

Divine Immutability for Henotheists

Gods are revealed to us – or at least putatively revealed to us – in their *actions*. Hera borrows some sexy clothes from Aphrodite so that she can seduce Zeus in order to distract him from the battle between the Greeks and Trojans (*Il.* 14.153, ff). Hera *changed herself* from a nagging frump to a divine sex bomb. Sometimes one god seemingly undergoes a change by the agency of *another* god. Thus the adulterous couple, Ares and Aphrodite, are ensnared by the bonds of Hephaestus and cannot move until he consents to free them (*Od.* 8.295, ff). Finally, some gods seem to engender others. They are their off-spring and so dependent for their existence upon the elder god or gods as children are upon their parents. Thus Zeus was born from Rhea and Cronus (*Theog.* 453; *Il.* 15.157). The doctrine of divine immutability requires that none of this can be exactly true: gods do not come to be, nor do they undergo change.

I have chosen my examples quite deliberately from a polytheistic context. All these episodes from Homer and Hesiod were interpreted allegorically by the philosophers who took these poems to contain deep theological truths.¹ Yet divine immutability remains a potential problem for some philosophical polytheists. Moreover, this is a problem that we tend not to think about in discussions of divine attributes, for those discussions typically presuppose a monotheistic background. This background makes some problems seem especially salient – for instance, does the notion that God is immutable have any implications for God's relation to time?

In what follows, I'll consider the problem of divine immutability in the context of *henotheistic* conceptions of god. I take henotheism to be the view that, although there are a plurality of gods, all of them are in some sense dependent upon and subordinate to one god that is the supreme first principle or *archê*. Henotheism was the dominant approach to gods among the pagan philosophers of antiquity – with a few exceptions. I consider the development of henotheistic defences of divine immutability through a dialectical development from Xenophanes to Plato to Proclus (d. 485 CE).

1. Xenophanes: Monotheism and immutability

The first ancient Greek philosopher to bring charges against the poets around the issue of divine immutability was Xenophanes of Colophon (born circa 570 BCE). His criticisms anticipate those of Plato in the *Republic*. Xenophanes objected to depictions of the gods that involve shameful conduct, like adultery and deception (DK 21 B11 = KRS 166),² though none of the fragments tell us what evidence he might have adduced in support of this objection.³ Xenophanes also famously skewered the human tendency to anthropomorphise the gods by observing that if cattle could create drawings of gods, they would be bovine in form (DK 21 B15 = KRS 169). While the rhetorical force of this observation about counter-factual cattle would do is immediate and simple, unpacking the implied argument is not so straight-forward. Obviously, there is an implicit premise that cattle are stupid and

¹ Cf. Robert Lamberton, *Homer the theologian : Neoplatonist allegorical reading and the growth of the epic tradition*, Transformation of the classical heritage 9 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

² As usual, DK = Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 5th edn ed., 10 vols. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1934--1938). KRS = G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Unless otherwise noted, translations of Xenophanes are from Kirk, Raven and Schofield.

³ Presumably it will have been a *a priori* reflection on the concept of a being worthy of worship. After all, we would not think it seemly to venerate human adulterers unless it is someone very powerful and we take ourselves to have good prudential reasons to do so. But our worship of the gods – while it is of course prudent – is not presented as *merely* prudent. It is also seemly or fitting; the notion of appropriateness that the Greeks gathered under the verb *prepein* and its cognates. Hence the gods do not engage in shameful acts like adultery or fraud.

that their conduct is no guide for intelligent humans. On the other hand, the remark invites us to consider, not the actual stupid beasts that we are familiar with, but cattle who understand that there are gods and make images of them. What these (now not so stupid?) counter-factual beasts think of their gods is supposed to contain a salutary lesson for us. Xenophanes' logical point becomes clearer when we also attend to his observation that the Thracians and the Egyptians each suppose that the gods look like them. If we assume that both Thracians and Egyptians are, in fact, venerating the *same gods*, then it is not possible that the very same god or group of gods could be both black and snub-nosed but also pale-skinned with red hair and blue eyes. So Xenophanes' cutting remarks on anthropomorphising gods presuppose a pantheon that is both *universal* for Greeks, Thracians, Egyptians and even counter-factually pious cattle and also *limited* in number. Once we accept the idea that all these groups worship what are in fact the very same gods, anthropomorphism is revealed as a kind of naïve and baseless provinciality.

