in a *parallel* organization through the symbols and tokens. Note, in this respect, the use of the term *to pan*, “the totality,” to refer to the universe as a whole in which the parts are completely constituted by their *taxis*, their order or position; the *plêrôma* of the Forms in the passage from Proclus’s *De Philosophia Chaldaica* 5 quoted above has a similar implication. Bearing in mind the technical contrast between the universal form of humanity on the one hand and the essentially particular divine “tokens” on the other, the term “ineffable” takes on a technical sense as well: the tokens and symbols of theurgy are *rationally* ineffable because they are not connected by a web of dialectical inferences but of mythological associations. In this light, the passage (and many others like it) appears less exotic.

It is not clear, given our fragmentary knowledge of the Iamblichean canon, that the ontological structure I am explicating was fully present in Iamblichus, although a crucial element of it, the bond between *particularity* and *divinity*, obviously was. In its fully developed state, however, the duality inherent in the worshipper (and the offering) as a being corresponds on a higher, causal register, to a duality inherent in the Gods inasmuch as they are prior to Being with respect to their existence (*huparxis*) but constitute and sustain Being in and through their potencies (*dunameis*) and activities (*energeiaî*). The Gods are in the first place unique individuals, but because they are participated by Being, they can also be conceptualized and classified. Individual beings, in their particularity, fall beneath the level of Being, that is, of Form, while the Gods, in *their* very particularity, or *idiotês*,²² are *prior* (not temporally, but causally) to the universality of Forms. Form participates the Gods, while beings participate Forms. Thus, in his *Platonic Theology*, Proclus explains that the Platonic conception of the nature of the Gods is superior to others in that it places the divine principle beyond Being, thereby extending the scope of its causality *further* than that of Being, “for all things cannot enjoy intellect or being, but only those subsisting according to form [*kat’eidôs huphestêke*]; but the principle of all things must be participated in by all beings.”²³

In the act of making offerings the human individual, through the consecra-

22. This is a term Proclus introduces in his commentary on Plato’s *Parmenides* (see *Procli Commentarium in Platonis Parmenidem*, in *Procli philosophi Platonici opera inedita*, ed. Victor Cousin, 2nd ed. [Paris, 1864], 617–1258, at 1049) as a technical term distinguishing the individuality of henads from the difference or otherness (*heterotês*) of beings. For the individuality of the Gods and their relation to the One Itself in Proclus, see my “Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold,” *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 83–104.

23. Proclus: *Théologie Platonicienne*, 1.3:13–14.

tion of particular items, makes a connection with the individual deity who receives it, a vitalizing bond between individuals *beyond Being* in two different ways: the Gods, who are *prior* to Being, and particular beings, who derive their own being from their participation in universal forms and are thus non-beings relative to those forms. This bond between individuals grounds Proclus's piety, as we can see from a passage in his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, explaining that one must "stand aside from all other pursuits" in order that "alone, one may associate with the solitary deity, and not attempt to join oneself to the One by means of multiplicity. For a person like this accomplishes the very opposite, and separates himself from the Gods."²⁴ It is evident here (from the plural "Gods," if nothing else) that concept of "unity" refers here to the individual integrity of the worshipper, which approximates them to the existential individuality of the chosen deity. The deity's individuality, in turn, grounds the cultural particularity of ritual—one does not explicate a *form* by a myth, after all, but a *God*, and one does not refer to a God by a *word* but by a *name*.



With these general features of Neoplatonic metaphysics in mind, we can now turn to the discussion of offerings to the Gods in the *Encheiridion* commentary of Simplicius.²⁵ The historical context in which this commentary emerged is significant. Simplicius was active in the sixth century CE, and was thus one of the last great pagan philosophers of antiquity. A native of Cilicia in Asia Minor, he studied at Alexandria under Ammonius and at Athens under the last head of the Platonic Academy, Damascius. The Academies at Athens and Alexandria were the undisputed centers of the study of philosophy in late antiquity, as well as focal points for pagan resistance to Christian hegemony. Since the time of Iamblichus, the major Neoplatonists had been self-consciously and self-assertively pagan. From the Academy at Athens in particular, thanks in part to its endowment, which freed it from dependence on state subsidies, issued the voice of a pagan intelligentsia standing atop the unbroken intellectual tradition of classical antiquity and defiantly claiming that tradition to be inseparable from pagan religiosity. The religious climate in which Simplicius lived would have had a profound effect upon his under-

24. Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria*, 1: 212.

