

THE FAR-WANDERER: PROCLUS ON THE TRANSMIGRATION OF THE SOUL

While commonly referring to us as ‘human’, ‘particular’ (μερικοί), or ‘rational’ (λογικοί) souls, in one striking passage, Proclus (*In Ti.* 3.259.21–7) instead describes us as

τὸ πολυπλανὲς καὶ μέχρι τοῦ Ταρτάρου κατιὸν καὶ αὐθις ἀνεγειρόμενον παντοῖά τε εἶδη ζωῆς ἀνελίττον ἥθεσί τε χρώμενον ποικίλοις καὶ πάθεσιν ἄλλοτε ἄλλοις καὶ μορφῶς ζῶων ἀλλαττόμενον πολυειδεῖς, δαιμονίας ἀνθρωπίνας ἀλόγους, κατευθυνόμενον δ’ οὖν ὁμῶς ὑπὸ τῆς Δίκης καὶ εἰς οὐρανὸν ἀπὸ γῆς ἀνατρέχον καὶ εἰς νοῦν ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης περιεγόμενον κατὰ δὴ τινὰς τεταγμένας τῶν ὅλων περιόδους.

a far-wanderer, who descends all the way to Tartarus only to be raised up again, who unfolds all possible forms of life, making use of diverse manners and suffering one passion after another, who takes on the forms of living beings of every sort, daemons, men and irrational creatures, and yet is guided by Justice, ascending from earth to heaven and from matter to intellect, being led round and round in accordance with certain prescribed revolutions of the universe.¹

With this last epithet, Proclus reveals what sets us apart from the rest of reality. Although we are not the only ‘human’, ‘particular’ and ‘rational’ souls in the Proclean universe,² nothing else, soul or otherwise, shares in our vagabond existence and ‘is borne from one to the other extreme, as far as the Good and as far as Tartarus’ (*In R.* 2.310.25–6).

Given that this is Proclus’ most precise definition of what we are, it comes as a surprise that his teachings on the transmigration of the soul should have received so little attention.³ The present study therefore proposes to take a step towards filling this unfortunate gap in the scholarship by offering a synthesis of Proclus’ reflections on our soul as a far-wanderer, followed by a brief discussion of how these reflections shaped his understanding of the human condition.

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² The so-called ‘immaculate souls’, which we shall discuss below, may be equally described as such.

³ Especially in view of the current interest in Neoplatonic reflections on selfhood and subjectivity. With the exception of J. Trouillard’s two late articles, ‘Proclus et la joie de quitter le ciel’, *Diotima* 11 (1983), 182–93, and ‘Métempsomatose proclienne et eschatologie érigénienne’, *Annales de l’Institut de philosophie de l’Université de Bruxelles* (1984), 87–99, there exist only passing treatments of Proclus’ reflections on transmigration in the context of broader surveys of transmigration amongst late antique Platonists in general. For an example of such a survey, see H. Dörrie, ‘Kontroversen um die Seelenwanderung im kaiserzeitlichen Platonismus’, *Hermes* 85 (1957), 414–35.

1. SOURCES

Proclus' theory of the transmigrating soul was, in his opinion, merely an exegesis and collation of certain passages of Plato, principally the so-called 'laws of Fate' (*Ti.* 41e–42d) and the 'decree of Adrasteia' (*Phdr.* 248d–249b). Proclus attempted to harmonize these two narratives not only with each other but also with the myths of the *Republic*, *Phaedo* and *Gorgias* in order to arrive at a single description of our soul's journey through the cosmos. There is no evidence, however, that Proclus ever attempted to present this description in a single subject-specific work along the lines of his *Platonic Theology*. He seems to have rather discussed it piecemeal in his commentaries on the dialogues and elsewhere. By offering a synthesis of these occasional discussions, we are therefore attempting to do what Proclus himself perhaps never did (or at least never got around to doing).

Of Proclus' interpretations of the five key Platonic passages, we now possess only those on the 'laws of Fate' and the myth of Er in a complete form. However, Proclus' own attempts at harmonization over the course of these two discussions somewhat compensate for what has been lost, as do two other extant works from Proclus' intellectual milieu: Hermias' *Scholia on Plato's Phaedrus* and Damascius' commentaries on the *Phaedo*.

Hermias of Alexandria studied the *Phaedrus* alongside Proclus under the tutelage of their master, Syrianus, and his *Scholia* on the dialogue preserve many of Syrianus' explanations of the dialogue. Both students seem to have remained faithful to Syrianus' exegesis of the 'decree of Adrasteia', as what remains of Proclus' interpretation closely resembles what we find in Hermias. We may therefore look to the *Scholia* for guidance, when the surviving Proclean interpretations of the 'decree' are wanting.

Besides the *Scholia*, the surviving lecture notes from Damascius' lessons on the *Phaedo* are also of use to us, since Damascius appears to have taught the dialogue through a critical reading of Proclus' lost commentary on the same work.⁴ His lessons are therefore replete with references to Proclus' interpretation of the myth of the *Phaedo*.

2. TRANSMIGRATION AS AN ENDLESS CYCLE

Indian texts such as the *Upanishads* and the early Buddhist sutras are not alone in portraying the cycle of transmigration as a negative state from which one must seek ultimate release. Not only does Socrates speak in the *Phaedo* of 'those sufficiently purified by philosophy' who 'live altogether without bodies for all time to come' (*Phd.* 114c2), but in the same dialogue and elsewhere he also mentions certain 'incurable' (ἀνάρτιος) souls that are cast forever into Tartarus (*Phd.* 113e6; *Grg.* 525e5–6; *Resp.* 615d3). Despite their apparent clarity, Proclus and his successors demanded that these passages be interpreted allegorically, as 'it is impossible for any soul, either to remain forever in the intelligible world ... or forever in Tartarus' (Dam. *In Phd.* 1.492, 1.547–8). Our soul, according to the members of the Neoplatonic School of Athens, undergoes an endless and inescapable cycle of transmigration.

We find the earliest extant Neoplatonic argument in favour of an endless cycle of transmigration in a short treatise written only half a century or so before Proclus'

⁴ This, at least, is the opinion of L.G. Westerink, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo* (Amsterdam, Oxford and New York, 1976), 1.18.

time. The author, a certain Salustius (or perhaps Sallustius), argues first that it is in the soul's nature to animate mortal bodies and second, assuming that both the cosmos and the soul are eternal (as Salustius and his pagan successors indeed do), that a cycle of transmigration from which one could escape would lead to a gradual emptying of the world of generation (γένεσις) (*De deis* 20.3.1–6). Although otherwise heavily indebted to the teachings of Iamblichus, Salustius here breaks with his famous predecessor,⁵ perhaps under the influence of Iamblichus' great rival, Theodore of Asine. Nevertheless, whatever its true origin, Proclus adopted this notion of transmigration as an endless cycle and drew up the following argument in its defence.

Like all aspects of reality, Proclus holds that our soul exists according to the fundamental cycle of μονή–πρόδοξ–ἐπιστροφή, of remaining, procession and reversion. In the case of our soul, this means that it remains above the world of generation, proceeds into it and reverts from it back to the world of Being. The soul's immortality demands that this cycle be either a single endless process or an endlessly repeating one, and Proclus argues for the latter alternative. He reasons as follows: to say that a soul, having hitherto been eternally transmigrating between mortal bodies, suddenly begins a permanent existence in the world of Being, or vice-versa, would be to impose a temporal limit on an eternal process. It is thus necessary that the cycle be repeated indefinitely, so that, as Proclus (*ET* 206) writes,

περίοδους ἐκάστην ποιεῖσθαι ἀνόδων τε ἐκ τῆς γενέσεως καὶ τῶν εἰς γένεσιν καθόδων, καὶ τοῦτο ἀπαυστον εἶναι διὰ τὸν ἀπειρον χρόνον. ἐκάστη ἄρα ψυχὴ μερικὴ κατιέναι τε ἐπ' ἀπειρον δύναται καὶ ἀνιέναι, καὶ τοῦτο οὐ μὴ παύσεται περὶ ἀπάσας τὸ πάθημα γινόμενον.

each [particular] soul periodically ascends from the world of generation and descends into the world of generation, and does so unceasingly because of the infinitude of time. Therefore, each particular soul can descend and ascend an infinite number of times, and this condition will never end for any such soul.

Proclus' commitment to a system of perpetual transmigration and his conviction that this was the position of Plato obliged him to engage in a certain amount of creative interpretation. For example, he understood Socrates' remarks concerning the souls which supposedly remain forever in Tartarus to imply that they would remain there, not for all eternity, but only for the remainder of the current 'cosmic period' (*In R.* 2.178.2–8). The same logic evidently holds for those passages where Socrates indicates that certain souls may find ultimate release from the cycle of transmigration.

Proclus inherited the notion that the cosmos experiences a periodic ἀποκατάστασις or 'restoration' from the Old Stoa via earlier Platonists such as Severus (*fl.* second century C.E.), who read this idea into both the *Timaeus* and the myth of the *Statesman*.⁶ According to Proclus, not only does 'every encosmic'⁷ soul have its proper life periods (περίοδοις ... ζωῆς) and ἀποκαταστάσεις (*ET* 199), but so does the soul of the cosmos

⁵ Iamblichus himself seems to have held that some form of release from the cycle of transmigration was possible. See, *inter alia*, S. Gertz, *Death and Immortality in Late Neoplatonism: Studies on the Ancient Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo* (Leiden and Boston, 2011), 187–8.