So much for Xenophanes' critique of existing understandings of the gods. His positive counter-proposal *looks* like a statement of henotheism:

One god, greatest among gods and men, in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought. (DK 21 B23 = KRS 170)

There is one god who is the greatest among gods and men. On the surface this seems to imply that there are many gods, but one greatest god. However, interpreters have been inclined to treat Xenophanes as a monotheist on the basis of testimonia from the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias* (hereafter *MXG*); from Simplicius; and from Pseudo-Plutarch.⁴ In the first the following line of argument is attributed to Xenophanes: if there were two or more gods, then one could not say that each is *most* powerful and *best*. But it is a conceptual truth about a god that it rules and is not subject to being ruled. So to the extent that a thing is less powerful than something else, to that extent it is not a god.⁵ Similarly, Simplicius reports that Xenophanes showed that the first principle 'is one in number on the basis of the fact that it is more powerful than everything. If there are many [such principles] then it is necessary for authority (*to krattein*) to belong to all alike since a god is *most* authoritative and best of all.'⁶ The text from Pseudo-Plutarch explicitly rejects the subordination of the many gods to the one god that is characteristic of henotheism:

⁴ Cf. Jonathan Barnes, *Presocratic Philosophers*, ed. Ted Honderich, The Arguments of the Philosophers (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979). pp. 89–92. Against this view, see J.H. Leshner, *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments : a Text and Translation with a Commentary* (University of Toronto Press, 2001). pp. 98–100. For my own part, I suspend judgement on the matter of Xenophanes' own view. Certainly the *MXG* and other sources – perhaps because of the connection posited between him and the Eleatic school – attribute the view to him that there is but one god.

⁵ DK 21 A28 = [Aristotle] *MXG* 977a.23–29 εἰ δ' ἔστιν ὁ θεὸς ἀπάντων κράτιστον, ἓνα φησὶν αὐτὸν προσήκειν εἶναι. εἰ γὰρ δύο ἢ πλείους εἴεν, οὐκ ἂν ἔτι κράτιστον καὶ βέλτιστον αὐτὸν εἶναι πάντων. ἕκαστος γὰρ ὢν θεὸς τῶν πολλῶν ὁμοίως ἂν τοιοῦτος εἴη. τοῦτο γὰρ θεὸν καὶ θεοῦ δύναμιν εἶναι, κρατεῖν, ἀλλὰ μὴ κρατεῖσθαι, καὶ πάντων κράτιστον εἶναι. ὥστε καθὼ μὴ κρείττων, κατὰ τοσοῦτον οὐκ εἶναι θεόν.

⁶ DK 21 A31.9–11 = Simplicius, *in Phys.* 22.30–33 τὸ γὰρ ἓν τοῦτο καὶ πᾶν τὸν θεὸν ἔλεγεν ὁ Ξ., ὃν ἓνα μὲν δείκνυσιν ἐκ τοῦ πάντων κράτιστον εἶναι· πλειόνων γάρ, φησὶν, ὄντων ὁμοίως ὑπάρχειν ἀνάγκη πᾶσι τὸ κρατεῖν· τὸ δὲ πάντων κράτιστον καὶ ἄριστον θεός.

When it comes to the gods, he reveals that there is no trace of leadership among them, for it is not holy for one of the gods to be subject to the rule of a master and none of them stands in need of anything at all [from any of the others].⁷ (my translation)

It is only by having a plurality of gods that are all equally powerful or masterful, with no one god subordinate to any other, that the text from Pseudo-Plutarch is compatible with polytheism.

Henotheism is a form of polytheism that is precisely *not* egalitarian in this way. Nor do the traditional stories of the Greek gods in any way suggest a kind of egalitarian polytheism. It is thus not a position in the logical space of theistic views that would naturally suggest itself to someone in Xenophanes' intellectual context.⁸ I conclude that if we are to give credence to these later testimonia on Xenophanes, it appears far more likely that his view was monotheistic: there exists exactly *one* god.

Xenophanes is also the earliest known endorsement of something approaching the idea of divine immutability.