25. Subsequent parenthetical citations will be to page numbers in *Commentaire sur le Manuel d'Épictète*, ed. and trans. Isetraut Hadot (Leiden: Brill, 1996); translations from *On Epictetus' Handbook*, trans. Charles Brittain and Tad Brennan (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 27–53, occasionally modified.

standing of the relationship of humans to the Gods in general, but especially the role and function of ritual in that relationship. At the time in which he writes, pagan temples within the reach of Christian authority had been closed, and hence the distinction between public and private pagan worship had virtually vanished: there *was* only the private. Ritual observances in honor of the Gods could only be undertaken by individual worshippers or small private circles rather than by a dedicated priestly establishment.²⁶

Simplicius begins his discussion of chapter 31 of the *Encheiridion* (lemma 38 in Hadot) with an explanation of the logic implied in Epictetus's transition from the subject matter of chapter 30 to that of chapter 31, a transition that might otherwise seem arbitrary. Chapter 30 begins with the affirmation: "The appropriate actions for us to do are usually measured out for us by our relations," and goes on to explain that in the relationship to, say, a father, a brother, a neighbor, a fellow citizen, or a general, our relationship is not, insofar as it is a matter of ethical concern, with the actual father, brother, or general, who may play their roles well or poorly, but with the position of these *roles* themselves in an ideal system of relations. We need therefore to understand the ideal order—a relationship, we should note, of universal to universal—embodied in these relationships. The transition from chapter 30 to chapter 31, therefore, for Simplicius, is that after having dealt with the actions consequent upon our (ideal) relations to our (idealized) fellow beings, Epictetus proceeds to the appropriate actions defined by our relations to the Gods, and it is implied that there may be some significant structural difference in this relationship from the ones discussed in the previous chapter.

Simplicius stresses at the outset that we should not think that our relationship to the Gods means that the Gods *need* something from us. He is the inheritor of a long tradition, at least among philosophers, that had firmly established the Gods as absolutely autonomous and free by definition of need of any kind. He emphasizes the point on one hand because in his commentary on the previous chapter he has occasionally articulated the requirements of certain relationships in terms of the other's needs requiring our attention, but also and importantly because he is aware of a strong tendency to see the giving of offerings as supplying a need of the Gods for such things. One can imagine that correcting such an understanding of the offering would have had a special relevance in Simplicius's historical context, when offerings could only be made to the pagan Gods privately, even clandestinely, and

26. For more about the pressures experienced by pagan intellectuals in this period, see Polymnia Athanassiadi, "Persecution and Response in Late Paganism: The Evidence of Damascus," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 113 (1993): 1–29.

hence in much more humble fashion than before. The appropriate actions toward the Gods, then, must clearly not be thought of as supplying their needs.

In the relationship to the Gods, Platonists stress the soul's ontologically determined reversion (*epistrophê*) upon its causes—in performing ritual directed at the Gods, the soul works on itself. Simplicius affirms this when he asserts that the appropriate actions in relation to the Gods are those that serve to “assimilate (*oikeiounta*) and subordinate (*hupotattonta*) us to them” (361). The “subordination” Simplicius speaks of here is not some kind of recognition of fallen nature. In Neoplatonism to turn back toward or reflect its causes is constitutive for the reverting entity, and by arranging ourselves under the Gods (the literal sense of *hupotattein*) and understanding our relationship to them we position ourselves to receive their illumination and thus become *like* them (the sense of *oikeioun*). Simplicius's formulation here is not novel, although for this work upon oneself to be seen not merely in an ontological but also in an *ethical* light is significant. The relationships analyzed in the previous chapter (father, neighbor, fellow citizen, etc.) were to be understood in their essences (ontologically) in order that we might know how to live ethically through them. What is the ethical content Simplicius sees in the relationship with the Gods?