⁶ On the origins of this idea, see E.R. Dodds, Πρόκλου Διαδόχου Στοιχειώσις Θεολογική. *Proclus: The Elements of Theology. A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 1963²), 302–3; I. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Leiden, 2013), 7–10. On Severus specifically, see Procl. *In Ti.* 1.289.6.

⁷ That is, every soul that is permanently attached to a three-dimensional body (Procl. *In Ti.* 2.143.31–2; 3.252.24–5).

itself. A 'life period' of the cosmic soul, a cosmic period, constitutes 'the whole of time' or the full revolution of the fixed stars (*In Ti.* 3.129.16–3.130.3). Our own 'life period', on the other hand, refers to one of the 'cycles of experience'⁸ described in the *Phaedrus*, which occurs over a discrete period of time, running from one 'ἀποκατάστασις back to the same [point]' (*In Ti.* 3.291.31–2) to another, and encompassing many terrestrial lives. This ἀποκατάστασις culminates in the vision of intelligibles described in the *Phaedrus*, the apogee of the soul's journey.

Over the course of 'the whole of our [life] period' (*In Crat.* 86.23 [§152]), our soul may therefore be said to lead various types of lives: the life beyond the world of generation, the lives in terrestrial bodies and the lives between terrestrial incarnations. What is more, our individual life period is also regulated by that of the cosmos itself, for, as we shall discuss below, we may only experience one ἀποκατάστασις per cosmic period. Various durations are given for these periods, both ours and that of the cosmos, in Plato's texts, but Proclus regards them all as allegorical images rather than as concrete calculable figures.⁹

3. THE JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

3.1 *There Above*

Our soul thus undergoes an infinite number of life periods, each of which begins well beyond the sublunary world of generation. According to Proclus, the soul's life at this point is described allegorically not only in the *Phaedrus*, as the heavenly ride of the psychic charioteers, but also in the *Statesman*, as the life in the 'kingdom of Cronus' (*Plt.* 269a7–8; *Theo. Plat.* 5.29.6–10). As an example of this allegory, we might take the heavens of the *Phaedrus*, which are not, Proclus contends, the visible heavens that they appear to be, but the intelligible heavens (*Theo. Plat.* 4.18.23–4.22.8). When our soul is said to 'traverse the heavens' (*Phdr.* 246c1–2; *Theo. Plat.* 4.19.16) or when the divine souls are said to 'stand upon the vault of heaven, and ... are carried round by its revolution' (*Phdr.* 247b8–c1; *Theo. Plat.* 4.20.18–19), we must therefore understand not a physical journey but an intellectual one during which the souls contemplate ever more universal orders of intelligibles.¹⁰ Therefore, even when living the 'most blessed' life there above (*Phdr.* 250c1), contemplating the intelligibles and participating in the divine governance of the cosmos (Procl. *De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 23.13–14),¹¹ the soul still exists within the cosmos,¹² undoubtedly in the upper reaches of the heavens.

Although the souls in the kingdom of Cronus are said to be 'naked' (*Plt.* 272a5), this does not, in Proclus' opinion, imply that they are disembodied. They are rather, one

⁸ Dodds (n. 6), 302.

⁹ See, *inter alia*, Procl. *In R.* 2.169.27–2.171.6; *In Ti.* 3.129.16–3.130.3; 3.290.12–17.

¹⁰ As described in Book 4 of his *Platonic Theology*, Proclus understands each of the 'places' through which the souls pass in the palinode to symbolize a different order of intelligibles.

¹¹ On the governance of the cosmos, see, *inter alia*, Procl. *In Alc.* 149.1–8. Proclus is drawing, of course, on *Phdr.* 246e4–6.

¹² In keeping with his allegorical reading of the palinode, Proclus holds that the soul does not actually stick its 'head' outside of the cosmos (*Phdr.* 248a1–5), but that this is an image which is meant to convey that the soul is linked to something which transcends the cosmos within itself, i.e. an intellect. See Procl. *In Ti.* 2.105.30–2.

might say, minimally embodied. Proclus holds that a soul, by its very essence, perpetually animates a body (*ET* 196, page 171, lines 20–2). Therefore, even beyond the world of generation, an encosmic soul, whether divine, daemonic or human, animates a body which is congenital to it, coeternal and composed of light, to which Proclus refers as the soul's 'astral' or 'luminous' vehicle.¹³

Proclus takes the chariot of the *Phaedrus* to be an image of this astral vehicle (*In Ti.* 3.268.5–8), and, in keeping with Plato's description, holds that this vehicle contains two powers, symbolized by the chariot's two horses:¹⁴ one rational, which 'leads it from generation to Being' (3.296.19–22), and the other irrational, which leads the soul towards generation. This irrational part is elsewhere referred to by Proclus as the 'summits of the irrational life' (3.236.32; 3.238.30–1; 3.284.24–7). These 'summits', 'the enduring roots'¹⁵ of the irrational powers of the soul, such as sensation and desire, are the sources of the irrational powers native to our lower mortal bodies (3.237.24–31).¹⁶ While the power of the divine and daemonic souls leaves them unaffected by these summits (3.237.11–14), we are not impervious to their 'influence (ῥοπή)' (3.237.8). Proclus' choice of words is revealing, for, in its most concrete sense, ῥοπή refers to the weight placed in a scale pan. We can therefore imagine these summits as what tips the scales of our choice in favour of a return to the world of generation, an idea to which we will return below.

Mounted on its astral vehicle, our soul lives 'there above' (ἐκεῖ) amongst the train of its 'leader-god' (3.263.28), a divine soul. Proclus maintains that it is to this divine leader that Plato refers as our 'kindred star' in the *Timaeus* (42b4–5), and that is depicted in the *Phaedrus* as one of the 'army of gods' (*Phdr.* 246e7), who follow the twelve divine charioteers through the heavens (*In Ti.* 3.264.3–13). Our divine leader is a 'star' in so far as behind all celestial bodies, including the Earth and the Moon, there is a divine soul and its astral body, some of which reveal themselves to us as the fixed stars (3.264.19–3.265.12; 3.308.7–17). One may therefore belong to the company of the divine soul of the Earth, but, while we are beyond the world of generation, we are in the company of the god's astral body rather than of its material body (3.309.8–10).¹⁷

In accordance with the *Phaedrus* (252c3–e1), Proclus holds that the divine soul's attendants all share in their leader's 'form (εἶδος) and character (χαρακτήρ)' (*In Ti.* 3.262.6–3.263.5; 3.305.4–11), as well as in what we might call its gender (3.283.11–20). For example, those of the train of Zeus are male, of Aphrodite female, and of Hermes 'male-female (ἄρρενόθελον)' (1.46.21–2). The attendants of each particular god also differ amongst themselves by the degree to which each participates in the several powers of its divine leader (3.262.26–30; 3.279.11–24). For example, an attendant of Helios may participate in the god's healing power more so than it does the god's prophetic, demiurgic or elevating powers (3.262.26–8).

Hermias (*In Phdr.* 197.15–18) writes on this subject that

¹³ On this body, see, *inter alia*, *ET* 207–9; *In Ti.* 3.236.31–3.238.26; 3.298.12–3.299.9; Dodds (n. 6), 320–1; M. Griffin, 'Proclus on place as the luminous vehicle of the soul', *Dionysius* 30 (2012), 161–86; J. Opsomer, 'Was sind irrationale Seelen?', in M. Perkams and R.M. Piccione (edd.), *Proklos: Methode, Seelenlehre, Metaphysik* (Leiden, 2006), 136–66.

¹⁴ As well as by the periods of the 'Same' and the 'Different' that are said to reside in the soul at *Pl. Ti.* 42c. See Procl. *In Ti.* 3.296.19–25.

¹⁵ Dodds (n. 6), 320.

¹⁶ On this subject, see Opsomer (n. 13), 152–61.

¹⁷ On this subject, see A. Lemoine, *Physique et théologie: lecture du Timée de Platon par Proclus* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2001), 59 n. 68, 60 n. 75.

κατὰ τὴν ιδιότητα τοῦ οἰκείου θεοῦ καὶ τὸν ἐρώμενον καὶ τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα καὶ τὰ ἥθη καὶ πάντα ἐκλέγονται, καὶ τέλος αὐτοῖς τὸ τὸν οἰκεῖον ἐπιγῶναι θεὸν καὶ κατὰ τὴν οἰκειότητα αὐτοῦ τὰς ἐκλογὰς ποιεῖσθαι.

it is according to the specific character of their proper god that the [souls'] beloved, [their] occupations, [their] manners and all else are chosen, and that the souls' goal is to recognize their proper god and to make their choices in accordance with their connexion to him.

Though Proclus nowhere says so much, it is reasonable to assume that he held the form, character and gender of a soul to weigh upon its choices. It is also reasonable to assume that he understood the injunction from the *Theaetetus* (176a9–b1) to assimilate ourselves to god to mean, at least in part, that we must discover our god and our divine power and attempt to live in accordance with these. 'All souls', as Proclus writes, 'are undoubtedly children of the gods, but not all have recognized their god; those, however, that have recognized their god and have chosen a life which resembles them are called children of the gods' (*In Ti.* 3.159.29–31).