Always he remains in the same place, moving not at all; nor is it fitting (*epiprepei*) for him to go to different places at different times, but without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind. (DK 21 B26 and 25 = KRS, 171)

Xenophanes does not quite say that god does not change at all. Rather, this fragment denies that a god undergoes *local* motion. The Greek gods in the Homeric poems are remarkably like ordinary mortals when it comes to location: they come to places and, having done so, are absent from others. Thus Hephaestus set his trap for his errant wife and her lover by *leaving* to go to Lemnos, but returning sooner than expected. Thus this fragment from Xenophanes is certainly consistent with the other fragments in which he criticises poetic representations of the divine. The fragment itself contains nothing by way of argument: it is simply stated that local motion is not *fitting* for god. This vocabulary is consistent with the idea that such local motion would be beneath a god's dignity and also with the more philosophically rigorous idea that the very essence of divinity is such as to preclude the possibility of divine locomotion.⁹

The fact that gods are neither generated nor destroyed is also implied by divine immutability. Our testimonia – but not the fragments – attribute to Xenophanes an argument against a god being *generated*. The argument relies on vaguely Eleatic principles about not-being and raises the suspicion that Xenophanes was being interpreted – whether correctly or incorrectly – in light of the connection that Plato (DK 22 A29 = *Soph.* 242d), and subsequently Aristotle (DK 22 A30 = *Metaphys.* 1.5, 986b18), sought to draw between him and the Eleatic school. On the other hand, however, it seems likely that this is a question that Xenophanes might well have been motivated to address, for the myths that he was critical of include divine births.

⁷ DK 21 A32.9–11 = [Plut.] *Strom.* 4 ap. Eusebius, *Prep. Evang.* I.8.4.D.580 ἀποφαίνεται δὲ καὶ περὶ θεῶν ὡς οὐδεμιᾶς ἡγεμονίας ἐν αὐτοῖς οὐσης· οὐ γὰρ ὅσιον δεσπόζεσθαι τινα τῶν θεῶν· ἐπιδεῖσθαι τε μηδενὸς αὐτῶν μηδένα μηδ' ὅλως·

⁸ The author of the *MXG* responds to Xenophanes' idea that god is most powerful and best in the following way: 'This does not seem to agree with the customary opinion, which holds that some gods are in many respects superior to others. It was not therefore from accepted opinion that he took this admission about god.' (977b29–31)

⁹ When we turn to the testimonia on Xenophanes, we find that the dubiously Aristotelian *MXG* attributes to him an argument that god is *neither* mobile nor immobile. The divine transcends this dichotomy. It also transcends the limited / unlimited dichotomy. This might indicate an attempt on Xenophanes' part to articulate a view about the omnipresence of divinity.

The arguments attributed to Xenophanes in the *MXG* would generalise to every kind of coming to be, though the author notes that Xenophanes made his case with specific reference to god. The argument proceeds as follows:¹⁰

1. Whatever comes to be must come to be either from something similar or from something dissimilar.
2. It is impossible for x to come to be from y if x and y are similar, for since they are alike, they are equal and have the same qualities and stand in isomorphic relations to one another.
3. It is impossible for x to come to be from y if x and y are dissimilar.
 - a. If x and y are dissimilar, then one is better or worse, greater or weaker, etc than the other.
 - b. If the better can come to be from the worse, or vice versa, then nothing prevents Being coming to exist from Not-Being (or vice versa).
 - c. Therefore it is impossible for x to come to be from y if x and y are dissimilar.

The argument clearly contains Eleatic ideas and this is what we would expect given the post-Platonic tendency to connect Xenophanes with Parmenides and Eleatic monism. But this fact should not obscure the role that the comparatives better/worse, stronger/weaker play in the reasoning. We have already seen how considerations about the superlative nature of the concept of a god figure into an arguments for monotheism that our sources identify with Xenophanes. The same theme can be seen to undergird the reasoning outlined in the *MXG* and without reference to the Eleatic strictures on Not-Being.

1. If anything, x, engenders a god, y, then x is either (a) superior, (b) inferior, or (c) equal to y.
2. Not (a), for nothing is superior to God.
3. Not (c), for God is superlative and no two things can be equally superlative.

The remaining alternative to eliminate, (b), is that the better could come to be from the worse. This seems to be empirically false: many fine and powerful young men and women come to be from parents who are neither good nor powerful people. What then should prevent the superior Cronus from coming to be from Ouranos? Perhaps Xenophanes or one of his allies might argue that gods are an exceptional case. Though the better can come to be from the worse in the case of *human* offspring, the divine – which must be the best – cannot come to be from anything inferior. But this must be speculation.