According to Simplicius, a key point made by Epictetus is that we should “obey the things which happen through their [the Gods'] agency, and [quoting Epictetus] ‘yield to them willingly’ and contentedly, ‘in the belief that they happen by the best judgment’ and by good forethought” (361). There could be no more pervasively Stoic reflection than that we must accommodate ourselves to that which happens beyond our control, and even see it as providential. However, there is a special relevance of this to the making of offerings. Simplicius wishes to purge us of the notion that we would seek to *sway* the Gods by offerings. He spells out what should be determinative for our attitude toward the Gods explicitly in three theses: the Gods exist, they exercise forethought, and they do so in a way that is just and in accordance with correct reason. The making of offerings, then, must not be corruptive either of the proper notion of the Gods and their own disposition in relation to the cosmos, nor of our own proper care for ourselves. It must not, therefore, express a disposition in us to find good and evil in external things. Our whole attitude toward the Gods is corrupted if we see them as the givers at one time of good things to us and at another time of evils, and, what is worse, insert offerings into this cycle. People fail to infuse the institution of worship with a rational sense of the totality: “Sailors get upset when the favorable wind does not blow for them, even though one sailor often needs a south

wind and another a north wind at the same time. They don't consider that it is impossible for contrary winds to blow at the same time" (363). Simplicius explains that "we dedicate and sanctify our soul to the God, its cause, by purifying it through a scientific conception (*epistêmonikês . . . ennoias*) of him and a life in accord with nature" (364). But "when the soul has been purified in the manner described, it should also offer the first fruits of the externals given to it by the God."

How does a "scientific conception" of the divine purify the soul? It is crucial to note that since Aristotle²⁷ *epistêmê*, "science," is always *of the universal*, and of the particular strictly in its universalizable, formal aspects. Science treats of the universal while ethics concerns the particular. The ritual act has the potential, however, to *synthesize* the universality of the scientific and the particularity of the ethical. Science plays a "purifying" role in that the "scientific" conception of the Gods establishes universal propositions about their relationship to the world that prevent us, in virtue of their very universality, from expecting things of the Gods that are impossible or cannot, at any rate, be expected to be provided in all situations (like the two sailors each praying for a wind contrary to the one for which the other prays) and therefore blaming them when our desires are not fulfilled. It prevents the relationship with the Gods, therefore, from being corrupted in a manner that would, in effect, break off the contact. A more immediate synthesis, however, is suggested by Simplicius. In his analysis of the offering, he highlights the relationship between universal and particular in an unexpected fashion.

The "customary and lawful honors" that are "offered to the divine through external things," Simplicius explains, were "revealed to human beings by the God . . . so that we could achieve assimilation to him through them, and so that external things, which have the benefit of divine illumination through our offerings, could become bountiful and truly serviceable to us" (364). That is, "we . . . receive the God through these external things, in the measure that is fitting to them and when they have become suitable for the divine illumination."²⁸ Simplicius says that "through the small portion

27. *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6.

28. It is interesting to note that Simplicius discusses the offering not as "material," but as "external." This less ontologically loaded terminology suits the evolution in later Platonism away from the dualistic opposition of form and matter, whereas earlier philosophers concerned with ritual may have seen the significance of the offerings in their affirmation of *continuity* in the hierarchy stretching from the divine through all the intermediary hypostases to the material. Iamblichus, despite his crucial role in articulating the distinction between formal and existential determination, still largely sees offerings in this light. Accordingly, this continuity forms the basis of Gregory Shaw's defense of the theoretical integrity of Iamblichean theurgy (Shaw, *Theurgy and*