Yet, choosing a life in accord with the power of our divine leader in which we most share is not the only—nor even the primary—way to assimilate ourselves to the divine. There is, more importantly, our choice of the way in which we will lead this or any life (3.279.20–1). For example, two souls belonging to the same god and partaking to the greatest extent of the same divine power may choose to lead the same type of life, and yet one may live it well and the other ill (3.279.23–4). Although Proclus does not elaborate on the cause of this difference, Hermias may again be of some assistance.

Every god, according to Hermias, bestows his gifts upon the members of his company, gifts which the recipients may use either well or ill (*In Phdr.* 197.31–198.18). Ares, for example, is 'a friend of division' and all which belongs to him is 'excited, in motion and unstable' (197.28–9). These characteristics are partaken of in different ways by different souls of that god's company. For instance, a lover of the company of Ares with a base disposition (ἔξις) tends to become jealous and vengeful (*Phdr.* 252c5–d1), while another with a virtuous disposition will become a philosophical lover whose spontaneity and forcefulness help his beloved break away from the material world when the moment is right.

Thus, we see that living a life well or ill is not simply a matter of having chosen appropriately but of possessing a good disposition, one which allows us to manifest our god's particular gifts in the best possible way in any given life. Controlling one's disposition is, of course, the object of philosophy, which remains the primary form of assimilation to the divine for the members of the School of Athens.¹⁸

3.2 Descent

If the soul leads such an 'easy existence' (*In R.* 2.350.2) there above, why then should it descend into generation? This was a vexed question within the Platonic tradition, as the dialogues are not unanimous as to whether the descent of the soul is a necessity or a choice, or even whether it is harmful or beneficial for the soul. While many Platonists chose to defend one or the other of these perspectives,¹⁹ some, such as

¹⁸ On the definition of philosophy in general for the members of the School of Athens as an assimilation to the divine, see, *inter alia*, Amm. *In Porph. Isag.* 4.5–14.

¹⁹ A doxography may be found at Iamblichus, *De anima* 375.5–16. See also A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* (Paris, 1986), 3.69–96.

Proclus, saw them as complementary rather than as contradictory. ‘The soul’, as he puts it, ‘goes into generation for all sorts of reasons’ (2.158.18).

3.2.1 The Necessity of Descent

The soul not only can but also must descend at least once during each cosmic period (*In Ti.* 3.278.25–6). This descent is necessary both for the cosmos and for the soul itself. As we learn in the *Timaeus*, the assimilation of the cosmos to its intelligible model requires that the former be populated ‘by the entire range of living beings’ (*Ti.* 39e4–5). The descent of the soul is therefore necessary for ‘the perfection of the cosmos’ (*In Ti.* 3.324.15). To ensure this perfection, the cosmic body, like a human body, acts upon all things within itself, compelling them to move to their proper place (*In R.* 2.258.10–2.259.22). The soul is therefore impelled downwards so that it may exercise its natural activity of animating a body in generation.

Aside from its cosmic necessity, our descent into a material body is also necessary for our own perfection, in so far as it allows us to imitate an aspect of the divine activity that we could not imitate while there above. Regarding this imitation of divine activity, Proclus (*In Ti.* 3.324.6–14) tells us that,

διττῆς γὰρ οὐσῆς τῆς θείας τελειότητος, τῆς μὲν νοεράς, τῆς δὲ προνοητικῆς, καὶ τῆς μὲν ἐν στάσει, τῆς δ’ ἐν κινήσει, τὸ μὲν μόνιμον αὐτῶν καὶ τὸ νοερὸν καὶ τὸ ἀκλινὲς ἀπεικονίζεται διὰ τῆς θεωρίας, τὸ δὲ προνοητικὸν καὶ τὸ κινητικὸν διὰ τῆς γενεσιουργοῦ ζωῆς. καὶ ὥσπερ ἡ νόησις αὐτῇ μερική ἐστιν, οὕτω καὶ ἡ πρόνοια μερική, μερική δὲ οὕσα περὶ σῶμα διατρίβει μερικόν.

as the divine perfection is of two sorts, the one intellective, the other providential, [the soul] reproduces by contemplation that which in them is steadfast, intellective and undeviating, while it reproduces by its life in generation that which is providential and mobile in them. And just as the intellection of the souls is particular, so too is their providence particular, and, being particular, it takes care of a particular body.

Only in the world of generation, therefore, can we exercise the special type of providence that is all our own, namely, caring for our material body.

3.2.2 The Choice of Descent

Although descent is necessary, no soul is simply dragged down into generation against its will, for this would violate our basic self-determination (αὐτεξούσιον). Our descent must therefore be as much freely chosen as it is necessary (3.280.13–16). Proclus holds that this choice is apparent even in the opening lines of the ‘decree of Adrasteia’ (*Pl. Phdr.* 248c3–8):

ἥτις ἂν ψυχὴ θεῶ συνοπαδὸς γενομένη κατίδη τι τῶν ἀληθῶν, μέχρι τε τῆς ἐτέρας περιόδου εἶναι ἀπήμονα, κἂν αἰεὶ τοῦτο δύνῃται ποιεῖν, αἰεὶ ἀβλαβὴ εἶναι· ὅταν δὲ ἀδυνατήσασα ἐπισπέσθαι μὴ ἴδῃ, καὶ τινι συντυχίᾳ χρησαμένη λήθῃς τε καὶ κακίας πλησθεῖσα βαρυνθῇ, βαρυνθεῖσα δὲ πεπορησῇ τε καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν πέσῃ ...

every soul, which, while in the company of a god, has seen any of the truths, is free from harm until the next period, and, if it can always do this, it is always unharmed; but when, through inability to follow as it should, it fails to see, and through some mischance, having been filled with forgetfulness and evil, it grows heavy, and having grown heavy, it loses its wings and falls to the earth ...

According to Proclus, this decree ‘applies to all the genera of souls’ (*Theo. Plat.* 4.53.11–12). Its first clause, however, marks the distinction between particular and ‘universal’ (ὀλικοί) souls (that is, divine and daemonic souls), for only the latter can forever contemplate the intelligibles and therefore remain ‘always unharmed’. Our contemplation, by contrast, is transient; therefore, in accordance with the decree’s second clause, we must inevitably descend.

This descent, however, does not happen ‘simply ... and suddenly’ (*In Ti.* 3.349.7). In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates mentions three sets of human souls, namely, those with a clear view of the intelligibles, those with a periodic or partial view, and those with no view at all (*Phdr.* 248a1–b1). Proclus understands these to be three different states through which the soul gradually passes (*In Ti.* 3.348.30–3.349.9). The soul begins each life period with a clear view, which will later dwindle to a partial view and, finally, to no view at all. Once the soul has arrived at this third state, it simply ‘follows the gods by habit’ (3.349.7). The causal sequence behind this gradual passage from contemplation to non-contemplation, mentioned with the utmost brevity in the *Phaedrus*, is carefully worked out by Hermias (*In Phdr.* 170.27–171.8):

πρῶτον οὖν ἡ ἀδυναμία τοῦ συνέπεσθαι τοῖς ὁπαδοῖς τῶν θεῶν· δεύτερον τὸ μὴ δυνηθῆναι αὐτὴν ἰδεῖν τι τῶν νοητῶν· τρίτον καὶ ἡ συντυχία· αὕτη δὲ ἐστὶν ἡ δαιμόνων τινῶν συνάντησις κακοποιῶν, ὡς τὸ εἰκός· ἀποστάσα γὰρ τῶν ὁπαδῶν θεῶν περιπίπτει δαίμοσιν, οἳ καὶ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας αὐτῆς τὰς περὶ τὴν γένεσιν ἐξάπτουσιν· ὥσπερ δὴ καὶ ἐνταῦθα ὁρώμεν, ἐν ὅσῳ μὲν συνέπεται τις τῷ διδασκάλῳ (Σωκράτει φέρε ἢ ἄλλῳ χρηστῷ διδασκάλῳ) κόσμιός τε καὶ ἐπιεικὴς γίνεται καὶ μεταλαμβάνει ἀγαθοῦ τινος· ἐὰν δὲ ἀποστῇ τοῦ διδασκάλου, περιτυγχάνει ἀκολάστοις καὶ ἀναιδέσις ἀνθρώποις, οἳ αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὰς ἐναντίας ἐγείρουσιν ἐπιθυμίας· τέταρτον αἴτιον ἡ λήθη πάντων τῶν νοητῶν καὶ ἡ αὐτῆς ἑτεροποιός καὶ γενεσιουργὸς δύναμις βαρυνομένη λοιπὸν καὶ πλήθουσα μὲν τοῦ τῆς λήθης πόματος καὶ ὅσα τῶν τῆς γενέσεως δεσμών, †ἀποστάσης δὲ καὶ παντελῆς λήθῃ τῶν νοητῶν†.

the *first* [cause] is the inability to accompany the attendants of the gods; the *second* is for the soul to be unable to see something of the intelligibles; and a mischance is *third*; this is an encounter with certain maleficent demons, as might be expected; for having departed from those accompanying the gods, [the soul] falls in with demons who kindle in it the desires concerning the world of generation; just as we observe here below, in so far as a certain [student] follows his teacher (such as Socrates or another good teacher), he becomes both well behaved and reasonable and partakes of a certain good; but should he depart from the teacher, he falls in with undisciplined and shameless men, who rouse him to the opposite desires. Oblivion of all the intelligibles is the *fourth* cause and the differentiating and generation-centred power of this forgetfulness having weighed it down, it is then filled with the river of forgetfulness and what belongs to the shackles of becoming, and, having been left [that world] behind, it undergoes a complete oblivion of the intelligibles.

