

Jesús de Garay

# The Reception of Proclus: From Byzantium to the West (an Overview)

## 1 Introduction

Despite being the object of numerous studies, Proclus's reception in Byzantium and the West continues to be a source of perplexities.<sup>1</sup> My purpose in these pages is to establish the differences between this reception in Byzantium and in the West, in order to present a synoptic vision.

On the one hand, his writings were preserved in Byzantium – by means that are not always clear –, even though he was considered the quintessential pagan philosopher. On the other hand, Proclus's reception in the West follows a clearer trail, especially after Moerbeke's translations starting in 1268.<sup>2</sup> It is quite significant that Moerbeke, besides translating Aristotle, dedicated his attention to Proclus, and not, for example, to Plato: the former's presence in Byzantium, unlike that in the West, was important enough for Moerbeke to undertake this translation.

Nevertheless, Proclus's reception, both in Byzantium and in the West, is marked by important discontinuities, both in subjects and in time. That is to say: aside from certain exceptions, it is impossible to speak of a continuous tradition or school that considers itself indebted to Proclus, as opposed to the way in which we can, for example, refer to long-lasting Aristotelian, Platonic, or even Neoplatonic traditions. This also applies to the 15th and 16th centuries: while there are many authors inspired by Proclus, it would be extravagant to locate them in a single tradition. Specifically, in Pletho, Cusanus and Ficino, Proclus's reception differs in essential aspects, even while there are common themes.

The situation can be summed up as follows. 1) In the West Proclus remains nearly unknown until 1268; it is only from then on that he begins to be better known, especially among the disciples of Albert the Great (Dietrich of Freiberg, Eckhart, Berthold of Moosburg). His principal impact is on Nicholas of Cusa, at least beginning with 1434. Nonetheless, other authors, like Bessarion, Pletho, Ficino and Pico also contribute to his spreading influence. 2) In Byzantium, on the contrary, he was always a recognized author, both because of his philosophical relevance as well as for his paganism. It is principally with Psellos that his presence grows: on the one hand, the criticisms of

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<sup>1</sup> Gersh 2014b. For my part, I have examined certain aspects of this reception in: de Garay 2012, 2013, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Steel 2014, 247–263, Boese 1987.

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his paganism intensify (condemnations of Italos and his disciples, the refutation of Nicholas of Methone); on the other hand, his writings and teachings receive increasing attention (Petritsi, Pachymeres).

## 2 A Brief Historical Journey from 11th until 16th century

In Byzantium, Proclus's reception was initially cut short by the prohibitions and censorship that the Byzantine imperial tradition imposed upon pagan religion, culture, and philosophy. This is probably one of the main reasons why Proclus practically disappears from academic discussions beginning in the 7th century, even though we still have many of his writings, and many of his ideas – reformulations purged of pagan connotations – continuously reappear in the writings of different authors.

It is only in the 11th century, by way of Psellos<sup>3</sup>, that Proclus's relevance as a philosopher acquires new life, although the prosecution of Psellos and his disciples delayed the spreading of his writings.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, beginning with Psellos, Proclus's presence in Byzantium becomes more intense. After the Latin occupation of Constantinople, the censorship of Proclus's writings lessens. This can be inferred from the attention Proclus received from George Pachymeres, or the proliferation of copies of some of Proclus's scientific writings throughout the Empire. Beginning in 1350 we can actually speak of a systematic recovery of Proclus's writings in Byzantium.<sup>5</sup>

From a doctrinal point of view, the 15th century is marked by the rise of the figure of Georgius Gemistus Pletho: he gave new vitality to philosophical perspectives very characteristic of Proclus, in a way that reminds one of Psellos's irruption in the 11th century, even to the point that Gennadius Scholarius accuses Pletho of plagiarizing Proclus's doctrines. Pletho is important for the history of the reception of Proclus in the West, first and foremost because of his stay in Florence on the occasion of the Council of Ferrara-Florence, and also, in an indirect way, through some of his disciples,<sup>6</sup> especially Cardinal Bessarion.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Proclus's reception in the West has a story of its own that goes far beyond Pletho or Bessarion.

As also occurred in Byzantium, Proclus's doctrines in the West were indirectly spread through the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>8</sup> Even so, while in Byzantium the

<sup>3</sup> O'Meara 2014d, 165–181.

<sup>4</sup> Clucas 1981c; Gouillard 1985d; Gounaridis 2006, 35–47.

<sup>5</sup> Cacouros 2007a, 177–210; Cacouros 2000b, 589–627; Cacouros 2006, 1–51.

<sup>6</sup> Lisi and Signes 1995, xlii–xlvi.

<sup>7</sup> Macé, Steel, and d'Hoine 2009, 241–279.

<sup>8</sup> Dillon 2014b, 111–125.

Dionysian corpus impacted Byzantine culture and religion since the 6th century,<sup>9</sup> in the West we are forced to wait for the translations of Scotus Eriugena in the 9th century, and Scotus's own philosophy, which ultimately relies on Proclus.<sup>10</sup>

This indirect dissemination of Proclus's doctrines in the West was reinforced by the fortune of the Latin rendition of the so-called *Liber de causis* in the 12th century, which builds upon certain propositions taken from Proclus's *Elements of Theology*. Beginning in the 12th century, many authors were inspired both by the Dionysian corpus and the *Liber de causis*.

The direct reception of Proclus's writings in the West – excluding the early translation of the *Elements of Physics* in the 12th century – begins with Moerbeke, whose translations aroused particular interest among the disciples of Albert the Great, including Dietrich of Freiburg, Berthold of Moosburg and Heymeric van der Velde.<sup>11</sup>

Nicholas of Cusa also belongs to this tradition, linked to Albert the Great. Within this heritage we also find Meister Eckhart,<sup>12</sup> who aroused Cusanus's interest even before Proclus did. It is specifically in Nicholas of Cusa where we can rightfully speak, regarding Proclus's reception, of a certain convergence of the Byzantine tradition (which culminates in Pletho) and that of the Latin West. Without a doubt, the close relationship between Bessarion and Cusanus catalyzed the exchange of ideas between both traditions.