that is offered, the entire species (*to holon eidos*) to which it belongs is dedicated and sanctified to the God, and obtains the divine (*theothen*) assistance that is proper to it” (365). He prefaces this statement by “as I said,” referring apparently to the remark that external things partaking in divine illumination by being offered to the Gods become both “truly serviceable to us,” that is, presumably, serviceable beyond their simple utility, as well as “bountiful.” With the notion of *bounty* Simplicius hearkens back to the sort of doctrine that is often perceived to lay at the heart of the practice of making offerings from its very beginnings: by giving of the first fruits to the Gods, we ensure that more of their kind are produced. However, the philosophical formulation of the doctrine involves something more. The primordial power of the offering to secure abundance comes about through the affirmation of the divinity of the particular, which infuses the class of which it is a member: its particularity allows it to be a special conduit for divinity.

Conversely, we have seen that Simplicius speaks of the necessity for the human soul to “purify” itself by appropriating the universalizing “scientific” perspective on the divine. This is only a “therapeutic” measure, however. To turn toward its *ultimate* causes does not call for the soul to lift itself out of its particular context, even if its *nearer* causes—that is, in the hierarchy of Being—demand just this. Although we must be properly positioned with respect to the hierarchy of Being in order to perform it correctly, the *point* of ritual lies in the affirmation of that context itself, for this completes the act of procession begun by the Gods. Hence Simplicius takes what seems to have been, for Epictetus, advice to trouble oneself as little as possible about the details of any particular cult, but simply to “mak[e] offerings at various times according to the customs of one’s country,” and interprets it as a programmatic statement about the necessity for engaging with the Gods through the cultural and historical context in which they have revealed themselves to the world. Not only is the cultural context in which we find ourselves in some fashion reflective of the choice of life that we made before our birth (365, 119–20),²⁹ and therefore not something adventitious to us, but Simplicius compares it to the environment which fosters certain kinds of flora and fauna while another environment fosters others (124–25).

In addition, Simplicius says that “each person propitiates the divine

the Soul, passim). But the theoretical refinements of later Platonists permitted a non-dualistic solution—and it is noteworthy in this respect that in the *Encheiridion* commentary Simplicius engages in a lengthy critique of Manichean dualism.

29. The choice of elements of one’s future life in the interim between death and reincarnation, as in book X of Plato’s *Republic*, was a standard Neoplatonic doctrine.

through the rites which the God revealed and which they themselves became aware of through experience [*peiras*]” (126–27). The appeal to experience is important because it points to the value of the individual’s appropriation of the cultural and historical material which has been made available to them by virtue of their situation. The worshipper is not just a passive receptacle of tradition, especially in Simplicius’s day, when the choice to continue worshipping the traditional Gods was by no means reflexive or even easy. Simplician worshippers are going to weigh, by experience, the effectiveness of the rites they perform. Hence Simplicius points immediately to the results that can occur and that are themselves inseparable from the particular time, place, and method of ritual:

When the affairs of the God [*ta peri theon*] are celebrated in accord with the God [*kata theon*], a particular activity of divine illumination becomes evident on certain circumscribed days which is not evident on other days: the sick are cured, and sometimes beneficial events are foretold. A difference of time, or the consonance of place and method with what is uttered, wrought and offered—all of these have a great effect on assimilation to the divine [*pros tēn theian oikeiotēta*]. (365–66; trans. mod.)

Simplicius underscores the same message in his interpretation of Epictetus’s rather bland injunction that offerings should not be made “in a slovenly way or without care.” For Simplicius extends this to all “divine words and deeds”: “if anything is left out, or rearranged, or confused, divine illumination does not occur—instead, the negligence of the one performing the ritual waters down the power of the events” (366). This is not about the triumph of mechanical compliance with the letter of ritual over its spirit. Words and actions, names and formulas, are precisely what differs from culture to culture and religion to religion, but the philosopher does not speak in the voice of a universalism that would dismiss these differences as veils upon an underlying identity. Instead, it is only in the particular that the universal is active and authentic. It is in the same spirit that Proclus remarks, in his commentary on the *Cratylus*, that “just as it is impious to ill-treat the statues of the Gods, in the same way it is not righteous to err regarding names.”³⁰