Hermias’ interpretation of the *Phaedrus* passage corresponds to certain descriptions that Proclus gives of our soul’s descent (for example, *De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 23.14–21). And while the latter also speaks of us as the first beings to suffer from the ‘influence’ (ῥοπή), the ‘downward inclination’ (νεῦσις) or the ‘recklessness’ (τόλμα), and the ‘shedding of the wings’ (πεπορρύησις) (*In Ti.* 1.52.23; 3.255.29–30; 3.258.19), these two sequences are easily reconciled.

Our soul’s turn from the intelligibles begins with what Hermias calls its ‘inability’ to remain forever in the company of its god. While the celestial gods and demons, as we have said, maintain a perpetual mastery over the irrational aspect of their astral vehicles, we cannot. We are, by nature, unable perpetually to contemplate the intelligibles, and are therefore susceptible to the aforementioned ‘influence’ of the summits of the

irrational life on the soul. It is through this influence, as Proclus describes here in his explanation of the ‘gladness’ of the souls arriving in the ‘meadow’ (λειμών)²⁰ (Pl. *Resp.* 614e2), that the soul ‘grows weary of the life there above’ (Procl. *In R.* 2.159.21–2.160.11):

καὶ μὲν διὰ καὶ τὸ ἀσμένως ἐκατέρας εἰς τὸν λειμῶνα ἀφικνεῖσθαι καὶ τὸ ἐκ πολλῆς τινας αὐτὰς πορείας φαίνεσθαι ἤκειν δηλοῖ τὴν [τε] περὶ τὴν γένεσιν ἀμφοτέρων φιλοφροσύνην. εἰ γὰρ ὁ λειμών ἀρχὴ τῆς γενεσέως ἐστίν, αἱ δὲ ἄσμενοι τὸν λειμῶνα καταλαμβάνουσιν, φανερόν ὅτι ἀμφοτέραι τὴν γένεσιν προθυμοῦνται καὶ μετέχειν ἐθέλουσι τῆς ἐνύλου ταύτης ζωῆς· πολλὴ γάρ ἐστιν ἐν ταύτῃ ἡ ἐνέργεια. ταῖς οὐρανίαις οὖν καὶ ταῖς χθονίαις ἡ μεταβολὴ τῆς ζωῆς ἀσμένη ἐστὶ, καμουσiais ἐν ταῖς προτέραις ἐνεργείαις, ταῖς μὲν γε εἰκότως, ἐν τληπαθείαις οὐσαις, ταῖς δέ, εἰ καὶ ἐν εὐπαθείαις, ἀλλ’ ἀποκαμουσiais καὶ πρὸς ἐκείνην τὴν ζωὴν. οὐ γὰρ ὅλαις ἐαυταῖς ἐνήργουν, ἀλλὰ μόνῳ τῷ μένειν ἄνω δυναμένῳ. κάρᾳ οὖν αὐτῶν ὠρέγετο τῆς ἐν οὐρανῷ ζωῆς, τὸ δὲ λοιπόν, ὅσον εἶχεν ἐκάστη τῆς φιλογενέσεως ζωῆς, ἐκεῖ μὲν ἀνενέργητον μένον, ἐφιέμενον δὲ ἐνεργῆσαι, κάμνειν ἐποίει καὶ ἀσθενεῖν τὴν ὅλην κατὰ τι ἑαυτῆς ψυχὴν καὶ κάμνουσαν διδόναι καὶ τῷ σφύζοντι χώραν καὶ διδοῦσαν ἀσμενίζειν τὸν λειμῶνα πρὸ ὁμμάτων αὐτῇ ποιοῦντα τὴν γένεσιν.

‘gladness’ signifies the affection of both groups of souls [that is, those arriving from the heavens and those arriving from Hades] for generation. For if the meadow is indeed the source of generation, and if they come upon the meadow with ‘gladness’, it is clear that both groups have a strong desire for generation and that they wish to participate in this material life: for there is much activity in this place. Therefore, for the celestial souls, just as for the chthonic souls, the change of life is gladdening, as they are tired of their former activities, some indeed with good reason, as they endured much hardship, while some, even if they existed in a state of ease, nevertheless grew weary of the life there above. For they could not act with their entire self but only with that part of themselves able to remain above. It was therefore their head that yearned for the life in the heavens, while the rest, all that which each soul has of the life which loves generation, remaining inactive there above, and desiring to act, produced a weariness in the entire soul and weakened it with regard to a certain part of itself, and, having thus wearied it, it gave way to that which throbbed within it, and, having given way, it gladly arrived at the meadow, which placed before its eyes the prospect of generation.

According to the ‘decree of Adrasteia’, those souls that have contemplated the intelligibles, that is, those that have achieved their ἀποκατάστασις during this cosmic period, will remain above with the celestial gods for the remainder of the current period. To ensure this, certain beneficent daemons will help them keep their place (*In R.* 2.187.23–4; *In Phdr.* 170.16–17). By the same law, however, those who have grown weary of contemplation and have turned their attention away from the intelligibles must descend, and this is ensured by certain maleficent daemons with which these souls have the ‘mischance’ to meet (*In R.* 2.187.25–8; *De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 23.25–7).²¹

Thus far, there seems to be very little that is freely chosen about our descent into generation. Yet, Proclus will insist that this natural process is consummated by the soul’s choice of generation over Being. Indeed, the maleficent daemons do not drag the soul down, but instead offer a glimpse of earthly delights sufficient to persuade those loitering above by force of habit alone to descend. This choice of a ‘licentious fantasy’ (ἀκόλαστον φαντασίαν) (*In Ti.* 3.334.5) over true reality constitutes the

²⁰ On the location of this ‘meadow’, see below.

²¹ These daemons are, of course, not maleficent *per se* but only relative to certain particular souls. From a cosmic perspective, they simply enforce the ‘decree of Adrasteia’ by tempting those souls unfit to stay above into generation. See Procl. *De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 17.10–23.

soul's choice to descend, which is variously qualified by Proclus as a 'downward inclination', 'recklessness', or, simply, an 'error' (3.334.4). Once it has been made, there follows 'the oblivion of the divine things which results in the loss of our wings, the fall and the association with perishable bodies' (3.343.4–10).

Having made its choice, the soul gravitates from the outer rim of the cosmos towards the sublunary world of generation. It descends from the sphere of the fixed stars through those of the five planets, gradually gaining more and more affinity with our world (1.147.29–1.148.16). While Saturn (Cronus) still represents the intellectual life, when passing through Jupiter it 'descends into the concept (ἔννοια) of a political life' (1.148.1–2). With Mars it experiences the first traces of θυμός and the love of honour, with Venus ἐπιθυμία and, finally, with Mercury 'it projects the λόγοι', through which 'it is bound to the body' (1.148.4–7).

Eager to enjoy the world of generation, the descending soul takes to its new material body with gusto and makes a fast friend of its 'image' therein, the irrational soul (3.324.27–30). Yet, no sooner has it entered a body than it is overcome by a terrible tumult of sensations, passions, pains and false opinions.²² Incarnation will not be the wholly pleasant experience that it had imagined.

3.2.3 The Immaculate Souls

Not all souls who descend, however, do so because of a bad choice. In the myth of Er the souls are said not only to arrive 'gladly' in the meadow after their celestial or chthonic journeys but indeed with the glee of those arriving at a 'festival' (Pl. *Resp.* 614e3). Proclus, making use of a well-established Pythagorean metaphor, explains that Plato chose this word because souls descend into generation for as many reasons as people go to a festival (Procl. *In R.* 2.158.18–2.159.2):

εἰς γὰρ τὴν γένεσιν παντοδαπαὶ ψυχαὶ φέρονται, καὶ αἱ μὲν θέας ἔνεκα τῶν τῆδε καὶ ἱστορίας ὡς ἐν ταῖς πανηγύρεσιν, αἷς καὶ ἡ κάθοδος ἀνεπαχθῆς, αἱ δὲ ἐμπορευσόμεναί τι τῶν γενέσει καθηκόντων καὶ ἀποδωσόμεναί τι τῶν οἰκείων (αἱ δὲ καὶ συντελοῦσιν εἰς τὴν εὐγονίαν τῶν ἐνύλων), αἱ δὲ οἷον ὠνησόμεναί τι τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς γενέσεως καὶ προληψόμεναί τι τῶν γενεσιουργῶν παθῶν, αἱ δὲ ἄλλο τι προσεικοὺς ἔχουσιν τοῖς εἰς τὰς πανηγύρεις ἀφικνουμένοις· αἱ μὲν οἷον εἰς ἄνεσιν διὰ τὸ πεποιηθῆαι πολλὴν πορείαν καὶ κάματον ἡκούςαι, αἱ δὲ διὰ τοῦτο ἀφικνουόμεναί, ὡς τοὺς ἐφόρους ἐκμειλίζονται τῆς γενέσεως, ὥσπερ ἐκεῖ τινες, ἵνα τοὺς τῆς πανηγύρεως θεραπεύσωσιν·

some souls come to see the things here below and to enquire about them, as one does at a festival: for these souls the descent is not at all burdensome. Others to import some of things befitting the world of generation and to 'sell' what belongs to them: these souls contribute to the fruitfulness of material beings. Others to 'buy' some of the things from the world of generation and to gain a preconception of the experience of the passions incident to generation. Others because they have some other resemblance to those who come to a festival: some come to relax, for they have made a long journey and are weary, while others come for the following reason, namely, to appease the gods who watch over generation, just as certain people go to festivals here in order to pay court to those men who run the festival.

