IAMBlichus' Exegesis of Parmenides' Hypotheses and His Doctrine of Divine Henads

Svetlana Mesyats

1. Henads and the Problem of the Transcendent First Principle

The question about the First Principle is one of the central problems of Neoplatonism as well as that of every monistic system of philosophy, that considers the world as a creation of a single divine Cause. The problem here is the following: the absolutely transcendent and self-sufficient Principle does not need to cause anything outside itself, because to be transcendent means to be entirely independent from all the rest. But a principle, which is entirely independent from its own effects, cannot be a cause, since causality presupposes some relationship between the causative principle and its effects. Consequently we are faced with a dilemma: either to define some principle as a cause, so that it depends by nature on its own effects and is no longer transcendent; or to define it as transcendent, so that it cannot be a cause. In the history of Platonic philosophy there were many efforts to solve this dilemma. In one of his treatises Plotinus described the One as a "productive power of all things" (δύναμις τῶν πάντων)\(^1\) and so to some extent introduced into the Absolute all the plurality of its effects, at least in the mode of potency, power. Plotinus' pupil Porphyry abandoned the idea of the transcendent Principle and identified the supreme One with Being.\(^2\) Iamblichus after him proposed the theory of "two" Ones, first of which he thought to be completely ineffable and inexpressible, whereas the second one he understood as a cause in the true sense of the word in so far as it

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1. Plotinus, *Enneads* III, 8, 10, 1.
2. Damascius, *De principiis* I, 86, 8–10: κατὰ δὲ τὸν Πορφύριον ἐροῦμεν τὴν μίαν τῶν πάντων ἀρχήν εἶναι τὸν πατέρα τῆς νοητῆς τριάδος; Proclus. *In Parm. VI, 1070, 15–19*: "we shall, therefore, be far from making the primal God the summit of the intelligible world, as I observe to be the practice of some leading theologians, and making the father of that realm the same as a cause of all things" (transl. by G.R. Morrow and J.M. Dillon (1987) 423–424).
contains in itself all things (though “in a hidden mode ... not distinctly, ... in a manner inexpressible and inconceivable to us”)\(^3\) and being simultaneously One-total (ἐν πᾶντα).\(^4\)

The doctrine of the divine henads (ἐνάδες- “unities”), one of the most remarkable modifications introduced by the later Neoplatonists into the Plotinian metaphysical system, is very important in the context of the efforts to solve the problem of a transcendent First Principle. In its fullest form we find it in Proclus’ treatises *Elements of Theology* (Prop. 113–165) and *Platonic theology* (Book III). Proclus was not its author, and in his own philosophy henads or “gods” formed a special level of reality, situated between the supreme One and the intelligible level of being. Like the First One they are beyond all beings, but at the same time somehow include in themselves all things, and come into relationship with the world. According to the *Elements of Theology* (Proposition 116), henads are entirely like the First One except that they are participated substances (μετέχομεναι, μεθεκταί), whereas the One itself is absolutely unparticipated (ἀμεθεκτος). “If after the First Principle there be another imparticipable henad,—asks Proclus,—how will it differ from the One?”\(^5\) Every causative principle, which can produce a lower order of reality without being itself affected by this production, is called by Proclus “imparticipable” or “transcendent”. It does not change, nor turn itself into its results, nor mix with them, but remains essentially pure, separate and self-sufficient in its being. On the other hand, there must be some likeness between the cause and its effects, so that the procession from the higher orders of reality to the lower ones may take place.\(^6\) It means that the proceeded term must contain an element of identity with its producer or some reflection of it. Proclus names this reflection of a transcendent cause “participated term”. It seems that, according to this definition, all participated terms necessarily belong to their participants (μετέχοντα), that is to say, they exist only in some other thing and not by themselves. But Proclus distinguishes two classes of participated terms, which he names

\(^3\) This is a quotation from Proclus, *In Parm.* 1114, 1–10, where he describes lamblichus’ exegesis of the words of Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* IV, 715e, that God possesses the beginning, the middle and the end of all existing things. Cf. Proclus (1987) 457.


\(^6\) According to the general principle: “All procession is accomplished through a likeness of the secondary to the primary” Cf. Proclus. *El. Th.* 29 (transl. by E.R. Dodds).