

NEOPLATONISM AND POLYTHEISM*

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This essay proposes a fresh understanding of the relationship between Platonism and polytheism in later antiquity. A chief reason, I think, why the character of this relationship has not been appreciated is a misunderstanding concerning the concept of unity in Neoplatonism and hence the nature of the First Principle. The cardinal doctrine of Neoplatonic henology, its charter, so to speak, comes from the conclusion to the First Hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides*, which states that the One Itself neither is, nor is one (*Parm.* 141 E). This negativity of the first principle is, for later Platonists, what distinguishes it from the One Being of the Second Hypothesis, which both is, and is one. But modern commentators have tended to assume that Neoplatonists, in positing the negativity of the One Itself, nevertheless still meant that the One Itself really *is* after all, and really is *one* in any case, only in an eminent or mysterious way, and commentators have often called upon religious concepts such as mysticism or negative theology in order to characterize what Neoplatonists are doing with this doctrine. [125]

In approaching the problem in this way, commentators follow in the footsteps of the historical appropriation of elements of Neoplatonic thought as adjuncts to monotheistic religiosity. This appropriation, however, had as its precondition—at least culturally, if not in fact, as I intend to argue, intellectually as well—the disruption of the Neoplatonic scholastic

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community, which had almost universally identified itself with the Pagan cause. Furthermore, the genealogy of concepts such as negative theology and mysticism is itself so infused with the interpretation of Neoplatonic texts within the hermeneutical confines of monotheistic faiths that the appeal to such concepts to elucidate what the Pagan Platonists meant risks circularity. Even manifestations of so-called mysticism or negative theology from Asia have been labelled as such in a Western discourse marked by this problematic Neoplatonic legacy.

Aside from this issue, however, a reading attributing to Neoplatonic thinkers so much willful obscurity and, indeed, empty rhetoric concerning the central feature of their philosophy ought to be regarded as problematic in itself. If this were what lay at the very heart of Neoplatonism, it would hardly be surprising if Neoplatonism failed to be perceived as a serious philosophical position; indeed, one would really have no other choice. There would be something [126] curious in an intellectual edifice of such apparent complexity built upon a foundation so vacuous.

There is another alternative, however. I have argued elsewhere¹ that a close reading of Proclus reveals that for him at least the negativity of the One Itself becomes meaningful when understood in conjunction with a positive pluralism embodied in his doctrine of the *henads*. I will briefly present the key elements of this doctrine.² The *henads* are a manifold

¹ I discuss the general characteristics of henadic multiplicity in “Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold,” *Dionysius* 23, 2005; for a full treatment of the doctrine of the *henads*, see “The Metaphysics of Polytheism in Proclus,” diss., New School for Social Research, 2004.

² *Elements of Theology*, prop. 149; Syrianus, *In Metaph.* 914b3-6.

prior to Being, the total number of whom, although finite, is not knowable by lesser entities. As a factual matter, the henads bear proper names and are the Gods of the many national pantheons. Although Proclus chiefly concerns himself with the Gods of the Hellenic pantheon, and, in particular, with demonstrating the harmony between Plato's philosophy and Hellenic Paganism, he does not believe that these are the only Gods nor, apparently, that different nations worship the same Gods under different names.³ [127]

The henadic manifold, that is, the manifold of the Gods, possesses a unique structure utterly unlike any ontic manifold. The structure of ontic manifolds reduces the multiplicity within them to a unity, but the structure of the henadic manifold accords to each God an absolute autonomy and individuality far beyond that possessed by beings, including the ontic hypostases of Being, Life and Intellect themselves. Members of any ontic manifold are mediated by and subordinated to higher principles they participate in common, and even the major ontic hypostases of Being, Life and Intellect, as well as the minor hypostases within these, are mediated by one another inasmuch as they form a holistic system of reciprocal implication.⁴ By contrast, all of the henads are in each *immediately*.⁵ This all-in-all structure eliminates the need for the henadic manifold to vest its own unity in a higher principle because it has its ground, so to speak, in each of its members.⁶ The nominal

³ See Chapter 3 of my dissertation.

⁴ *In Parm.* 1048f; *ET* prop. 115; *IP* 936f.

⁵ For the henads as all-in-all, see *IP* 1048. For a concrete application of this doctrine, see the reference at *In Crat.* 179 to “the Artemis and the Athena which Kore contains.”