We have discussed how our souls may be said to descend through weariness of the celestial life or in order to appease the gods by perfecting the cosmos. In this extended metaphor, however, we find that there are also souls who choose to descend in order to help others, to learn about the passions or simply to observe the pageant of earthly

²² On the troubles associated with incarnation, see *Ti.* 43a6–44b1; *In Ti.* 3.323.14–3.348.20.

existence. These souls, although they may inhabit human bodies, differ from us in that their descent into generation, while cutting short their contemplative activity, does not affect their contemplative disposition (*De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 21.15–18). They therefore descend into generation ‘immaculately’ (ἀχράντως) (*In Ti.* 3.259.18), untroubled by the tumult that overtakes our souls (*De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 21.18–19), and Proclus refers to them simply as the ‘immaculate’ (ἀχράντους) souls (21.19). These souls have lived amongst us in the guise of such heroic figures as Orpheus, Pythagoras, Heracles, Asclepius and others (*In Crat.* 38.11–14 [§81]), all of whom descended in their time ‘for the benefit of the places here below’ (*De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 21.7–12).

The immaculate souls have been compared to ‘bodhisattvas’,²³ spiritually advanced human beings who choose to be reborn here below for the benefit of others. This analogy, however, is false. While they, like us, are particular souls (*In Ti.* 3.278.11) that inhabit human bodies and have λόγος as their principal cognitive faculty, they are nevertheless distinct from us with regard to transmigration. They too are subject to the second clause of the decree of Adrasteia and must therefore descend at least once per cosmic period (*In Ti.* 3.278.13–15).²⁴ Yet, they descend not out of ignorance but knowingly and with the blessings of their superiors (*De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 21.11–12). They are therefore not a group of former far-wandering souls but a distinct intermediary order of souls between those that remain forever above and those that wander at length through the world of generation (*In R.* 2.332.4–12).

3.3 The ‘First Birth’

The soul’s initial descent during a given life period, which Proclus takes to be the ‘first birth’ (γένεσις πρώτη) mentioned in the *Timaeus* (Pl. *Ti.* 41e3; Procl. *In Ti.* 3.277.31–3.279.2), is the only descent common to both the immaculate and the far-wandering souls (3.277.4–6). The immaculate souls, because of the faultless lives they lead here below, need not descend more than once during a cosmic period, while we, on the other hand, will inevitably lead several terrestrial lives.

The soul first descends, according to the *Timaeus*, into one of ‘the most god-fearing of living beings’ (42a1). This, for Proclus, designates ‘all the living beings able to participate in intellect and to turn towards the gods’ (*In Ti.* 3.280.30–1), which includes not only what we commonly think of as human beings but also other rational beings inhabiting other parts of the Earth (which we shall discuss below). As Proclus understands the Earth to be the ‘True Earth’ described in the *Phaedo* (Pl. *Phd.* 108c5–8; Procl. *In Ti.* 1.180.25–1.181.28), he considers there to be at least²⁵ three earthly abodes for the human soul: 1) the land masses within the Earth’s surface craters, 2) the heights of the true surface of the Earth and 3) the subterranean world.

²³ e.g. J. Dillon, *Iamblichus Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta* (Leiden, 1973), 243.

²⁴ This passage, however, which states that the immaculate souls, like us, must descend once per cosmic period, is seemingly contradicted at *In Crat.* 69.1 [§117], where it is said that these souls ‘pass many periods there [i.e. outside of the world of generation]’. Barring an error on Proclus’ part or a shift in his teachings, this may simply be a mistake on the part of the *reportator* or the excerptor of the *In Crat.*

²⁵ We say ‘at least’, as Damascius, who is drawing on Proclus’ lost commentary on the *Phaedo*, mentions that there are also human souls inhabiting ‘the bottom of the sea’ (*In Phd.* 1.552.10–11). Proclus’ passing mention of rational beings ‘in the other elements’ (*In Ti.* 3.280.23, 3.230.15–16) does not exclude this possibility.

On the Earth's true surface live rational beings 'more divine' and 'longer-lived' than humans, yet still mortal (3.280.23–34).²⁶ The body of these beings is what Proclus calls the soul's 'pneumatic vehicle', a material body which all souls take on upon entering into generation. This body, as E.R. Dodds summarizes, 'consists of successive layers of the four elements, which are successively attached to the immortal vehicle in the course of the soul's descent and discarded in reverse order during the ascent'.²⁷ It is the seat of the 'irrational life' of the soul and it accompanies us so long as we inhabit the world of generation. It is only with the soul's ἀποκατάστασις and its return to the life of celestial contemplation that the pneumatic vehicle finally disintegrates back into its constituent elements.²⁸

When inhabiting what we commonly think of as a terrestrial being (that is, a being living within one of the Earth's craters), in addition to its astral and pneumatic vehicles, the soul takes on what Platonists called our 'oyster-like' (ὀστρεόεις) body.²⁹ Should a soul enter into such a body on its first descent, it must, according to the *Timaeus*, first enter into the body of a man. Proclus, however, as we shall discuss below, found here some interpretative latitude and believed that we might equally enter into the body of a man or into that of a woman.

The type of existence of this first terrestrial body is determined, as per the 'decree of Adrasteia', by the extent of the soul's vision of the intelligibles (*Phdr.* 248c9–e4). Although Proclus' interpretation of this passage has been lost, what little remains seems to suggest that he, like Hermias, attempted to harmonize it with the myth of Er.³⁰ Hermias holds that the soul receives one of the nine 'types of existence' (βίαι) proposed in the *Phaedrus* like it receives its lot in the myth of Er. As all of these, save the worst, contain more than one possibility, the soul then makes a choice. He tells us further that the nine types of existence have nothing to envy the seemingly limitless existences of the myth of Er, as they effectively cover 'all of the plane of life' (*In Phdr.* 172.9–10). He also, despite *Phaedrus*' silence on the subject, believes that we may reasonably divine the extent of the vision of the intelligible world necessary for each type of existence (173.32–174.24).

In order to obtain the first and highest type of existence, that of a philosopher or a lover of beauty or a follower of the Muses and of love, one must have contemplated the intelligible form of the Beautiful, of Wisdom or of the Good. To enter into one of the royal existences, one must have contemplated all the genera of being, while the political or acquisitive existence requires only a partial contemplation of these genera. The fourth type of existence, that concerned with strengthening or healing the body, is brought about by the contemplation of the form of Health or the form of Body, while the priestly or prophetic life demands that one have contemplated the elevating gods. The last four types of existence depend on the contemplation of the forms of Similarity and Dissimilarity, the mimetic and manual types of existence

²⁶ Proclus (*In Ti.* 3.309.25–30) takes *Pl. Phd.* 111a5–6 to refer to such beings.

²⁷ Dodds (n. 6), 307. The Platonic inspiration for the idea that the soul entering generation should accumulate a series of elemental 'tunics', as Proclus calls them (*ET* 209), is found at *Pl. Ti.* 42c–d.

²⁸ On the pneumatic vehicle, see, *inter alia*, Procl. *In Ti.* 3.235.9–3.238.23, 3.297–8; *ET* 207–9; Dodds (n. 6), 319–21; Opsomer (n. 13), 140–1.

²⁹ In reference to *Pl. Phdr.* 250c6. See, *inter alia*, Procl. *In R.* 1.119.14.

³⁰ An indication that Proclus attempted this sort of harmonization as well is to be found at *De mal. sub.* (Strobel) 24.11–13, where he says that souls, during their initial descent, stop in the 'meadow' mentioned in the myth of Er and even pass under 'the throne of Necessity' (*Pl. Resp.* 621a1).

depending on Similarity, and the sophistical and tyrannical types of existence depending on Dissimilarity.

3.4 Between Lives

Upon the end of its first terrestrial life, the soul begins what Proclus calls the ‘intermediary period between lives’ (μεταξὺ τῶν βίων) (*In Ti.* 3.300.10–11). At the beginning of this intermediary period, it ascends into the sky, all the way to the lowest part of the ethereal sphere just below the moon. Proclus understands this to be at once the ‘meeting of three roads’ (τρίοδος) in the ‘meadow’ (λειμὼν) of the *Gorgias* (524a2), as well as the ‘meadow’ and the ‘daemonic place’ (τόπος δαμόνιος) (*Resp.* 614c2) of the myth of Er (*In R.* 2.134.20–2.133.25; 2.157.19–22). Here a series of judges, both daemonic and divine (2.134.24–2.135.12), including the three judges mentioned in the *Gorgias*, assign the souls to one of three different journeys based upon the justice of their mortal lives (2.145.2–15).³¹

To live justly for a particular soul consists in αὐτοπραγία (that is, doing what befits it) and in living according to its ontological rank (τάξις), while injustice consists in ἀλλοτριοπραγία (that is, doing what befits other, lesser, beings) and living in disaccord with its ontological rank (2.146.21–3). Those souls that have lived justly are therefore assigned a celestial journey, while those that have lived unjustly are assigned a chthonic journey. Those who fall somewhere in between, however, embark immediately upon another terrestrial existence (2.133.32).