This attitude grew, in part, out of the controversy discussed above concerning the translation of the divine names occurring in ritual and magical texts. While for Porphyry culturally particular contents—for example, different languages—are merely a ladder we use to climb up to the universal and

30. In *Platonis Cratylum commentaria* 51, ed. G. Pasquali (Leipzig: Teubner, 1908), 19.

then let fall away, for Iamblichus, they are “tokens” or “symbols” of the Gods. The opposition here is not between intellectual insight and “irrationalism,” but rather between two different modes of signification, one that is universalizing while the other is purely of, by, and for the particular. Iamblichus discerned two modes of signification where Porphyry only perceived one. Thus for Simplicius the concrete materials of ritual observances mean not only the physicality of the objects offered, but the culturally specific rituals according to which the offering is performed.

External things “become bountiful and truly serviceable to us” (364) when their particularity and facticity have been consecrated to the Gods. Ordinary things thus become extraordinary. Simplicius gives examples of the offering becoming supernaturally energized. But such colorful examples can obscure the principle at work, which is clearer in Simplicius’s remarks on the importance of performing the rites “according to the customs of one’s country.” He explains the variations in worship according to an analogy that is reminiscent of the two sailors praying for contrary winds, only this time with a positive value given to the element of facticity:

You can at least see that when it is day with us, it is night for others, and when it is winter in one place, it is summer in another, and that these sorts of flora and fauna prevail here, and elsewhere other sorts: the earth and the things on it partake of divine goodness in a divided way. (365)

A “certain circumscribed day,” Simplicius explains, becomes the locus of “a particular activity of divine illumination . . . which is not at all evident on other days” when “the affairs of the God are celebrated in accord with the God” (366). There is nothing more essentially holy about such a day than there is something essentially holy about the particular portion of barley that through being consecrated and offered to the Gods has acquired a supernatural potency. A different handful of barley, a different day, would have served just as well, generically speaking. People in another place have different holy days, make different offerings, have different Gods. But that does not make these particulars a matter of indifference. The divine qua divine is not generic but individual, plural, and particular. Simplicius has thus enriched the Stoic text with a Platonic optimism. He began his consideration of the passage from Epictetus with the problem of external things, whose contingency threatens to distance us from the Gods if we think that our ultimate good lies with these things. In a similar fashion, we must not think that only the rites and the Gods of our nation are true. But we must embrace the contingency and facticity of our lives as part of the life we *chose*. What does choosing a

life mean, really? None of us recollect such a choice. But to believe that one has chosen one's life means to affirm the particular in its very particularity.

A related theme integral to Proclus's theology is the distinction between the individuality and uniqueness of each God, which can only be apprehended in worship and within the discourse of "theologians" (i.e., mythographers—Homer, Hesiod, "Orpheus," et al.), and, on the other hand, the classification of the Gods as this or that type of deity (including the most generic classification of all, that of "Gods" as such), which belongs to the philosopher or "scientist." Hence at *In Tim.* I, 303, Proclus remarks that philosophers speak "about" the Gods (*peri autôn*), but not "of each of them him/herself [*auto hekaston*]. And we [philosophers] are able indeed to speak scientifically [*epistêmonikôs*] of them, but not intellectually [*noerôs*]."³¹ The distinction here between a "scientific" and an "intellectual" discourse is that between *epistêmê*, always of the species, and a *noêsis*, an intuition, as it were, of individual Gods with proper names. Indeed, one finds that Proclus, when speaking "philosophically," refers to classes (*taxeis*) of Gods, the discourse about particular, named Gods being appropriate to "theologians." This is not a question of the limitations of the particularistic discourse, but rather of the limitations of the universalizing discourse of the philosopher. Hence we find Proclus exhorting us at one point to turn from the "indefinite and common [*aoristou . . . kai koinês*] doctrine" about a particular class of Gods to the "Greek tradition [*phêmên*] concerning it."³² Here it is the philosopher's discourse that cannot, because of its universalizing nature, reach all the way to the divine, which is by its nature individuated.