Proclus was also closely studied by Marsilio Ficino.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, by way of Pletho Ficino recovers some of Proclus's doctrines.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, he was aware of Cusanus's interpretations, albeit in a secondary way. But above all, he had access to Proclus's corpus in its entirety, since he could read directly in Greek. He would go on to translate the *Elements of Physics*, as well as extracts from the *Commentary on Alcibiades*, the *Commentary on the Republic*, *De sacrificio et magia*, and even some hymns.<sup>15</sup> To a large extent, Ficino's own commentary on the *Parmenides* seems to follow that of Proclus. Logically, there are common doctrines in Cusanus and Ficino, but, even so, they differ in their interest in Proclus.

After Ficino, an echo of Proclus's doctrines remained, e.g. in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola or Agostino Steuco,<sup>16</sup> even though the use of his writings was diluted when faced with the abundant new translations of Aristotle and the academic debates between the different Aristotelianisms. Even so, Proclus undoubtedly benefitted from the widespread intent at the time to edit and translate the writings of philosophers

<sup>9</sup> Lossky 2009, 19–33.

<sup>10</sup> Gersh 1978a.

<sup>11</sup> Colomer 1975, 81ff.

<sup>12</sup> Retucci 2008, 135–165.

<sup>13</sup> Celenza 2002Allen, Rees, and Davies 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Tambrun 2006a, 89–91.

<sup>15</sup> Kristeller 1987, 191–211.

<sup>16</sup> Schmitt 1996, 505–532.

and scientists of antiquity. His works, and particularly his scientific writings,<sup>17</sup> were read widely.

Special importance must be given to the edition of the Greek text of the *Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements* by Gryneus in 1533. Later, in 1560, Barozzi prints the Latin translation, which would provide the occasion for an important debate regarding the status of mathematics. In this case, Proclus will not be the leading representative of a new vindication of Platonism; rather, this text, as an interpretation of Euclid, will be the direct object of study by Aristotelians and mathematical circles.<sup>18</sup>

In synthesis, the reception of Proclus runs along two clearly differentiated paths. On the one hand, a direct reception can be located chronologically, both in Byzantium as well as in the West. On the other hand, there is indirect reception, primarily by way of the Dionysian writings, but also, in the case of the West, via Eriugena and the *Liber de causis*.

### 3 Proclus in Byzantium

The immediate reception of Proclus is important,<sup>19</sup> as can be seen in Damascius and Pseudo-Dionysius, and, from a critical point of view, Philoponus. Nevertheless, throughout the 6th century, his writings, and even references to him, seem to remain in the background, and there is hardly any mention of them in the 7th and 8th centuries. It is only through the efforts of Leo the Mathematician and Arethas of Caesarea that at least some of his writings received renewed attention,<sup>20</sup> and it is probably thanks to these two thinkers, among others, that Proclus is saved from disappearing. Both Photius and the Suda<sup>21</sup> register and disseminate knowledge about Proclus, as well as some of his works, but without any special sympathy.

The situation is obviously different in the case of the Dionysian writings and the interpretation developed by Maximus the Confessor, but in both cases some of Proclus's doctrines, already Christianized and without any reference to Proclus himself, are spread widely in Byzantium. Something similar could be said of Philoponus, Ammonius and Simplicius.

The situation in Byzantium takes an important turn after Michael Psellos. If we pay attention to his declarations,<sup>22</sup> Proclus's doctrines enjoy a central position in Psellos's thought. Nevertheless, while Psellos certainly does make use of Proclus in some

<sup>17</sup> A. P. Segonds 1987, 319–334.

<sup>18</sup> Crapulli 1969; Sasaki 2003, 13–62, 333–358; Rabouin 2009, 199–250.

<sup>19</sup> Parry 2006d, 223–235.

<sup>20</sup> Lemerle 1971, 169–176, 239–241.

<sup>21</sup> Lemerle 1971, 212.

<sup>22</sup> “Both [Aristotle and Plato] gave me a renewed desire to descend, as completing a circle, towards the Plotinuses, Porphyrys and Iamblichos, with whose company I followed the road that led to the

areas,<sup>23</sup> his cultural and philosophical interests go far beyond Proclus's philosophy.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, Aristotle holds a place that is as relevant as Proclus, and Psellos's own writings show a varied set of interests, in which history and politics play a significant part.

Psellos follows Proclus straightforwardly on certain concrete questions, for example in his commentary on the *Chaldean Oracles*, when questioning the place of the imaginative faculty or the scale of the virtues; above all, however, Psellos summarizes the general outline of Proclus's thought.<sup>25</sup> More specifically, what we might call his rationalism<sup>26</sup>, his naturalism, his vindication of Plato and the Platonic tradition, and of course his accepting the existence of an ancient form of wisdom which – dating back to the *Chaldean Oracles*, passes through Pythagoreanism and Plato, and continues with the Neoplatonic philosophers – integrates all other philosophies and religions in a complete and coherent interpretation of reality. For Psellos, of course, paganism in Proclus and other religions culminates in Christianity as the crowning doctrine, greater than all other religions and philosophies.

Among Psellos's disciples, the figure of John Italos holds a special interest, for an explicit reference to Proclus is made in his condemnation, as being the one who inspired his erroneous doctrines (Πρόκλω τάχα καὶ Ἰαμβλίχῳ πειθόμενος τοῖς τῆς ἀπωλείας τούτου καθηγηταῖς).<sup>27</sup> Even so, an analysis of the texts condemning Italos shows that the allusions to Proclus are superficial and of a rather rhetorical character, as if Proclus was just a metonymy to signify the entire pagan philosophy (τῆς ἑλληνικῆς ἀθεότητος),<sup>28</sup> and, more generally, philosophy as a rational way of regarding the Christian mysteries. In any case, a reading of Italos's own writings reveals a conscious use of Proclus's works.

The condemnation of some of Italos's disciples, e.g. Eustratius of Nicea, do not add much more clarification to this subject, even when his writings show determinate traces of Proclus's doctrines, as is also the case with those of Michael of Ephesus.<sup>29</sup> It might be suggested, at any rate, that in the circle of Anna Komnene – whether they were philosophers or not – Proclus's writings were still being pondered.