So at this point we have seen one clear line of argument that appeals to the allegedly superlative character of a god. It is perhaps possible to see *glimpses* of an argument for divine immutability that would mobilise similar considerations to show that a god never comes to be by the agency of another. When we turn to Plato's *Republic*, we see Plato taking up a line of argument for divine immutability that makes crucial use of the superlative character of gods. However, unlike Xenophanes, Plato embraces henotheism rather than monotheism.

¹⁰ *MXG* 977a14–23 = DK 22A28 part. Ἀδύνατόν φησιν εἶναι, εἴ τι ἔστι, γενέσθαι, τοῦτο λέγων ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοῦ· ἀνάγκη γὰρ ἥτοι ἐξ ὁμοίου ἢ ἐξ ἀνομοίου γενέσθαι τὸ γενόμενον· δυνατόν δὲ οὐδέτερον· οὐτε γὰρ ὁμοιον ὑπ' ὁμοίου προσήκειν τεκνωθῆναι μᾶλλον ἢ τεκνώσαι (ταῦτά γὰρ ἅπαντα τοῖς γε ἴσοις καὶ ὁμοίως ὑπάρχειν πρὸς ἄλληλα) οὐτ' ἂν ἐξ ἀνομοίου τάνομοιον γενέσθαι. (2) εἰ γὰρ γίγνοιτο ἐξ ἀσθενεστέρου τὸ ἰσχυρότερον ἢ ἐξ ἐλάττονος τὸ μείζον ἢ ἐκ χείρονος τὸ κρείττον, ἢ τοῦναντίον τὰ χείρω ἐκ τῶν κρείττωνων, τὸ δὲ ἐξ οὐκ ὄντος ἂν γενέσθαι· ὅπερ ἀδύνατον αἰδίων μὲν οὖν διὰ ταῦτα εἶναι τὸν θεόν.

2. Plato on divine immutability

Our business with Plato is as context for Proclus, so our engagement with him will be brief and will ignore the vast literature on his treatment of the gods in *Republic* II. What is important for our purposes is that his argument makes use of the same considerations that Xenophanes did, but – unlike Xenophanes – combines those considerations with henotheism rather than monotheism. This sets his loyal interpreter, Proclus, a problem.

Like Xenophanes, Socrates in the *Republic* is critical of what he regards as poetic misrepresentations of the gods. The first and gravest misrepresentation is that the gods are sometimes responsible for the bad things that happen to human beings (*Rep.* II, 379b–d). The second is that the gods change shapes and appear to humans in different guises so as to deceive them (*Rep.* II, 380d). Plato's argument for this conclusion makes use of principles akin to those considered above in relation to Xenophanes.

1. Things that are in the best condition are those that are least susceptible to change by an external agent (e.g. a body in peak health is most immune to the effects of hard labour; the best made chair is the one least likely to break when a fat man sits on it, etc.)¹¹
2. Gods are in every way best.
3. So gods are the things least susceptible to change by any external agent.
4. If a god changes itself, then – being best – it could only change itself for the worse.
5. No one deliberately makes himself worse.
6. Knowing what gods know, a god could not *mistakenly* make him- or herself worse. (unstated premise)
7. So gods are things that are least of all subject to change by external agents¹² and do not change by their own agency.¹³

This line of reasoning does not require the impossibility of what is *better* undergoing change – or even coming to be – from what is *worse*. Rather, it insists that what is *best* is most resistant to change by external factors. As such it mobilises considerations about the superlative case that are closely akin to those that Xenophanes used in his argument for monotheism. Likewise, it uses the superlative character of gods to eliminate any motive that they might have to change themselves. After all, if you are best in every way, then any change in any respect is a change for the worse.

In spite of this use of the logical implications of superlatives, Plato's Socrates does not mount any argument in the *Republic* for monotheism that parallels Xenophanes' DK 21 B23. In fact, when we consider the Platonic corpus as a whole, it seems far more plausible that Plato should be counted among the henotheists rather than among monotheists. The Demiurge certainly plays a leadership role among the various gods that are identified in the *Timaeus*. The Good Itself is sometimes held out as a candidate for a supreme god in Plato's philosophy, but since the Good is beyond Being it is open to question whether it could be an intellect. If possession of (or identity with) intellect is a necessary condition for being a god in Plato's way of looking at things, then the Good could be no god. But regardless of *which* of the entities discussed in Plato's dialogues is the *supreme* god, there seems little room for doubt that Plato's dialogues embrace a plurality of subordinate deities. Commenting on the

¹¹ The premise is open to counter-example, of course. The best made thermometer is best precisely because it changes in relation to changes in the temperature.