⁶ See, e.g., *IP* 1212, which refers to “the totality of the divine set [*pas te theios arithmos*], in virtue of which is the being, or rather pre-being [*proeina*], of the Gods and of the whole divinized class of being [*pasa hê ektheoumenê taxis tôn ontôn*].”

principle of the henads, [128] the One Itself, therefore, exists as each henad, rather than as some singular item.⁷ To better understand this doctrine, let us compare the disposition of the Gods relative to the One with the disposition of beings relative to an Idea or Form. The Form is *more real* than its participants. The Gods, however, are explicitly said by Proclus *not to participate anything*, nor to have any attribute as a result of participation.⁸ Godhood is thus nothing other than the Gods themselves, the negativity of the One opening a space for a radical *pluralism* which is also a radical *polytheism*.

The existential pluralism of the henadology goes hand in glove with Proclus's concept of theology as a discipline. Theology is, for Proclus, a discourse that essentially involves a radical individuality transcending ontology. For ontology, there can only be classes of entities determined down to the level of *infima species*, while theology for Proclus makes necessary reference to real individuals with proper names.⁹ In a passage early [129] in his *Platonic Theology*, Proclus states that “all that have ever touched upon theology have called things first according to nature, Gods; and have said that the theological science concerns these” (*PT* I 3. 12. 11). He goes on to explain that since, for some, what ranks first is the corporeal, the Gods are for such as these a certain kind of body, intending the Stoics here. Others, he continues, regard soul as primary. For these (apparently Anaxagoreans), the best

⁷ *Decem Dubitationes* X. 63; *ET* prop. 65.

⁸ *In Timaeum* I, 364; *ET* prop. 118.

⁹ *IT* I, 303: “Someone may say, do we [philosophers] not assert many things about the demiurge, and about the other Gods, and even of the One Itself? To which we reply, we speak indeed *about* them [*peri autôn*], but we do not speak *of each of them itself* [*auto de hekaston*]. And we are able indeed to speak *scientifically* [*epistêmonikôs*] of them, but not *intellectually* [*noerôs*].”

of souls are Gods. Others (Peripatetics) place intellect before all else, and these consider theology and the discussion of intellectual essence to be one and the same. Plato, according to Proclus, laid the groundwork for a different sort of theology because of the principle that he places first, namely *unity*. Unity is the most generic of concepts; not everything participates of soul, nor even of intellect or being, for these are only enjoyed, Proclus explains, by such things as subsist *according to form*. Unity, however, is, at least in some respect, prior to form. This much is evident from the fact that individuals under *infima species* are distinguished by us not formally, but numerically. In a theological discourse based upon the concept of unity, the Gods will be first *by virtue of their mode of unity*, a mode of unity prior to form. It is important to understand that Proclus does not think that this theology is superior simply because its principle is more generic, but also because it is more adequate to its object. Unity is a concept more adequate to a [130] science of the Gods than form because form is *whatness*, while unity, in the sense in which Proclus applies it to the henads means, instead, *whoness*. If the concept of unity is understood as *individuality*, rather than as abstract singularity or as the absence of distinction, the superiority of a theology based on such a concept becomes immediately comprehensible insofar as only such a theology approaches the Gods simply as who they are, as just the unique individuals who have manifested themselves to humanity, rather than as instances of some essence or presentations of some potency.

This explains something else about theology in Proclus, namely that although he speaks of theology as a science with universal principles at the beginning of the *Platonic Theology*, he more typically uses the term theology to refer to revealed, hieratic knowledge of the Gods, that is, the mythology and iconography of particular Gods, which is the

province, not of philosophers, but of cultic specialists. Theology, in this sense, is something irreducibly multiple and particular; and yet Proclus never implies that this particularity places theology on a lower tier than philosophy.¹⁰ [131] Philosophy's universality is the outcome of a cosmogonic process, a dialectic unfolding from the absolute individuality that is the mode of existence of the Gods. This ideal genesis constitutes the ontic hypostases, but from the viewpoint of pragmatics it results in a discourse, namely philosophy, that is capable of analyzing all things, including the Gods themselves, in a formalizing mode. The ideal dialectical genesis of the ontic hypostases which is the subject of philosophical reconstruction is paralleled by the stages of the mythic cosmogonies, as explicated according to the Neoplatonic hermeneutic. This explication does not constitute a "demythologization" exhausting the myths, however, insofar as myth is not merely a textual but, indeed, an ontological category for Proclus. The cosmos is constituted in myth and in the reading of myth for Proclus and other Pagan Platonists.¹¹ Myth, rather than a narrative representation of events, is a performative cosmic [132] infrastructure contiguous with the persons of the Gods. Philosophy is inferior to myth in not being contiguous with the Gods; its dignity is as the culmination of the myths' cosmogonic work.¹² Philosophy, the flower of the Intellect, is

¹⁰ A particularly striking text is *Theol. Plat.* V 35. 127. 8-12, where Proclus exhorts us to turn, at one point, from the "indefinite and common [*aoristou ... kai koinês*] doctrine about these Gods" to the "Greek tradition [*phêmên*] concerning it, as delivered to us by Plato, and demonstrate that he as far as to the very names follows the theologians of the Greeks."