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admirable Proclus, with whom I moored as if in a wide port. There is where I learned all the doctrine and the exact foundations of intellection": Michele Psello. *Imperatori di Bisanzio (Cronografia)*, S. Impellizeri, Milano 1999, 4<sup>a</sup> ed., VII, 38 (Spanish trans. by J. Signes Codoñer, Madrid 2005, pp. 233–234).  
**23** Podskalsky 1976d, 517–518; Benakis 1987d, 252–253.

**24** In any case, Psellos remains "terra incognita": cf. Signes Codoñer 2005, p. 25. Also J. Duffy 2006b, 2006.

**25** Kaldellis 2008, 194ff.

**26** Kaldellis 2008, 203–214.

**27** Gouillard 1985d, 147, 202–203.

**28** Gouillard 1985d, 155, 370–371.

**29** Steel 2002c, 51–57.

It is hard, in any case, to determine to what extent Proclus's doctrines were still in use.<sup>30</sup> There are two authors that almost simultaneously – around 1100 – display a very special interest in Proclus's philosophy, even though they do so in entirely opposite ways. On one hand, in Georgia Ioane Petritsi<sup>31</sup> begins a rigorous study of Proclus's works. On the other hand, in Byzantium itself, Bishop Nicholas of Methone composes a *Refutation of the Elements of Theology*, because he considers it a work that is especially threatening to Orthodoxy.

After 1261, we can perceive signs that the censorship of Proclus has eased up. On one hand, we find the works of George Pachymeres on Proclus,<sup>32</sup> especially those concerning the *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, we can trace the spread of Proclus's scientific writings, probably meant to be used as school manuals. Finally, we find a systematic copying of Proclus's writings beginning in 1350, most probably by the Prodromou-Petra monastery (in Constantinople).<sup>34</sup>

In sum, we can distinguish various phases in the reception of Proclus in Byzantium: 1) In the 5th and 6th centuries references to his doctrines and writings are frequent. 2) In the following centuries his writings appear to have been forgotten, until they surface again with Leo and Aretas. 3) Thanks almost exclusively to Psellos, Proclus becomes newly important in philosophy, an importance he will maintain. 4) From 1261 to 1453 the theological censures are mitigated, and his writings once again circulate.

From the doctrinal point of view, the most striking aspect is the widespread acceptance of Dionysian theology, as opposed to the theology of Proclus, which is the foundation for the former. This allows us to conclude that this rejection affects only superficial aspects and not the deepest ground of the philosophy of Proclus. At any rate, starting with Psellos, Proclus is presented as a symbol of Greek rationalism and naturalism that subverts Christian mysteries, as opposed to St. Dionysius.

## 4 Proclus and Pletho

It does not appear that Pletho contributed in any serious way to the spreading of Proclus's ideas in Italy, during his stay in Florence. His contributions were more focused on the defence of Plato against Aristotle. Scholarius's reproaches of Pletho due to his dependency on Proclus<sup>35</sup> were based on the obvious coincidences between the two

<sup>30</sup> Podskalsky 1976d, 520–521; Angelou 1984b, lviii.

<sup>31</sup> Alexidze and Bergemann 2009a; Iremadze 2004c.

<sup>32</sup> Saffrey and Westerink 1987, vol. V, lix–lxix.

<sup>33</sup> Steel and Macé 2006a, 77–99.

<sup>34</sup> Cacouros 2000b, 615.

<sup>35</sup> Woodhouse 1986a, 73–78.

philosophers. And yet, behind these apparent coincidences, strong discrepancies can be discerned between Proclus and Pletho.<sup>36</sup> Of course, the fact that the *Treatise on Laws* was destroyed renders us incapable of reaching any definitive conclusion. Even so, it is possible to show how close or how far apart they are in their central tenets.

The most obvious coincidences are found in the general outlines of their thought. Pletho, just like Proclus, belongs to the Platonic tradition. His critiques of Aristotle, like those of Proclus, are only meant to show Plato's superiority over his disciple; this does not prevent them from adopting numerous Aristotelian doctrines. In general, many of Neoplatonism's classic themes can be found in Pletho: for example, the affirmation of the One's transcendence over the Intellect, as well as the middle place of the Soul between the intelligible and the sensible world. Further, there is the derivation of the whole of reality from the One, conceived as a First Cause, in such a way that physical reality is but the unfurling of the One's potency.

Additionally, in both Pletho and in Proclus there is a manifest interest in the recovery of Ancient Greek polytheism. In the eyes of Scholarius, this is undoubtedly the most scandalous coincidence. In order to carry on with this task, Pletho, like Proclus before him, holds that Plato's intelligible world corresponds to a divine domain. That is to say: Platonic ideas – differently formulated by each of them, we should note, – are transformed into Ancient deities.

In any case, the result of this correspondence between Platonic ideas and pagan gods implies a certain rationalization or demythologization of pagan religious traditions. That is to say, in both cases we can find philosophical notions behind divine shapes, constituting an autonomous philosophical system. Pletho, like Proclus before him,<sup>37</sup> strives to build a scientific theology, which can be developed in a strictly rational fashion, but having a polytheist character, so that that it can be adjusted to pagan beliefs.

Both authors also agree in their genealogical interpretation of knowledge. Platonic philosophy would be, in this interpretation, only the latest link in a much older tradition dating back to an ancient wisdom that Plato encountered through Pythagoras. Both Pletho and Proclus find in the *Chaldean Oracles* a sacred revelation of this ancient wisdom, even if they do so in different ways. All philosophies and religions are

<sup>36</sup> Tambrun 2006a, 153–168. See also: Plethon, *Oracles Chaldaïques*, ed. B. Tambrun-Krasker, Bruxelles 1995; Tambrun-Krasker 1987.

<sup>37</sup> Saffrey and Westerink 1978, vol. III, lxxi–lxxii: “Ainsi, dans la mesure où la théologie comme science a supplanté la théologie symbolique ou mythologique, qui était la théologie traditionnelle depuis les origines de la pensée grecque, on peut dire que cette nouvelle théologie scientifique a opéré une sorte de ‘démithologisation’. Mais il est évident que cette ‘démithologisation’ atteint son achèvement complet, lorsque les dieux du panthéon olympien sont devenus les hénades divines. Lorsque Proclus nous dit que la propriété qui définit la déesse Hestia, c’est ‘être en soi-même’, et celle qui définit la déesse Héra, c’est ‘être en un autre’, nous sommes devant un cas de ‘démithologisation’ complète. Mais, parce que Proclus était un génie, il savait garder conjoints l’ordre de la théologie scientifique et celui de la piété populaire qui n’est autre que la dévotion du cœur.”

nothing more than a reformulation, more or less distorted, of this *philosophia perennis*.