Simplicius, like Proclus before him, is concerned to maintain both kinds of relationship to the Gods. Preserving the distinction between a "scientific" (formalizing or abstract) discourse about the Gods, and a "theological" discourse that is practical and addresses particular, named deities by means of traditional cultic structures, and upholding the value of the latter, came to be seen by the pagan Platonists of late antiquity as essential to preserving paganism itself. Given the strongly hierarchical structure of Neoplatonic logic, subordinating the practical theological discourse to the philosophical discourse about the Gods would have meant that the philosophical discourse was all that was really needed. But such a conclusion would have been neither prudent, insofar as the pagan Platonists wanted very much to argue for the importance of sustaining the traditional cults, nor would it have properly expressed the pretheoretical intuitions of these Platonists about the existential

31. *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* 1: 103.

32. *Théologie Platonicienne* 5.35:127, lines 8–12.

status of the Gods as real individuals. It was desirable, therefore, and also convergent with refinements taking place in the discourse of Neoplatonic metaphysics, to arrive at a solution that would grant a status to a discourse of particularity (properly understood) superior to that granted to the discourse of universality. Accordingly, the discourse of the “theologians” concerning particular, named Gods corresponds to the supraessential domain of *huparxis*, or existence, while the “scientific” discourse of the philosopher (the interpretation of the negations in the first hypothesis of the Parmenides, for example, as referring to corresponding classes of Gods), in contrast, delineates the stages in the ideal constitution of Being. A balance was thus struck such that the primacy of the theological discourse protected it from rationalizing “demythologization” while the universalizing philosophical discourse, equally divine in origin, held its ground against the absorption of philosophy by any particular, dogmatic theology.³³

APPENDIX: ON THE PARALLEL SERIES

The parallel series that I term “formal” and “existential,” respectively, in the present article are recognized by Andrew Smith, but he sees the role of “unity” in what I call the existential series in terms of “union” (i.e., of the subject and object of cognition) rather than individuation, as I do.³⁴ A comprehensive account of my reasons for interpreting the concept of unity in this way would require a detailed discussion of the nature of the Neoplatonists’ First Principle and its relationship to the henads or Gods, for which see my dissertation and a later article in *Dionysius*.³⁵

On the other hand, A. C. Lloyd rejects the existence of parallel series or, as he puts it, “an ‘alternative system’ which offers a royal road for an entity to bypass the diacosms in a reversion to the One.”³⁶ Lloyd makes this judgment,

33. This is, in my opinion, the proper sense in which to understand the divergence Damascius speaks of among Platonists between those “who regard philosophy as preeminent [*tén philosophian protimôsin*], like Porphyry and Plotinus and many other philosophers,” and those who regard “the hieratic art” as preeminent, “such as Iamblichus and Syrianus and Proclus and all the hieraticians”: *In Platonis Phaedonem* 1; *The Greek Commentaries on Plato’s Phaedo*, ed. L. G. Westerink, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1977), sect. 172, lines 1–3.

34. Smith, *Porphyry’s Place*, 117–19.

35. Edward P. Butler, “The Metaphysics of Polytheism in Proclus” (Ph.D. diss., New School for Social Research, 2003); Butler, “Polytheism and Individuality.”

36. Lloyd, “Procession and Division in Proclus,” in *Soul and the Structure of Being in Late Neoplatonism*, ed. H. J. Blumenthal and A. C. Lloyd (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), 38.

however, without explicit reference to texts supporting an “alternative system” such as (but not limited to) *De Phil. Chald.* V (see below). Sheppard rejects that the latter implies an alternative way of reversion, but for reasons that are faulty: “At the beginning of the fragment Proclus claims that philosophy and the oracles agree: he wants here to show that both come to the same thing, not that they present alternatives.”³⁷ Indeed, both ways of reversion for the soul do come to the same thing—the Gods—but in different ways, ways that Proclus says are “in harmony” and not, therefore, identical.