¹¹ On these matters, see "The Theological Interpretation of Myth," *The Pomegranate* 7.1, 2005. See also Sarah Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge, 2000), Chap. 8, "Language and Theurgy in Proclus' *Platonic Theology*," with regard to the performative dimension of Neoplatonic hermeneutics.

¹² This argument begins from understanding the status of the "powers" (*dunameis*) of the Gods; see, e.g., *PT* III 24. 164-5: "We must never think therefore that all power is the

the goal of the Gods' activities. The hermeneutic of myth has an especially honored place in philosophy, because philosophy thus traces the conditions of its own emergence and, indeed, of being *qua* being. But there is no final "demythologization" because the supra-essential cannot be exhausted by its ontic participations. Philosophy thus can forever be fertilized by recourse to myth. Unlike theologians, the philosopher is not tied to any one tradition or pantheon: on account of its formalizing nature, philosophy becomes the [133] proper home for the comparativist impulse ancient in Pagan religion. The philosopher, however, has neither desire nor authority to reduce the Gods to ontic principles nor to fold the Gods of different nations into one another. Comparison has its ground in the common functions the Gods of different pantheons exercise relative to a purely formal world order,¹³ but does not thus touch their identities.¹⁴ From the dialectic of unity, therefore, the distinction can be generated and grounded between the discourse of theology, necessarily plural, and the discourse of philosophy, aspiring, at any rate, to commonality.

This system, which can be reconstructed in its fully articulated form from Proclus, and which was seemingly largely maintained by his successors in the Athenian school and to

progeny of essence. For the powers of the Gods are supra-essential, and are consubstantial with the henads themselves of the Gods. And through this power the Gods are generative of beings." *IP* 1128 distinguishes between the Gods and their powers, stating that intellectual shapes "are knowable and expressible as pertaining to the powers of the Gods, not to their existences [*tais huparxesin autais*], in virtue of which they possess the characteristic of being Gods." The powers of the Gods, which are expressed in myth and iconography, are supra-essential in their particularity and theurgic activity, ontic in their universality or as objects of comparison, and are thus the locus of the division between Being and the supra-essential.

¹³ The technical term for the relationship between the Gods and the levels of Being they constitute by their activity is *katalampsis* or *ellampsis*.

¹⁴ *Huparxeis*, "existences", is the technical term for the unique identities the Gods possess.

some degree probably in the Alexandrian school as well, albeit with different emphases, was the product of centuries of intellectual effort moving simultaneously along two lines which were ultimately brought to a successful convergence either by Proclus himself or already by his master Syrianus. One line was the [134] purely philosophical henology given formal structure by the dialectic of the *Parmenides*, but also substantively informed by Middle Platonic debates with Peripatetics and Stoics which helped to focus the issue of individuation and to refine ontological speculation in general.¹⁵ The other line was the effort to philosophically articulate Pagan religious ideas and practices. The social transformations of the Hellenistic and Imperial periods, which saw unprecedented mobility of every kind and the dissolution of many of the local structures which had fortified the traditional cults, provided an opportunity over the course of centuries for Paganism to demonstrate that it was more than the sum of these local networks and the various kinds of state sponsorship of cults, and intellectuals took full advantage of the freedom and flexibility they possessed in the non-dogmatic and pluralistic environment of Pagan antiquity to define for themselves the terms upon which they engaged the divine. This questioning was not a sign of weakness, but of strength in [135] Paganism. Elements of Pagan belief and practice which had been taken for granted by thinkers still living in the comparatively sheltered environment of the classical *polis* were being thought through consciously in certain ways for the first time. But this does not mean that these earlier thinkers did not move in a world suffused with Gods and possessing a multitude of ways of engaging with them, and it is high time that we

¹⁵ See Louis Roberts, "Origen and Stoic Logic," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 101 (1970), pp. 433-435, on the possibility that Origen draws equally upon Stoic logical categories and Neoplatonic theurgy to explicate his thesis against the translatability of names, which would be the more probable if Stoic ideas were part of the background of Neoplatonic thought on individuality and proper names in the first place.

stopped taking the manifestations of piety with respect to the traditional Gods in Plato and Aristotle, for instance, for mere lip-service.