In addition to the general outline of their doctrines, which have their origin in the Neoplatonic tradition – particularly in Proclus, of course – there are numerous concrete points where Proclus’s influence becomes manifest, e.g. the positive character attributed to matter,<sup>38</sup> the role of the *ochema*,<sup>39</sup> the *peras-apeiria*<sup>40</sup> duality, the conception of the particular as an expression of the universal, etc.

Scholarius’s criticism therefore seems justified, in certain measure. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis of those of Pletho’s writings still available to us reveals discrepancies with Proclus on numerous issues, some of them highly relevant. It is also not at all clear just how deeply Scholarius was familiar with Proclus. There was a firmly rooted prejudice in Byzantium that saw Proclus as a champion of paganism and an enemy of Christian orthodoxy. It is even possible that some sort of “*Syllabus*”<sup>41</sup> may have existed, where those of Proclus’s ideas considered most dangerous were summarized; this might constitute Scholarius’s principal source of knowledge. In any case, whether due to ignorance, or because he just wished to highlight Pletho’s heterodoxy, Scholarius does not take into account the notable differences between the former and Proclus.

Going beyond general outlines, Pletho’s interest in politics,<sup>42</sup> laws, and, more concretely, in the Byzantine Empire, is not found in Proclus. This does not mean a contradiction, since Proclus does concede value to political reflection, as his commentaries on Plato’s *Republic* make manifest: he appreciates political virtue, and is not unaware of the political intrigues of his time. It is, however, revealing that Pletho’s *opus maior* was a *Treatise on Laws*, just as in Plato’s case. This change of perspective is visible in his consideration of virtues<sup>43</sup>: unlike the Neoplatonic scale of the virtues, in which political virtue can be found in the very early steps of moral progression, Pletho recovers the central worth of justice as an essential virtue for the whole of society.

The most radical difference between them, made explicit by Pletho himself, lies in the correspondence established by Pletho between the One and Being. In the case of this last issue, Pletho does not just break with Proclus, but also with Plotinus and Iamblichus. The transcendence of the One over Being was, in general, commonplace in the Neoplatonic tradition.

<sup>38</sup> Pletho, *Oracles Chaldaïques*, 14, p. 22, 4–8. Cf. Procl., *In Alcib.*, 320, 10–11, ed. A.-Ph. Segonds, Paris 2003, p. 451n: (τὸ μὲν ὑλικὸν αἴτιον, εἰ καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἔστιν) “La matière a part à l’un-bien : thèse capitale de Proclus”.

<sup>39</sup> Pletho, *Oracles Chaldaïques*, 14, pp. 10–12, 89–103.

<sup>40</sup> Pletho, *Tratado sobre las leyes*, 105–106.

<sup>41</sup> Cacouros 2000b, 593–595; Cacouros 2007a, 194.

<sup>42</sup> Lisi and Signes 1995, xxx–xxxv.

<sup>43</sup> Tambrun-Krasker 1987; Masai 1956b, 245–263.



At this juncture, Pletho shows signs of support for the rejection of negative theology. While according to Proclus the First transcends all intellect, and can therefore only be accessed through negation, Pletho on the contrary advocates an affirmative theology, in which divine attributes may be expressed, both in the cases of the One and the other gods.

We must take into account the fact that Pletho knows of the victory of the Palamites, which had already been incorporated into Byzantine orthodoxy. Palamite Hesychasm is a radical expression of negative theology that, inspired by Dionysian texts, has characterized Orthodox spirituality ever since, especially monastic spirituality. Pletho, on the other hand, is completely allergic not only to Hesychasm, but more generally to the entirety of monastic culture. He characterizes the monk as a parasite that does not assume the mission given to every man, namely, to become a link between the material and the intelligible world. By withdrawing from the world, the monk relinquishes the divine mission that was entrusted to him.

In the same vein, the first differentiated expression of the One, according to Proclus (*peras-apeiria*), is substituted in Pletho by the distinction between being by itself, and being by reason of another.<sup>44</sup> If, for Proclus, the *apeiria* expresses the infinite potentiality of the One, irreducible to any affirmative statement, Pletho's negative theology, on the contrary, portrays the One as the only being that is by itself, unlike the rest of realities that exist through another, which in a way recalls the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accidents.

Similarly, Pletho's philosophy seems to be centered on the causal derivation of reality from the One, while the *epistrophe* moment, the return of all that is real to the One, seems to be relegated to a secondary importance. While Proclus's reality has at its essential core a triadic and circular scheme, Pletho seems to replace it with *diairesis*. If Proclus's *Parmenides* represents the culmination of Platonic theology, Pletho's choice of a reference dialogue seems to be the *Sophist* instead, inasmuch as everything seems to be articulated around identity, otherness, repose and movement.<sup>45</sup>

At any rate, the divine and intelligible world of Pletho differs considerably from Proclus's pantheon. *Henads* have disappeared; as has the Proclean triple division between what is intelligible (*noetos*), what is intelligible-intellective (*noetos-noeros*), and what is intellective (*noeros*). The One, for Pletho, is immediately followed by *Nous*, as in Plotinus, obviating Proclus's emphasis on establishing mediations to avoid any discontinuity. Otherwise, demiurgy, which for Proclus is a divine activity proper to the intellective (*noeros*) domain, in Pletho belongs to Zeus himself, and only in a derivative way does it belong to the second divinity (Poseidon).

More generally, Pletho's pantheon differs radically from that of Proclus. Without a doubt Pletho's sources are, in this matter, very different from those of Proclus.

<sup>44</sup> Pletho, *Oracles Chaldaïques*, 14, p. 18, 14–19 ; cf. Tambrun 2006a, 149.

<sup>45</sup> Tambrun 2006a, 158–159.