¹² *Rep.* 381b6–7 Ταύτη μὲν δὴ ἥκιστα ἂν πολλὰς μορφὰς ἴσχοι ὁ θεός.

¹³ *Rep.* 381c7–9 Ἀδύνατον ἄρα, ἔφην, καὶ θεῶ ἐθέλειν αὐτὸν ἀλλοιοῦν, ἀλλ' ὥς ἔοικε, κάλλιστος καὶ ἄριστος ὢν εἰς τὸ δυνατόν ἕκαστος αὐτῶν μένει ἀεὶ ἀπλῶς ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ μορφῇ.

parallels between the gods that appear in the *Phaedrus* myth and at various points in the *Republic*, Mark McPherran comments:

... when Socrates acknowledges the Apollo of Delphi at [*Rep.*] 427a–b and Zeus at 583b and 391c, and defends the reputation of Hera, Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaestus and Poseidon at 390c and 391c, he is affirming the existence of distinct deities with distinct functions who may still be credited with distinct personalities, each one resembling the kind of human soul it will lead up to the nourishment of the Form realm ([*Phdr.*] 248a–e). The series of cosmological etymologies concerning the names of the gods provided by the *Philebus* (395e–410e) reinforces this point.¹⁴ (Oppy and Trakakis, vol 1, p. 72)

McPherran seems to me to be exactly right on this matter and only someone with a desperate need to recruit Plato to the ranks of wise pagans who anticipated the truth of Christianity could think otherwise.¹⁵

Thus Plato's argument for divine immutability mobilises considerations that can easily lead to an argument for monotheism. Yet Plato embraces henotheism. We might reasonably expect that at some point this potential source of tension might be explored.

3. Proclus on divine immutability and henotheism

In his *Commentary on the Republic*, Proclus first summarises what he takes Plato's argument for immutability to be. This summary high-lights the role that superlatives play in the reasoning.

Well, Plato once again assumes the following axiom prior to the argument: that everything that changes either changes by itself (as when a soul freely and deliberately becomes vicious or virtuous) or else by [the agency of] another (as when a body is heated or cooled). Having assumed this [axiom], he infers that the divine too must change in one of these two ways, unless it is changeless. First let us assume that the divine changes by the agency of something else. Now, everything that *undergoes* change is weaker than that which *does* the changing, if in fact the one acts while the other undergoes. But everything divine is maximally powerful and weakness is far removed from the gods since it is a [kind of] passivity that is material. It is not the case, therefore, that anything belonging to the gods undergoes change by the agency of anything else since there is nothing more powerful and that which undergoes change by something else has something that is more powerful [than it]. (*in Remp.* I 33.19–30)¹⁶

It seems to me that Plato's argument, and his qualified conclusion, rests only on the modest premise that what is best is *least susceptible* to change by an external agency. Proclus, by contrast, endorses the stronger premise that the agent of a change is more powerful than the patient or subject of the

¹⁴ Mark L. McPherran, "Socrates and Plato," in *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2009).

¹⁵ Cf. Eusebius, *Prep. Evang.* XI.13 and closer to our own times the disagreement between the two great 20th century commentators on Plato's *Timaeus*: A. E. Taylor and F. M. Cornford. A.E. Taylor, "The "Polytheism" of Plato: An Apologia," *Mind* 47, no. 186 (1938)., Francis Macdonald Cornford, "The "Polytheism" of Plato: An Apologia," *Mind* 47, no. 187 (1938).

¹⁶ Greek text, W. Kroll, ed. *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Rem publicam commentarii*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1899). The translations from Proclus are my own and will appear – in due course – in a 3 volume series with Cambridge University Press, co-authored with John Finamore and Graeme Miles.

change (at least in the respect to which that change is relevant).¹⁷ Since everything divine is maximally powerful, nothing divine is subject to change by any other agent.

Having given this argument, Proclus immediately moves to deflect the thought that this line of reasoning leads inevitably to monotheism.