The increasing refinement and specificity with which philosophical problems were being articulated after centuries of unbroken conversation thus converged with a growing desire to negotiate the relationship between philosophical and religious discourses. The solutions ultimately arrived at by thinkers like Proclus show what elements were valued by them. Contrary to what is often asserted, namely that philosophers wished to “demythologize” Paganism and replace the traditional Gods with deified ontological principles, one of the elements which was clearly valued was the preservation of the traditional Gods with their identities, iconography, and mythology intact. The tendency to conceive the Gods in more transcendent terms did not come from a desire to insulate them from these things which had always belonged to them, [136] but rather to safeguard the Gods from reductionistic or relativistic attempts to immanentize them. E. R. Dodds shows an utter lack of understanding of this when he charges Proclus with “depriving the gods of all personality, and even of all identity.” Dodds gives as an example that Zeus, in Proclus’s philosophical hermeneutic of Hellenic theology, “appears as five different gods each of whom symbolizes the ‘jovial’ principle on different planes of reality,” leading Dodds to complain “[t]hat Homer’s Olympians, the most vividly conceived anthropomorphic beings in all literature, should have ended their career on the dusty shelves of this museum of metaphysical abstractions is one of time’s strangest ironies” (260). What is truly ironic, however, is to impose one’s own aesthetic preferences on a religion in which one has no spiritual interest. Proclus, by contrast, plainly *had* such an interest. Deaf to Proclus’s own piety, Dodds does not perceive the way in which the henadology at once safeguards the

identities of the Gods from absorption into ontology and seeks to ensure that the human access to the divine through myth is not obstructed by pseudo-problems arising due to our failure to mark the difference between supra-essential and ontic individuality. The philosopher can resolve these pseudo-problems and free the myths to do their work. [137]

These pseudo-problems arise especially around the status of *relations*. The Gods possess their identities prior to any reciprocal or diacritical determination, whereas the identities of beings are inextricably entwined with such determinations.¹⁶ Conflicting myths involving a particular deity manifest different modes of that God's activity within Being, whereas conflicting narrative accounts of an ontic individual could not all be true. Conflicting narratives that would disintegrate a being's identity instead allow the Gods to multiply their cosmogonic and salvific efficacy. For Dodds, it is proof that "Proclus is far from treating his 'gods' as persons" that (at *IT* III 184. 21) "he accepts both the statement of Hesiod that Oceanos, Tethys, Kronos and Rhea were all of them begotten by Ouranos upon Ge, and the statement of the *Timaeus* that Oceanos and Tethys were the parents of Kronos and Rhea" (260 n. 3). But in fact this is exactly how Proclus preserves the "personhood" of the Gods by conceiving, for example, the power of being-daughter-of-Ouranos-and-Ge and the power of being-daughter-of-Oceanos-and-Tethys as distinct powers coexisting in Rhea, powers she wields as instruments of her cosmogonic activity which do not, therefore, contradict one another. While I am [138] passively determined as the son of a certain mother and a certain father, the Gods enact their filiations and produce their relationships, even

¹⁶ See *In Parm.* 936 and the related discussion in my article from *Dionysius*, cited above.

those which account for their “origins”, because these refer, not to an absolute origination of the Gods in question, but instead to the sites within the cosmos whence they act.

In conclusion, the possibility arises from rediscovering this legacy of Pagan Platonism not only of recovering its strictly philosophical insights with respect to individuation, for example, but also its insights with respect to the possibility of a philosophy of religion which neither reduces the objects of religious devotion to ontic principles, nor functions as the dedicated interpreter of some single body of dogma, but instead constitutes a framework sustaining the object of religious experience just as experienced. A philosophy of religion that goes beyond the experiential dimension to assert, for instance, that all Gods are really one God, or manifestations of some limited set of divine potencies, engorges itself at the expense of the whole religious sphere, which should be objectionable even to those finding the resulting philosophical construct closer to their own religious beliefs than some others. Rather than being called upon to justify some theology, or suspected of detracting from it, such a philosophy of religion would seek to draw out [139] the ontology immanent to particular religious traditions in all their richness, no longer seeking to wring from them their culturally particular content in pursuit of an empty universality. The myths of every tradition could thus be read for their ontological value without sacrificing their immutable truth and inexhaustible generativity for the sake of a pallid generality.