Plutarch, Iamblichus, Timaeus of Locri, Julian and especially Aelius Aristides,<sup>46</sup> are more noticeably influential in Pletho. In addition, Orphic theology is not relevant for Pletho as it is for Proclus.

Finally, Pletho emphasizes the necessity of destiny in a Stoic fashion, undervaluing human freedom.<sup>47</sup> Proclus's determination to save human freedom is discarded by Pletho, who wagers on accepting servitude to the best of beings.

In sum, Pletho can be considered to be the concluding term of the reception of Proclus in Byzantium: on the one hand, he systematizes and radicalizes the rationalist reading that Psellos and Italos had already proposed; and on the other, he completely rejects Palamism and the mystical theology of Dionysius.

## 5 From Moerbeke to Nicholas of Cusa

Nicholas of Cusa's reception of Proclus<sup>48</sup> is dependent on a wholly different tradition<sup>49</sup> from that of Pletho. Even if they were coetaneous and coincided in space – for the brief years of the Council of Ferrara-Florence, at least – and even despite Bessarion, disciple of Pletho and friend of Cusanus, the interpretation of Proclus is considerably different in Pletho than in Nicholas of Cusa.

In the Latin tradition, Dionysian writings had been the object of numerous commentaries and interpretations – which Cusanus knows and appreciates – by the likes of Eriugena, Thierry of Chartres and Albert the Great. The *Liber de causis* had served as an inspiration for numerous authors since the 12th century, as well. Moreover, Moerbeke's translations, particularly the *Elementatio theologica*, had encouraged philosophical reflection to move in a new direction, as can be seen in Dietrich of Freiburg or Berthold of Moosburg. Additionally, in contrast to the Byzantine tradition, Latin Platonists had always been fed by the writings of Augustine of Hippo.

The reading of Proclus, as a result, begins with Dionysius and his commentators, as well as with St. Augustine and Avicenna. In contrast to Byzantium, in the West there was no opposition between Dionysius and Proclus, but rather a complete continuity. Nor was there religious censure of Proclus, as opposed to the condemnations of Aristotle and Eriugena. Religious reservations about rationalism were directed towards Averroes and not towards Proclus.

Cusanus's acknowledgment of Proclus's writings seems to date to a very early time, certainly prior at least to his writing of the *Docta ignorantia* and *De coniecturis*. We know this not only because we have at our disposal fragments of the *Commen-*

<sup>46</sup> Tambrun 2006a, 187–195.

<sup>47</sup> Pletho, *Tratado sobre las leyes*, 64–78.

<sup>48</sup> d'Amico 2009, 107–134.

<sup>49</sup> Kristeller 1987, 191–211.

tary on the *Parmenides* and the *Platonic Theology* with comments written in his own hand,<sup>50</sup> but also because Cusanus seems to know and have assimilated the *Elements of Theology*, which had inspired Dietrich and Berthold of Moosburg. Before Cusanus, proposition 83 (πὸν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ γνωστικὸν πρὸς ἑαυτὸ πάντῃ ἐπιστρεπτικὸν ἐστίν) or the equivalent proposition 15 of the *Liber de causis* (“omnis sciens qui scit essentiam suam est rediens ad essentiam suam reditione completa”), had already received particular attention among Albert’s disciples (including Thomas Aquinas<sup>51</sup> and Eckhart). The return of thought to itself implied the intellection of the *unum in nobis*, which, in turn, stands as the ground of itself and of all knowledge.

Right from the beginning of the *Elements*,<sup>52</sup> Proclus lays down how, from the unity of the *unum in nobis*, the contradiction between the One and the not-one arises: πὸν τὸ μετέχον τοῦ ἐνὸς καὶ ἓν ἐστὶ καὶ οὐχ ἓν. The synthesis of opposites, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, defines the *intellectus*. Thus, the *Commentary on the Parmenides*<sup>53</sup> acquires a special relevance. The priority of negation over affirmation represents a doctrine defended by Cusanus throughout his whole life.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, Eckhart<sup>55</sup> and the Pseudo-Dionysius are, for Cusanus, as important as Proclus. Dialectics thus appears as one of his methodological bases.<sup>56</sup> Negation is what makes the overcoming of the one-sidedness of our knowledge possible. It is dialectics that makes possible, more precisely, the overcoming – negation – of the one-sidedness of our knowledge, and the integration of new perspectives into it.

The *visio Dei* opposes the *angulus oculi* of human knowledge.<sup>57</sup> Our knowledge is only partial, for we possess only one perspective, while God covers with his gaze the totality of the universe’s viewpoints. Perhaps one of Proclus’s most influential theses in the 15th century, especially in the West, is the one Trouillard calls “monadology”.<sup>58</sup> The sources of Renaissance perspectivism are undoubtedly many, but it is quite tempt-

<sup>50</sup> Beierwaltes 2005, 68–69; d’Amico 2009, 111–112.

<sup>51</sup> Hankey 2002, 279–324.

<sup>52</sup> Procl., *El. Th.*, prop. 2.

<sup>53</sup> And yet he does not seem interested in Proclus’s scientific writings or in his *Commentary on the Timaeus*. He also does not seem to have known the *Commentary on the First Book of Euclid’s Elements*, which was not translated until 1560 by Francesco Barozzi.

<sup>54</sup> d’Amico 2009, 126–132.

<sup>55</sup> Mojsisch 1991, 675–693.

<sup>56</sup> Concerning the distinction *intellectus-ratio*, cf. Flasch 2001, 156–164.

<sup>57</sup> Beierwaltes 2005, 216–222.

<sup>58</sup> Trouillard 1959, 309–320; cf. also Trouillard 1972, 20: “Ainsi chaque point de l’univers intelligible est d’une manière originale le tout, non seulement parce qu’il est un foyer original de relations, mais surtout parce qu’il effectue en lui-même le processus constituant du tout”.

ing at this point to refer to proposition 103 of the *Elements of Theology*:<sup>59</sup> πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν, οἰκείως δὲ ἐν ἑκάστῳ.