3.4.1 A First Ascent

For our soul, as Proclus (*In Ti.* 3.292.3–9) tells us,

μέτρα γάρ ἐστιν εὐδαιμονίας· καὶ διττὴ ἡ ἀνοδος, ἡ μὲν ἀνιόντων, ἡ δὲ ἀνελκλυθόντων. ὥστε καὶ τὴν εἰς τὸ σύννομον ἄστρον ἀφικομένην δυνατὸν ἢ ταῖς περικοσμίαις δυνάμεσι συντάττεσθαι τοῦ σφετέρου θεοῦ ἢ καὶ ἀνωτέρω χωρεῖν. εἰ δὲ μέλλοι πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ νοητὸν ἀναδραμεῖσθαι, δείται τῆς τρισχιλιετοῦς περιόδου· διὰ γὰρ ταύτης ἡ ἀκροτάτη πτέρωσις.

there are degrees of happiness, and there are two types of ascent: there is, on the one hand, that of the ascending souls, while, on the other, there is that of the returning souls. So, even for the soul that has arrived at its kindred star, there is the possibility of either coordinating themselves with the pericosmic powers of its proper gods, or ascending even more highly. And if the soul wishes to elevate itself to the intelligible itself, it requires a period of three-thousand years: for it is after this that the highest plumage grows.

The first of the two types of ascent mentioned here is described in the *Timaeus* (42b3–4) as the ‘return to the soul’s kindred star’ and in the *Republic* (614c5–6) as the soul’s journey ‘through the heavens’ (Procl. *In Ti.* 3.291.23–30). This journey is the privilege of both those souls that have led a philosophical life ‘honestly’ (ἀδόλως) (*Phdr.* 249a1) here below and those that, having been born into favourable circumstances, practised virtue simply by habit rather than by choice (Procl. *In R.* 2.131.1–2; 2.161.3–6; *In Ti.* 3.291.27–30).

³¹ On Proclus’ assimilation of the judgment scenes from the myth of Er and the *Gorgias*, see J. Finamore, ‘What the Hades? Iamblichus and Proclus on judges and judgment in the afterlife’, *Mediterranean Perspectives: Philosophy, Literature, and History* 1 (1998), 45–59, at 50–2.

The souls embarking on this journey leave their pneumatic vehicles behind in the sublunary world and, mounted upon their astral vehicles alone (*In R.* 2.162–3), coordinate themselves with the ‘pericosmic powers’ of their divine leader. In the company of their ‘star’, these souls are treated to a vision of the heavens in all their glory (*In R.* 2.167.18–22) and, at the end of this journey, they descend back into generation. Despite having been cast off, the pneumatic vehicles remain intact and circle about the sublunary sphere awaiting the return of their pilots, who have yet to free themselves entirely from the irrational life that this vehicle represents (2.300.18–19).

3.4.2 Nekyia

Unlike the celestial journey, the soul embarks upon its chthonic journey still clad in its pneumatic body (*In Ti.* 3.235.11–3.236.6), which has become ‘heavy and earthy’ (*In R.* 1.121.17) with accretions of the lower elements. Both body and soul must therefore be purified by a passage through one of the three realms mentioned in the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*: the Plutonian Isles of the Blessed, Hades, also called the ‘place of purification’, and Tartarus, also referred to as the ‘prison of retribution’ (*In R.* 2.140.19–20).

With the loss of Proclus’ commentary on the *Gorgias*, the exact role of the Plutonian Isles of the Blessed in the soul’s purification remains uncertain. The roles of Hades and of Tartarus, however, are somewhat clearer. Following the distinction established in the *Gorgias* (525b3–5; *In R.* 2.184.14–19) between the souls ‘paying justice’ in the underworld and the souls ‘suffering retribution’, Proclus distinguishes between Hades and its various rivers as a chthonic purgatory and Tartarus as a place of exemplary punishments. In both realms, the soul is chastised by daemons who exemplify the same passions by which the soul allowed itself to be ruled: ἐπιθυμία, θυμός or perverted opinions (διαστροφαὶ δοχαί) (*In R.* 2.147.13–18). As Proclus contends, ‘it is only when we are suffering under these passions that we grow to hate them, and not when we are acting upon their impetus’ (2.147.13–14). Yet, these punishments, even those inflicted in Tartarus upon the ‘incurable’ souls of tyrants, are always corrective in nature (2.184.19–26). They are meant to heal, not to harm.

In keeping with this therapeutic principle, the chthonic journey employs remedies both bitter and sweet.³² Proclus, faithful initiate of the Eleusinian mysteries that he was, held that the soul is cared for below by certain Plutonian daemons, which perfect the soul, purify it by means of a divine light, assure the providence of the chthonic gods, and present it with serene images (2.184.29–2.185.18). An unfortunate lacuna (2.185.1) prevents us from knowing whether such ‘blessings’ are reserved for the inhabitants of the Isles of the Blessed, but it is entirely possible that Proclus held all souls travelling through the underworld to partake of them to some extent.

3.4.3 The Choice

As described in the myth of Er (*Resp.* 617d6–620e4) and in the *Phaedrus* (249b2–6), at the end of their celestial and chthonic journeys, the souls return to their point of departure, which, for Proclus, is in the ethereal sphere below the Moon. With the

³² In the line ‘such then were the punishments and retributions; and, on the other hand, the blessings were the antistrophes of these’ (Pl. *Resp.* 616a8–b1), Proclus apparently understood the ‘blessings’ (εὐεργεσίας) to refer to something which occurred during the chthonic journey rather than the blessings of the aforementioned heavenly journey.

changing of the phase of the Moon (*In R.* 2.190.30–2.191.2), the souls ascend to the sub-celestial vault and the top of the column of light mentioned in the myth of Er (*Resp.* 616b5; *In R.* 2.190.19–20). Here, according to the myth, they encounter the three Fates and their prophet and choose their next incarnation. In preparation for their choice, the prophet makes a brief address (*Resp.* 617d6–e5; 619b3–6) and then casts lots amongst the souls to determine the order in which they will choose from amongst the various lives he presents them (617e–618b).

Proclus has a rich interpretation of the scene of the choice of lives.³³ According to him, each soul receives a single lot that contains a series of types of existence, those which the universe offers to that specific soul at that moment. The universe cannot force a single type of existence on the soul, for that would impinge upon the soul's self-determination (2.262.10–21), nor can it offer the soul every possible type of existence to choose from, for that would lead to chaos here below. As Proclus remarks, given the disposition of most humans, were every soul to choose from all possible existences, tyrannies large and small would rapidly fill the world (2.262.24–6). A balance must therefore be struck, one which preserves the order of the universe as well as the soul's basic self-determination.

The lots for those souls making their choice at the same moment of the cosmic period are distributed according to merit: those who lived justly choose before those who lived otherwise. These lots differ based on the earthly time frame that they embrace, a longer time frame implying a greater diversity of types of existences from which to choose. For example, the choice of types of existence over the course of a century will be more diverse than the choice over the course of a decade.³⁴ The lot of the soul who is awarded the first choice, therefore, both contains the largest number of types of existence and embraces all the types that the other lots contain.³⁵

Each type of existence within a given lot is composed not only of what Proclus calls 'the form of the life' (that is, the life of a monarch, a farmer, etc.) but also of a variety of accidents that the universe assigns to the form after it has been chosen, based upon the merits of the chooser. Proclus sees this as the 'chance of the lot' (*Pl. Resp.* 619d8) described in the myth. A soul may therefore choose the life of a farmer, but whether that farmer will be born rich or poor, in good or in ill health, and so on, is up to the justice of the universe (*Procl. In R.* 2.263.26–9).

By choosing a certain type of existence, the soul falls under the surveillance and protection of one of the daemons assigned to that type (2.271.6–2.273.5). Whatever the soul's choice, once made, it is binding. The soul having chosen the life of a monarch will inevitably lead such a life. Nevertheless, the soul's actions over the course of this life are not preordained. No matter its incarnation, the soul always maintains its basic self-determination and control over its own disposition. Virtue is therefore possible in every incarnate life, even in the life of a tyrant (2.275.19–30).

According to the prophet, 'god is blameless' in our choice of lives. Yet, as Plato demonstrates, there are other factors that weigh upon our choice. In the same way in which a soul, on its first descent, assumes a type of existence based on the extent of its contemplation of the intelligibles, the souls choosing their next incarnation choose 'for the most part ...

³³ For a summary of the basic points of his interpretation, see *Procl. In R.* 2.264.31–2.266.26.

³⁴ There will, of course, be moments when a greater number of souls are choosing than others. In such cases, the overall number of different types of existences will not change, but there will simply be a greater diversity of qualitative differences between similar types.

