PROCLUS AS A READER OF PLATO’S TIMAEUS

Introduction

From our ‘superior’ modern perspective, on the one hand, it appears that Proclus carries far too much Neoplatonic doctrine into his interpretation of Plato’s *Timaeus*, but, on the other hand, from an ancient perspective, he may be taken as accurately reflecting one tradition of interpretation whose legitimacy cannot be dismissed, since it can be traced back to the early Academy. Given our historical distance from Proclus, it is relatively easy to identify his interpretive presuppositions, though our own prejudices remain largely hidden from us. In this respect, Proclus might well serve as an object lesson with regard to the necessary hermeneutical situation of any reader of ancient texts, namely, that there is no such thing as an interpretation that is completely free of all presuppositions. So, as readers of Plato, we should strive to become aware of our own presuppositions as we are engaged in a dialogical conversation with the text.

In this paper, however, I will try to identify some of the hermeneutical assumptions that guided Proclus in his reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*, while exploring how these assumptions are related to a central philosophical problem in the dialogue. For instance, in the third section of my paper, I will pay some attention to the traditional Platonic question of whether or not the sensible universe is generated, which is reformulated by Proclus in Neoplatonic terms as whether or not the universe is self-constituted. Even though such a question seems incidental to the dialogue itself, by highlighting the problem Proclus is obviously continuing an ancient way of reading Plato’s *Timaeus* that had begun already within the early Academy with the dispute between Aristotle and Xenocrates as to whether Plato held the sensible universe to be eternal or rather temporally generated.¹

¹ See Aristotle, *De Caelo* 279b32 ff., Xenocrates, frs. 153–158 and 163Isnardi, Speusippus, frs. 41 and 72 Tarán. Plutarch and Atticus seem to be in the minority among Platonists in claiming that Plato held the sensible universe to be temporally generated; cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* I.276.30 ff. According to Baltes (1976 I: 22), Xenocrates probably argued for the eternity of the sensible world from the eternity of the world-soul, while reinterpreting Plato’s temporal talk as being for the sake of explanation; cf. *In Tim.* I.395.1–10.
In his attempt to interpret Plato’s *Timaeus*, therefore, it was inevitable that Proclus should deal with the philosophical question of whether or not the sensible cosmos is generated. Within that dialogue, the character named Timaeus had argued that the sensible cosmos belongs in the class of things that are generated, so that it must have a demiurgic cause, yet he had insisted that the cosmos remains perpetually in existence because of the goodwill of that divine craftsman. Such apparently conflicting claims led to an interpretive crux within the early Academy when Aristotle took Plato literally to be saying that the sensible cosmos is generated and so perishable, whereas Xenocrates and Crantor took him to be speaking metaphorically for the sake of explication, just as one does in talking about the construction of eternal geometrical objects. For Proclus, however, the problem is resolved by placing the sensible cosmos within the Neoplatonic hierarchy of causes that descends from the transcendent One through the intelligible realm and into the sensible realm. More specifically, he reformulates the problem in terms of the question of whether or not the sensible cosmos is self-constituted. Since it is not, according to him, then there must be some other higher cause on which it depends, and so Proclus undertakes the task of relating it to a hierarchy of causes that culminates in the One.

I. Proclus’ Principles of Interpretation

From our modern hermeneutical perspective, Proclus’ commentary appears deceptively like an ‘open book’ because he gives us so much information in his Prologue as to how he proposes to read Plato’s *Timaeus*. For instance, he declares the literary genre or character of the dialogue to be a Pythagorean/Socratic inquiry into causes, which is not only physical but also theological in character. According to Proclus, the *skopos* or purpose of the *Timaeus* is to discuss the most perfect achievements of natural science and the typical formulae associated with this view are *didaskalías* (or *théōrias*) *charin* and *saphêneias* (or *théōrias*) *heneka*, which Theophrastus reported with reference to the Academy, according to Philoponus; cf. *Aet.* VI.8.145.20 ff.; VI.8.148.7 ff.; VI.21.188.9 ff.; VI.27.220.22 ff. See Plotinus II.9 [33] 3.1–14; VI.1 [10] 6.37 ff.

In this respect, Proclus seems to accept the monism of Plotinus in taking the One to be the single and ultimate cause of all things, including matter; cf. *In Tim.* I.370.13–371.8. By contrast, for instance, Atticus is rather unorthodox in treating pre-cosmic matter as independent of any divine cause; cf. *In Tim.* I.283.27–285.7; 384.2.

Carlos Steel has informed me that *hori* is often used by Proclus to refer to whatever provides perfection, measure or structure; cf. *In Remp.* I.247.24; *In Tim.* II.194.10.