Already in *De coniecturis*, when referring to *De tribus mundis*, Cusanus reasserts Proclus's doctrine: "centrum primi deus, centrum secundi intelligentia, centrum tertii ratio".<sup>60</sup> And he goes on to add: "Omnia sunt in primo mundo, omnia in secundo, omnia in tertio, in quolibet modo suo".<sup>61</sup> But now, in a much more accented way than even Proclus, this thesis is applied to man:

Homo enim deus est, sed non absolute, quoniam homo; humanus est igitur deus. Homo etiam mundus est, sed non contracte omnia, quoniam homo. Est igitur homo microcosmos aut humanus quidem mundus. Regio igitur ipsa humanitatis deum atque universum mundum humanali sua potentia ambit.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, in Cusanus the highlight is displaced from the human being in general to the concrete individual in particular:

Singularitas igitur omnia singularizat, specialitas specializat, generalitas generalizat, universalitas universalizat. Omnia enim universalia, generalia atque specialia in te Iuliano iulianizant, ut harmonia in luto lutinizat, et ita de reliquis. Neque in alio hoc ut in te possibile est. Hoc autem, quod in te Iuliano est iulianizare, in hominibus cunctis est humanizare, in animalibus animalizare, et ita deinceps.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> In this sense Dodds (1962, 254) points out the following regarding prop. 103: "The general principle of which this is a particular application, viz. that 'all things, but in each after its own fashion', is ascribed by Syrianus (in *Metaph.* 82. I ff.) to 'the Pythagoreans', and by Iamblichus (ap. *Stob. Ecl.* I. xlix. 31 [866H]) to Numenius. Plot. applies it to the relations of intelligibles in general (*V. viii.* 4; *II.* 235. 23); it is explicitly laid down by Porphyry (*aph.* X), and from Iamblichus (cf. *Pr.*, in *Tim.* I, 426, 20) onwards it is much resorted to. The later school saw in it a convenient means of covering all the gaps left by Plotinus in his derivation of the world of experience, and thus assuring the unity of the system: it bridged oppositions without destroying them. *Pr.* uses it not only to explain the Platonic κοινωνία εἰδῶν (in *Prm.* 751 ff.) and to solve Parmenides's difficulties about transcendent Forms (in *Prm.* 928ff.), but also to link together the four material elements (in *Tim.* II. 26. 23ff.); he even adduces it to justify the community of women and children in the *Republic* (*ibid.* I. 48. 24ff.); and it enables him to evade such a question as 'Where does sphericity begin?' by replying that it exists 'intellectively' in the demiurge, 'intelligibly' in the αὐτόζωον, and on still higher planes 'secretly' (*ibid.* II. 77: cf. 83. 161. 26, III. 285. 30, in *Prm.* 812. 10). The formula was taken over by Ps.-Dion. (e.g. *Div. Nom.* 4. 7) to be echoed in the Renaissance by Bruno, and later given a new meaning by Leibniz (cf. *Principles of Nature and Grace*, 3: 'Chaque monade est un miroir vivant, représentatif de 'l'univers suivant son point de vue)'). Similarly, regarding *In Prm.* 755, 5–14, J. Dillon comments: "It is best, perhaps, to see the Platonic Forms as distinct 'points of view' within an integrated system, each containing the whole, but from a unique perspective" (Dillon 1987, 97). And also: "The extreme realism of Proclus' philosophical position leads to his postulation of distinct entities answering to each aspect of an hypostasis, but things become clearer if we think of them as just aspects after all" (Dillon 1987, xx).

<sup>60</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis*, I 12, 62, *Opera omnia*, vol. III, ed. J. Koch, Hamburg 1972.

<sup>61</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis*, I 12, 63.

<sup>62</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis*, II 14, 143.

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis*, II 3, 89.

In a similar vein as Proclus, Cusanus holds that everything is in everything, but each individual is in the individualized whole. The individual perspective on totality is unique (οἰκείως δὲ ἐν ἐκάστω).

This also applies to the diversity of religions. Already in Cusanus we may readily find – probably without it being related to Proclus – an interpretation of the diversity of religions as diverse ways of expressing the unknowable God,<sup>64</sup> according to their distinct traditions. The Neoplatonic and Proclean *topos* of the unity of all religions in a *prisca theologia* reappears in Cusanus. In a similar fashion, the Proclean doctrine of the necessity of conjoining the distinct viewpoints corresponding to each of the monarch's counselors<sup>65</sup> seems to reawaken – again, without Proclus – his initial support for Conciliarism.

Negative theology and cognitive partiality go hand in hand: if we can only utter negative statements about God, our knowledge of any reality is weakened due to the ultimate lack of grounding. We are only capable of forming conjectures, for the ground of reality is veiled from us.

The priority of negation is closely linked to the priority of the One. In *De principio*, Cusanus,<sup>66</sup> following Proclus, argues in different ways about the necessity of the One (*unum necessarium*): all that can be participated is plural and thus exists by means of another, unlike that which cannot be participated (*amethektos*),<sup>67</sup> which is One and is *per se subsistens* (*authupostatos*). The One is beyond *ens* and *non ens*, beyond affirmation and negation, potency and act, and even beyond unity and plurality.

Infinity also reappears in Cusanus as a positive characterization of the One.<sup>68</sup> The *autapeiria* as expression of the One in Proclus is reaffirmed here. Infinity is thus one of the aspects of negative theology: God's unreachability resides also in His infinity.

Nonetheless, Cusanus deviates from Proclus at several points, especially as he tries to accommodate him to Christian doctrines. On the one hand, he emphasizes Christian monotheism, in contrast to Proclus's attribution of *authupostatos* to other gods besides the One, and even to souls; Cusanus limits the *per se subsistere*<sup>69</sup> to God alone. On the other hand, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and particularly the characterization of the Son as *Logos*, compels Cusanus to recover the Intellect as a divine feature: God is One, but also Being,<sup>70</sup> and Intellect (*divina infinita ratio*).

Lastly, an important change in perspective in Cusanus's reading of Proclus must be highlighted. Human subjectivity (*angulus oculi*) now comes to the fore. While Pro-

<sup>64</sup> Saffrey 1992a, 35–50.

<sup>65</sup> Procl., *In Alc.*, 182, 1–20; Proclus. *Sur le premier Alcibiade de Platon*, Paris 2003.

<sup>66</sup> Flasch 2001, 502–510.

<sup>67</sup> d'Amico 2009, 116.

<sup>68</sup> d'Amico 2009, 113–114.