³⁵ On this paragraph, see *Procl. In R.* 2.264.17–30; 2.273.6–2.274.21.

according to the habit of their former life' (*Resp.* 620a2–3). Proclus holds that, just as there are infinitely repeating natural cycles, so too do our habits (ἔθρα) cycle infinitely over the course of our eternal existence (*In R.* 2.306.24–7). Unlike the cycles of nature, however, the force of habit is not irresistible. This, at least, is what Proclus takes Plato's above-cited qualification 'for the most part' to signify (3.304.23–3.305.17).

The experience of hardships, whether on Earth or in Hades, is sometimes enough to break old habits. Thus, 'many of those souls who came from [under] the Earth, because they themselves had toiled and had seen the hardships (πόννοι) of others, were not in a rush to make their choices' (*Resp.* 619d3–5), and the soul of Odysseus, 'from memory of its former hardships' (620c5) on Earth, chose the life of a humble private man. On the other hand, those 'unexperienced in hardship' (619d3), the souls that had lived virtuously by force of habit alone, often made miserable choices, such as the one 'who had drawn the first lot ... and immediately chose the greatest tyranny' (619b7–8).

These last two examples, Odysseus and the future tyrant, illustrate the closing statement of the prophet: 'Let the one who begins not be careless about his choice. Let the one who is last not be disheartened' (*In R.* 2.289.25–2.290.12). It is possible to choose well, according to Proclus, if we have a 'correct judgement concerning the better and the worse amongst the types of existence offered' (2.302.15–17). We must therefore 'philosophize in a healthy way' (*Pl. Resp.* 619d9) concerning our choice and let it always tend, on the advice of Plato, towards 'the happy medium' (μέσος) (*Pl. Resp.* 619a5; *Procl. In R.* 2.287.8).

Having chosen their lives and had their choice ratified by the Fates, the myth depicts the souls heading to the plain of 'Forgetfulness' (Λήθη) in the stifling heat and drinking from the river 'Neglect' (Ἀμέλητα) (*Resp.* 621a1–5). Proclus interprets this scene as an image both of the soul's forgetting of the intelligibles, as it focusses its attention on the world of generation, and of the growth of its pneumatic vehicle, as it descends from the ethereal sphere into thicker and eventually humid regions of air (*In R.* 2.346.17–2.350.23).

3.5 The Second Incarnation

The Demiurge states that a soul, 'having failed in these things [that is, having failed to live justly during its first terrestrial life], shall be changed into woman's nature at the second birth' (*Ti.* 42b5–c2). Proclus and his predecessors found this fatal injunction difficult to reconcile with their own views on women, as well as with other passages in the dialogues. For his part, Proclus held that there is necessarily 'a community of virtues between men and women' (*In Ti.* 3.281.19–20), and that, as Plato makes clear with the figure of Diotima, women can lead the highest of philosophical lives (3.281.20–7). How then to interpret this injunction?

For those who wish to take it literally (3.293.25), Proclus first argues that Plato teaches 'the procession according to nature (κατὰ φύσιν) and the decline (ὑφασίς) of life' (3.282.8–9) in the *Timaeus*. This decline must be properly understood as the decline 'from the immaculate and immaterial form of life to a vigorous being, participating in intellect but material, and from this into a material and weak being but capable of the intellective life, and from this into a being entirely without a share in intellect' (3.282.11–13). There is thus a natural difference between men and women for Proclus, but it concerns merely brute force rather than intellectual capacity.

That this procession from man to woman to animal is κατὰ φύσιν does not, however, necessarily imply that it represents the typical order of incarnations for the soul. The

political models of life, Proclus argues, while depicted by Plato (*Resp.* 544d6–e2) as declining κατὰ φύσιν from the aristocratic life to the timocratic life to the oligarchic life, may also pass directly from the tyrannical life to the timocratic life and so forth (3.282.14–21). In the same way, a soul's sequence of incarnations may follow the natural procession of lives, or it may not (3.282.21–3). We may pass from man to woman to animal, but equally from woman to man to animal.

Proclus' second argument concerns the true 'gender' of a soul. 'If the female was created by a deviation from the male,' he writes, 'it must be that the newly initiated souls begin in a form in accord with nature' (3.292.28–30), that is, in a male body. Yet, the female cannot simply be a degradation of the male, for '[it] exists even amongst the gods' (3.293.2). While our oyster-like carnal body may be either male or female, our true gender, as we have seen, is that of our soul and of its astral body. As proof of this, Proclus cites the speech of Aristophanes from the *Symposium*, which he apparently took to indicate the existence here below of male souls in female bodies and vice versa (3.284.4–8; 3.293.19–24). If, therefore, the leader gods of certain souls are female, 'what prevents [these souls] from imitating their proper leader gods in this, choosing not only the types of existence appropriate to these gods but also the nature of living beings suited to them?' (3.293.2–5).

Aside from the literal interpretation of the injunction, however, Proclus is also open to the symbolic interpretation of certain earlier Platonists, who held that the 'female nature' mentioned in the *Timaeus* refers not to the body of a human female *per se* but simply to a weak and effete human existence in a body of either sex (3.293.27–30). In sum, despite the apparent clarity of the *Timaeus*, Proclus holds that neither the soul's first incarnation nor its second incarnation is necessarily into the body of a man or a woman.

3.6 From Human to Animal

Proclus' teachings on the human to animal transmigration described in the dialogues are based, in large part, on those of Theodore of Asine. The simplest formulation of Theodore's argument is found in Salustius, who writes that, 'if the transmigration of the [human] soul happens into a rational creature, the soul becomes precisely that body's soul, if into an irrational creature, the soul accompanies it from outside as our allotted daemons accompany us' (*De deis* 20.1.1–5). Proclus (*In R.* 2.309.28–2.310.6) offers us a somewhat more nuanced picture in his commentary on the myth of Er:

κατὰ τὴν Πλάτωνος ψῆφον μετιέναι τὴν ψυχὴν εἰς ἄλογα ζῶα διὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα τῆς ζωῆς καὶ ἡμεῖς φαμεν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐνοικίζεσθαι τοῖς σώμασιν αὐτῶν (αἱ γὰρ φυσικαὶ διοργανώσεις μάχονται πρὸς τὴν τοιαύτην κατάταξιν), ἐν σχέσει δὲ μόνῃ τῆς ζωῆς συνδεῖσθαι πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνων ψυχὴν τὸ οἰκεῖον σῶμα ψυχώσασαν, οὐδὲν τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης προσδεομένην· τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ ὁ Ἀσινάιος Θεόδωρος αὐτὸς πρῶτος ἐπιβάλλων καὶ ἡμᾶς ἀνέπεισε φρονεῖν τε καὶ γράφειν·

according to the judgement of Plato, we too claim that the soul passes into irrational living beings because of a resemblance of life but does not inhabit their bodies (for natural structural differences are opposed to such a coordination), only in relation to its life is it bound to this [animal] soul animating its appropriate body, which is not [itself] bound to the human [soul]. Of this idea it was Theodore of Asine who had the first intuition, and he persuaded us both to think and to write likewise.

According to this theory, while our soul may exist 'in coordination' (ἐν κατάταξει) with a human body, fully inhabiting it and serving as its principal source of animation, we

may also exist ‘in relation’ (ἐν σχέσει) to the irrational soul of an animal. A particular soul existing ‘in relation’ to an animal’s native irrational soul shares in the animation of the animal’s body, ‘while remaining exterior in a relational manner’ (2.310.18). The particular soul is therefore in contact not with the animal’s body but with the life of its irrational soul, over which it exercises no direct control.³⁶

The origin of this relationship, or ‘what connects each soul’, as Proclus explains, ‘is the ordinary mode of its affectivity (πάθος), which draws to it the envelop (κύτος) of the soul which corresponds to the life and the impulsion (ὁρμήν) of this affectivity’ (2.310.7–8). In other words, while ‘a commanding λόγος leads us into a human [body], an excess of passions thrusts us into an animal body’ (2.316.1–3). The soul that acts as an animal during a human existence will subsequently be drawn to that animal life which best corresponds to its prevailing passion, be it ‘airborne, aquatic or terrestrial’ (2.333.2). Conversely, the soul that lives according to its λόγος can avoid this fate altogether during its life period (2.332.13–27). It is for this reason that both the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedrus* state that the soul’s first incarnation cannot be into an animal body, since only here below can we abandon our rational faculty to such an extent as to resemble beasts.

Proclus notes that this mode of existence is not exclusive to transmigration from human to animal, for our soul can also exist ‘in relation’ to a daemonic or a divine soul (2.310.18–21). It is ‘through the intellect and that which is beyond the intellect that the soul becomes daemonic and divine’ (2.310.26–7), which corresponds to Proclus’ idea that we are able both to contemplate intelligible Being, when our λόγος is illuminated by the particular intellect of a daemonic soul (*In Ti.* 1.245.17–22), and to unite with the gods, when the ‘one’ of our soul is divinely inspired (*In Parm.* 1071, 19–22 [Steel]). A soul therefore exists in relation to a daemon or a god, and may even be said to be, in a certain way, daemonic or divine, when it is inspired by one of these higher souls.