Part of the dispute seems to lie in the notion that the “alternative system” ought to constitute what Lloyd calls a “royal road,” that is, a more direct mode of reversion to the soul’s ultimate causes than the ascent through the intervening planes of Being (what Lloyd calls here “diacosms”). Indeed, the antihierarchical tendencies in Proclus’s doctrine of the henads lead Christian Guérard to remark that for Proclus, “[l]’idée de hiérarchie, fondamentale dans tout le platonisme, ne vaut plus . . . par rapport aux dieux,” and that thus Proclus’s henadology represents something “révolutionnaire dans la pensée grecque classique.”³⁸ Lloyd adduces as evidence against the “alternative system” prop. 128 of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology*, which reads: “Every God, when participated by entities nearer to him, is participated directly; when by those more remote, through a greater or lesser number of intermediaries.”³⁹ But the independence of the existential series does not require that it represent for Proclus a shortcut allowing an individual soul to bypass working on him or herself as an ensouled being. The antihierarchical aspect of the existential series derives from the nature of the Gods themselves, from the fact that each plane of Being is divinized directly by Gods active on that plane and who do not for their own existence depend on anything prior to themselves. The series depending from the Gods in their existential aspect, therefore, provide a route for the individual soul to revert qua individual and not just qua soul. But for beings such as ourselves, both modes of reversion are necessary, which is only natural considering that both series originate from the Gods. Smith calls attention to the conceptual distinction Neoplatonists such as Olympiodorus draw between theurgic virtues, which are *heniaiai* or “unitary” and possess *huparxis*, “existence,” and the ordinary virtues which are “substantial” or “substantifying,” *ousiôdeis*, possessing *ousia*, “substance”

37. A. D. R. Sheppard, response to Lloyd’s paper, in *Soul and the Structure of Being*, 44.

38. Guérard, “La théorie des hénades et la mystique de Proclus,” *Dionysius* 6 (1982): 81.

39. Proclus: *The Elements of Theology* (trans. modified).

or “being.” But it would be a very uncharitable reading indeed to think that any Neoplatonist would have suggested that the latter could be forsaken for the former. It is true that Smith says that “theurgy which works through the henads leads to a divorce of the spiritual ascent from the contemplation of Forms,”⁴⁰ but to speak of a “divorce” is perhaps too strong when the Neoplatonists’ concern ought rather to be seen as having been to keep these two channels of “ascent” distinct for the sake of the indispensable service each can be to the other.

Finally, note that not only lower beings, but also forms themselves participate in existential series. Hence regarding the characteristics conferred by higher orders of forms upon lower orders and accumulated in them, Proclus explains that “from the primal level of the intelligible-intellectual forms each [form] bears a token, not susceptible to knowledge, of its own paradigms, according as each has been allotted one or other divine characteristic.”⁴¹ This passage is laden with technical terms not requiring explanation here; what matters is simply the use of “tokens” (*sunthêmata*), a key technical term in theurgy. This aspect of the Form is “not susceptible to knowledge” because (like the intelligible forms⁴²) it is not accessible to *epistêmê*, scientific knowledge, but only to *gnôsis*, knowledge in the sense of insight. This “gnostic” dimension of forms is what we might characterize as their nondialectical characteristic, that remainder irreducible to their merely negative, diacritical differentiation from one another and which, akin to the value of the proper name, drops out in translation due to its specific associations in different cultures. In this way, while it sometimes seems as if the point of the parallel series is simply that, although both are equally formal, one is “rationally” and the other “mythically” determined, this distinction, when ontologically unpacked, so to speak, yields the formal/existential distinction nevertheless.

40. Smith, *Porphyrus's Place*, 127, n. 7.

41. Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, trans. Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 317 [*In Platonis Parmenidem*, 969]

42. Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, 280 [*In Platonis Parmenidem*, 924].