<sup>69</sup> Flasch 2001, 504: “Es gibt nur ein *authupostaton*. Wir könnten das übersetzen: Es gibt nur ein einziges Wesen, das alles ist, was sein kann. Es existiert nur *eine* Substanz”.

<sup>70</sup> Beierwaltes 1987, 287–297.

clus draws attention to the soul – and the One in the soul –, Cusanus always centers his considerations on man.<sup>71</sup> The soul's statute as a means is now undeviatingly redirected towards man.

In sum, just as Plethon does, Nicholas of Cusa reads Proclus as engaged in a polemic against Scholastic Aristotelianism. But unlike Pletho, the Cusanus's reading is in continuity with St. Augustine and Dionysius. In this sense, he emphasizes the value of interiority, i.e. the circular regression of thought towards itself, as a search for the *unum in nobis* (Proclus) or of the *abditum mentis* (Augustine); and finally, as a way for the mind to have access to the knowledge of God. In second place, in contrast to Pletho and in continuity with Dionysius, Nicholas emphasizes the value of negation and dialectic as a path to the progress of thought: the doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum* and the characterization of God as *non aliud* are proof of it. Finally, his interpretation of Proclus is inserted into the perspectivist context of the Renaissance, where human subjectivity acquires force: in this way, the monadology of Proclus (*El. th.*103) is interpreted as an essential trait of human knowledge, which is characterized as *angulus oculi* and as conjecture.

## 6 From Pletho to Ficino

Compared to Pletho or Nicholas of Cusa, Ficino's reception of Proclus is a late development. Ficino knows Plato's writings well, and it seems reasonable to assume that he was aware of Cusanus's stance. Moreover, he very early on translates Plato and Plotinus, whom he knows profoundly, unlike Cusanus. In addition, he rates Pseudo-Dionysius and Iamblichus<sup>72</sup> above Proclus. Consequently, both the Byzantine and the Latin tradition converge in Ficino. Furthermore, Ficino knows the history and writings of the Platonist tradition with greater precision than Cusanus. At any rate, there are some sources in Ficino that have a greater relevance than in Cusanus or Pletho (as is the case, for example, of the *Corpus Hermeticum*).

Pletho's connection with Ficino is rather indirect, insofar as Cosimo de' Medici seems to have drawn inspiration from Pletho's ideas, during his stay in Florence to promote the Academy that Ficino will run. In any case, he knew and studied his writings.<sup>73</sup> There is a general notion in Pletho's thought that is clearly echoed by Ficino: the existence of an ancient wisdom that has been written down in the *Chaldean Oracles*. In Pletho, this wisdom referred to Zoroaster as its eldest form. Ficino also held a great appreciation for that work, even if he does not concede it the preeminence as a sacred text bestowed on it by Pletho, which Ficino grants only to the Christian Scrip-

<sup>71</sup> Flasch 2001, 153–155.

<sup>72</sup> Concerning the strong mark left by Iamblichus in Ficino, cf. Celenza 2002.

<sup>73</sup> Tambrun 2006a, 241–259.

tures. At any rate, Ficino acknowledges the successive commentaries to the Chaldean Oracles undertaken by Pletho, Psellos, and Proclus himself.

The doctrine of *ochema*, present in the commentaries of Proclus, Psellos and Pletho on the *Chaldean Oracles*,<sup>74</sup> fruit of a long Neoplatonic tradition, is maintained by Ficino. It is the vehicle of the soul and, at one of its levels, accompanies the soul in its immortality. It is an ethereal and immortal element that withstands the corruption of the body after an individual's death. It is the seat of the imaginative faculty and the irrational soul.

On the other hand, dialectics also plays a central role in Ficino.<sup>75</sup> The human soul, after coming into the exterior world, reverses upon itself, becomes reflexive, and establishes an opposition between the outside world and what it is in itself. That is to say, it has a negative potency that negates all that which it is not. Just as non-being is infinite, this is an infinite potency. In this way, it is capable of establishing a mediation between all things, inasmuch as it relates to all that it itself is not, from God (starting from the *unum in nobis*) to the body (and, in a broader sense, the sensible world).

At any rate, perhaps the issue where Proclus's presence in Ficino is more visible and relevant is in his doctrine about the self-production of the soul.<sup>76</sup> This is a notion that Proclus stressed heavily in the *Elements of Theology*,<sup>77</sup> and was afterwards thoroughly developed by Latin writers based on the *Liber de causis*<sup>78</sup> and Moerbeke's translations. The idea is that if something is capable of reflecting upon itself, then its essence is capable of self-production.

In Dietrich of Freiberg, for example, this doctrine was interpreted with a special radicalism. Heymeric van der Valde also alludes on several occasions to this proposition. Nicholas of Cusa, however, neatly distinguishes between God's *per se subsistere* and human reflexivity. For Pletho also, existing *per se* is proper only to Zeus.

Ficino gives ample consideration to this Proclean doctrine, though now in an original way. On the one hand, Ficino characterizes the human soul as *tertia essentia*, that is to say, as an intermediary being between God and the angels on one side, and qual-

<sup>74</sup> García Bazán 1991, 131–135.

<sup>75</sup> Allen 1998, 149–193.

<sup>76</sup> Schefer 2001, 13–27.

<sup>77</sup> “Every soul is self-animated. For if it is capable of reversion upon itself, and all that is capable of such reversion is self-constituted, then soul is self-constituted and the cause of its own being” (Procl., *Elem. Theol.*, prop. 189; Engl. tr. by E. R. Dodds). Also proposition 83: “All that is capable of self-knowledge is capable of every form of self-reversion. For that it is self-reversive in its activity is evident, since it knows itself. [...] But if in activity, then also in existence, as has been shown: for everything whose activity reverts upon itself has also an existence which is self-concentrated and self-contained”.