Proclus suggests that the relationship of a daemonic soul to a human soul resembles that of a human soul to an animal soul. A human soul bound to an animal soul ‘sets itself over this irrational being like a daemon, as it is clearly connected to this being by irrationality’ (*In R.* 2.334.16–18). Proclus nowhere directly describes the life of the human soul existing in relation to an animal soul, but he does relate the encounter of Nestorius, the celebrated hierophant and father of Proclus’ own teacher, Plutarch of Athens, with a Roman noblewoman who had a vivid recollection of her past lives. Having at some point entered into the life of dog, she caused the animal to kill itself by jumping off a roof. As punishment for killing her hapless host, she entered into the life of a snake, which she again slew by compelling it to slither into the path of an oncoming carriage. As punishment for this further crime, she was placed into the body of bear, a state which she patiently endured until fate ordained that the bear should perish. She was then duly rewarded with a human body (2.324.11–2.325.10).

Although it may seem to us no more than an amusing anecdote, the authority of Nestorius led Proclus to consider this story as proof that a human soul can migrate from one animal into another, an even more savage and irrational one, on the basis of injustices committed during the previous animal’s life. He was therefore convinced that the woman had a hand in the death of her animal hosts. But how could this be so, given that she exercised no direct control over their actions?

³⁶ For the mocking description of this doctrine by the Christian author Aeneas of Gaza, see *Theoph.* 14.7–16.12.

Proclus holds that, for animals, ‘evil is the privation of a virtuous disposition’ (*De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 26.13–14) and that this disposition may be influenced for the better by the animal’s allotted guardian daemon (26.4–5). Of course, were a daemon tasked with doing so, it might just as easily inspire a vicious disposition in the same animal, leading it to give itself over to unnatural impulses, which would in turn bring about injury or malnourishment. Recalling that Proclus states that the human soul ‘sets itself over this irrational being like a daemon’, an idea seems to suggest itself. Could it be that the human soul, according to the Theodorean explanation, assumes a role similar to that of a guardian daemon for the animal to which it is attached? If so, then the human soul ‘in relation’ could choose whether to inspire the disposition of its animal companion for the better or for the worse. This would explain not only how the aforementioned woman was able to bring about the death of her canine and ophidian hosts without having direct control over their bodies but also how she was able to act virtuously and earn her way back into a human existence.

This, then, is Proclus’ explanation of transmigration from human to animal. Numerous questions concerning it immediately spring to mind, three of which Proclus addresses directly while commenting the myth of Er. He first answers the question of whether all souls that descend into generation must some day find themselves ‘in relation’ to an animal’s irrational soul by underscoring the fact that the transmigration from human to animal referred to in the *Timaeus* and in the *Phaedrus* is the result of a failure of the human soul to live as a human being, that is, a lack of αὐτοπραγία (*In R.* 2.330.18–2.332.27). The immaculate souls therefore always avoid this fate and we too can avoid it, at least during a given life period.

To the question of whether the soul can exist ‘in relation’ to a vegetable body Proclus answers no, citing the fact that Plato never indicates such a possibility (2.332.28–2.333.28). Finally, to the question of whether all animals carry a rational soul about with them Proclus, after some consideration, states that the entry of a rational soul into an animal life must remain an exceptional and unnatural arrangement and that, consequently, it must not be necessary for every animal to harbour a rational soul (2.333.29–2.341.8).

3.7 The Return

According to the *Phaedrus* (248e5–249a5), a soul’s sequence of descents into generation may come to a close either at the end of a ten-thousand-year period or, if it has honestly led three successive philosophical lives, after three thousand years. For Proclus, one must look to the spirit of this passage rather than the letter. He, like his colleague Hermias (*In Phdr.* 176.31–177.19), holds the time periods given in Plato’s text to be symbolic (*In R.* 2.170.9–2.171.5). Three successive philosophical lives will indeed bring an end to the soul’s current life period (*In Ti.* 3.291.24–6), but three thousand years is only a possible duration. The same goes for the ten-thousand-year period suggested for other souls (*In R.* 2.170.26–2.171.2). As a soul can no more remain within the world of generation indefinitely than it can remain without, one must imagine that the ten-thousand-year life period symbolizes a long but finite series of descents.

What might bring an end to such a series? Proclus (*In Ti.* 3.296.7–11) tells us that

μία σωτηρία τῆς ψυχῆς αὕτη παρὰ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ προτείνεται τοῦ κύκλου τῆς γενέσεως ἀπαλλάττουσα καὶ τῆς πολλῆς πλάνης καὶ τῆς ἀνηνύτου ζωῆς, ἡ πρὸς τὸ νοερὸν εἶδος τῆς ψυχῆς ἀναδρομὴ καὶ ἡ φυγὴ πάντων τῶν ἐκ τῆς γενέσεως ἡμῖν προσπεφυκότων.

the soul's only salvation, that presented by the Demiurge, delivering [us] from the cycle of generation, from the long wandering and from the useless life, is the ascent towards the intellective form of the soul and the flight from all that which has grown on us because of generation.

To free ourselves from the cycle of generation, we must ascend towards the intellective form of our own soul contained in the particular intellect of our guardian daemon (3.269.15–3.270.16). It is this intellect, as we said, which illuminates our λόγος and renders it intellective, opening the way to contemplation. For Proclus and the other members of the School of Athens, the prerequisite of the contemplative life is not merely the measuring of our passions but their total purgation through philosophical or theurgical practice. It is only once the soul is 'completely purified' (*In R.* 2.177.25, 2.300.15) that it may accede to the contemplative life. There is thus no possibility of riding out our stay in generation through a long series of undistinguished lives. We must live well in order to reach our 'ἀποκατάστασις back to the same [point]' (*In Ti.* 3.291.31–2).

The soul that has been completely purified rejoins the company of its divine leader circling the heavens. Having entirely abandoned its pneumatic vehicle and the irrational life it represents, this vehicle eventually disintegrates back into its constituent elements (*In R.* 2.300.15–18), taking with it the accumulated memories of the preceding life period (2.177.26–8). Reduced once again to its astral body, the soul eventually ascends back to the upper reaches of the cosmos and begins its long contemplation of the intelligibles. By arriving once more at a vision of the intelligibles, the soul has come full circle. It has reached its ἀποκατάστασις and has embarked upon a new life period.

Having attained this vision, the soul will, according to the 'decree of Adrasteia', enjoy it for the remainder of the cosmic period. Not all souls, however, are party to the same vision. As we have seen, while certain souls can contemplate some of the highest forms, such as the Beautiful or the Good, others see no more than Similarity. Although neither Proclus nor Hermias tells us what determines 'the prerogative and value of the vision of the intelligibles' (*In Phdr.* 171.20) afforded to each soul, one assumes that it must be based on the quality of the contemplative life led here below. The most profound earthly contemplatives would therefore make the most profound celestial contemplatives.

Once the current cosmic period has elapsed and the beneficent daemons have withdrawn their aid, the soul, unable to maintain perpetually this life on its own, will see its contemplative vision become periodic and eventually cease altogether. Thus begins yet another descent and the long series of mortal lives that follows.

4. TRANSMIGRATION AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

The wanderer, as Silvia Montiglio argues,³⁷ was a deeply ambivalent figure for the Greeks. While suffering and ignorance were his lot, such a life could also bring great, even divine, wisdom. Thus, the archetypal wanderer, Odysseus, declares that 'for mortals, nothing is worse than wandering' (*Od.* 20.343), and yet owes his very survival to the wisdom acquired on his journeys (20.19–22).

Like other Platonists before him, Proclus read the *Odyssey* not as the story of the trials and tribulations of a single man but as a general allegory 'of our passing through

³⁷ S. Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago, 2005), 3.

the successive journeys in generation and thus being restored to the place beyond all wave crash and ignorant of the sea' (Porph. *De ant. nymph.* 34.8–10).³⁸ Yet, beyond affirming that each soul undergoes its own odyssey across the cosmos, Proclus went so far as to hold that these journeys will be endlessly repeated. We may, like Odysseus, find 'rest from hardships' (Pl. *Ti.* 42c4; Procl. *De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 24.24), but only for a while. Wandering is therefore more than simply a moment in our existence. It is the human condition.

By placing us under the sign of the wanderer, Proclus made the profound ambivalence of this figure the essence of what it is to be human. On the one hand, our wanderings across the 'sea of generation' (*In Crat.* 86.11 [§151]; 88.22–3 [§158]) are the source of 'the most tragic of sufferings' (*De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 24.23–4), and, in keeping with the *Theaetetus*, Proclus enjoins us to flee 'the cycle of generation, the long wandering and the useless life' (*In Ti.* 3.296.7–11) and to assimilate ourselves to god through the contemplative life (*De mal. sub.* [Strobel] 24.35–6). Paradoxically, however, our wanderings are in themselves a form of assimilation to the divine, for it is only in the world of generation that we can fully imitate the providence of the gods, as well as that of our immediate superiors, the immaculate souls, who choose to descend for the benefit of others. The prospect of an infinite series of personal odysseys is therefore neither to be celebrated nor to be lamented. It is simply our lot.

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³⁸ Porphyry here tells us that this was already the reading of Numenius. Proclus' understanding of the *Odyssey* as a whole, given that he read the *Iliad* as an allegory for the soul's descent and its sufferings in generation (*In R.* 1.175.15–21), resembled that of Porphyry.