<sup>78</sup> Proposition XIV (XV) of the *Liber de causis* held that: “omnis sciens qui scit essentiam suam est redivens ad essentiam suam reditione completa”: ed. A. Pattin, *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 28 (1966), 134–203.

ity and the body on the other.<sup>79</sup> This medial character makes it possible for the soul to serve as a link between God and the physical world. The mediation of gods, angels or demons makes way in Ficino for the exclusive mediation of the human soul. Ficino has transferred to the human soul the Neoplatonic world of intelligibles.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, each soul – Picos’s objection notwithstanding – has been individually created by God.<sup>81</sup> Each human soul is therefore self-productive, that is to say, it constitutes itself.<sup>82</sup>

Ficino’s interpretation aims at a demonstration of the immortality of the soul, the central purpose of his whole treatise. If the soul, once created, possesses the capacity to exist by itself, then it must be immortal, for it would depend on nothing but itself to exist. And this self-sustaining characterization of its essence can be argued to via the reflexivity of its intellectual and voluntary activity.<sup>83</sup> In all these considerations, Ficino is following Proclus.<sup>84</sup>

**79** Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, III, II, 1, ed. J. Hankins and W. Bowen, London 2004 (engl. tr. by M. J. B. Allen, vol. I, pp. 231–233): “Ceterum ut ad id quandoque veniamus quod cupimus, in quinque gradus iterum omnia colligamus, deum et angelum in arce naturae ponentes, corpus et qualitatem in infimo; animam vero inter illa summa et haec infima mediam, quam merito essentiam tertiam ac mediam more Platonico nominamus, quoniam et ad omnia media est et undique tertia”.

**80** Schefer 2001, 20: “Ficino opère une véritable inflexion de l’ordre noétique vers l’ordre psychique en caractérisant la tierce essence par la triade Être-vie-pensée qui définissait, chez Plotin, le Nous même c’est-à-dire l’Intelligence ou l’Être”.

**81** Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, V, XIII, 1, Hankins and Bowen, vol. II, p. 79: “esse a deo accipit sine medio”; “Quamquam Plotinus et Proclus aliique nonnulli Platoniorum animam fieri arbitrantur ab angelo, tamen Dionysium Areopagitam, Origenem et Aurelium Augustinum, Platonicos excellentissimos, sequor libentius, qui animam putant a deo unico procreari”.

**82** If, for Pletho, *epistrophe* – and circularity in general – occupies only a place secondary importance, for Ficino, as in Proclus, it becomes essential: “Sempiternal circular motion, then, is proper to the third essence insofar as the essence is brought back in a circle to itself” (Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, III, II, 8, Hankins, vol. I, p. 244, Engl. tr. p. 245). “Since it is the first to be moved, this essence necessarily moves through itself freely and in a circle. If it moves through itself, it acts surely through itself” (Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, V, V, 5, Hankins, vol. 2, p. 30; Engl. tr. p. 31).

**83** “Si per operationem in se reflectitur, reflectitur etiam per essentiam” (Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, IX, I, 4, Hankins, vol. 3, p. 10). Reflexivity is a given feature of the intellect as much as it is of the will (Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, IX, I, 3, Hankins, vol. 3, p. 10): “animam in se resolvi modis quatuor alias diximus, scilicet per intellectum in naturam suam, quando quaerit, invenit consideratque seipsam, per voluntatem in naturam eandem, quando se affectat et amat, per intellectum in actum ipsum intelligendi, quando et rem intellegit et se intellegit intellegere, per voluntatem in voluntatis actum, quando et vult aliquid, et vult se velle”.

**84** “Proclus says – and I just mention it in passing – that soul, since it is the principle of generation, gives birth to and animates itself such that it possesses essence from itself” (Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, VIII, XV, 4, Hankins, vol. 2, p. 356; engl. tr. p. 357). “Here Proclus makes the following distinction: he argues that unchangeable essences come from God in a way just once, but that they preserve themselves through their own power. For, since they exist through God simultaneously and without motion as wholes, they are able in some manner to remain at rest thereafter through themselves, and then to proceed



Nevertheless, these arguments concerning the soul's self-production deserve attention not only regarding the soul's immortality, but also because this doctrine includes within itself the affirmation of human freedom.<sup>85</sup> In other words, if man is capable of existing and acting by himself, that means he is free.<sup>86</sup> And if he can be in contact with the first and the last essences (with God or matter), then he can shape himself in the image of God or in the image of matter. His freedom allows him not only to link all realities, but also allows him to move more freely in every way.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, in Ficino Proclus does not receive the prominence that he had in Cusanus. Plato himself and other Platonists (Plotinus, Iamblichus, Hermes and Pletho) receive as much or more attention. In continuity with the reading of Pletho, he interprets the human soul (*tertia essentia*) as a link between God and the physical world. Even more, the Proclean doctrine about the self-constitution of the soul is at the base of Ficino's doctrine of the essential freedom of the human being. Apart from that, his conception of Platonic philosophy as the expression of a simple theology in which all the doctrines are integrated points to the reading of Psellos and Pletho.

## 7 By way of a conclusion

1. The reception of Proclus in Byzantium and the West differs radically. While in Byzantium he represents Greek rationalism – as opposed to the mystical theology of Dionysius –, in the West Proclus is read through Dionysius, in opposition to Aristotelian epistemology.
2. The rejection of Proclus in Byzantium is primarily due to religious censure and not philosophical arguments. In the West, on the other hand, he does not habitually receive theological criticisms and his writings are read from a fully philosophical perspective.
3. Psellos and Pletho in Byzantium, and Nicholas of Cusa in the West represent the most important landmarks for the direct reception of Proclus. Nevertheless, the tradition in which Cusanus reads Proclus does not depend directly either from Psellos or from Pletho.

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by their own power from their own particular potentialities to their own acts. Wherefore he calls such essences self-subsistent and claims that they are, in a sense, self-producing" (Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, XI, VI, 11, Hankins, vol. 3, p. 308; engl. tr. p. 309).

<sup>85</sup> Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, IX, IV.

<sup>86</sup> Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, IX, IV, 19, Hankins, vol. 3, p 56–57: to move on one's own (*per se moveri*) and to act freely (*libere agere*) are the same.

<sup>87</sup> Ficino, *Th. Pl.*, III, II, I, Hankins, vol. I, p. 230: "Anima est medius rerum gradus, atque omnes gradus tam superiores quam inferiores connectit in unum, dum ipsa et ad superos ascendit et descendit ad inferos".

4. In any case, the indirect reception of Proclus's doctrines, especially via Dionysius, Eriugena and the *Liber de causis*, is of a great relevance for the history of thought.

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