This argument might seem to make it the case that there is only one god, for among the many, there will exist one that is more powerful [than the rest]. Or rather, while there exists one that is more powerful, it is not more powerful than one that is *weaker*. Instead, since it has its own intrinsic power, it remains unshaken (*asaleutos*) [by the greater power of the other god]. After all, the Solar Intellect is not weak because it does not have that power that the Demiurge has. Rather, it has the highest power among what has the form appropriate *to it*. Therefore that which is weak is weak through a decline in the power that is proper [to a thing of its kind] – not due to its inferiority to that which superior [to it]. (*in Remp.* I 33.30–34.6)

Xenophanes' argument for monotheism presupposes an account of the semantics of superlatives that:

1. Allows for all things to fall within the scope of quantification implicit in the superlative and
2. Insists on uniqueness as a condition for correct application of the superlative.

So *x* is a god if and only if *x* is most powerful and this can only be true if, for all *y*, *x* is greater than *y*. If there exists a *z* such that *z* is equal in power to *x*, then presumably neither is *most* powerful and thus neither is a god. This insistence on uniqueness provides a reason why Xenophanes could simply avoid consideration of egalitarian polytheism. Historically, perhaps, this is simply not a question that would come up: nothing in the cultural background suggests it as a possibility. But if we need to credit Xenophanes with further premises that would, in fact, rule out possibilities that his argument might not have considered, then 2 would do so. And as a view about the semantics of superlatives it is not without some intuitive motivation. After all, the underlying thought that there can be only one best team is what drives competing leagues – like the National Football Conference and the American Football Conference – to unite for a single “super bowl” to decide the matter.

Proclus' solution to this is to deny 1. When it comes to the relation ‘being weaker than’ or ‘being inferior to’ the domains of quantification are in fact implicitly restricted. Each god is the greatest of its kind. It may be true that there are kinds that are greater, but it does not follow that any god of a kind non-identical with this kind is weaker or lesser. Here Proclus relies on an understanding of relative terms (*ta pros ti*) that is common in antiquity, even if it is unfamiliar to modern readers who think about such matters in terms of the notation of the predicate calculus. ‘Greater’ and ‘lesser’ are like ‘master’ and ‘slave’. A master is what it is *pros* or in relation to a slave. This relativity is conveyed by the genitive case. A master is a master *of* a slave. A slave is the slave *of* some master. In the normal run of things, *x* is greater *than* some *y* that is lesser or inferior and *y* is inferior *to* *x*. It is essential to the ancient account of relative terms that these reciprocate.¹⁸ But in the case of gods, the Demiurge is simply greater than the Solar *nous* because the order of gods to which he belongs (the intellectual

¹⁷ Proclus supplies the argument against the missing case in the Xenophantic reasoning reconstructed above at *Elements of Theology* (hereafter *ET*) prop. 7. Suppose that the cause were inferior to the product (or to the subject in which it produces an alteration). If the product is superior, then the producer is capable of making something better than itself. But anything capable of making what is better than itself is capable of making itself better. Since all things love the good and seek to emulate it that which is capable of making itself better will do so. ‘Therefore were it able to produce something more perfect than itself, it would make itself better before perfecting the product.’

¹⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Categories* 7a31–3.

order) is greater than the order to which the Sun belongs (the encosmic order). Yet is *not* a consequence of this that the Solar intellect is lesser or inferior to the Demiurge because the Solar intellect is the best of its kind. The superiority of x to y in the case of gods does not imply the inferiority of y to x.

Now this may sound a bit like special pleading, but Proclus immediately goes on to develop a theory of weakness or inferiority that he claims is consistent with this picture. He also argues that this account of weakness must be accepted unless absurd consequences are to result.

Therefore that which is weak is weak through a decline in the power that is proper [to a thing of its kind] – not due to its inferiority to that which is superior [in kind to it]. Otherwise everything, save for one, would be weak. And if weakness is something evil, everything would participate in evil save for one. Inferiority, however, is not an evil for anything, for [the thing that is inferior to something superior] is rendered a substance in accordance with this [rank].¹⁹ If, therefore, the “weakness” associated with inferiority is substantial, and if everything evil is not substantial qua evil (for what is substantial is natural, while evil is contrary to nature), then inferiority would not be something evil, nor would it in this way count as weakness. Rather, whenever a thing should fail to have the power that is assigned to it, then at that point the lack of power counts as evil. What changes by the agency of something else necessarily has this sort of absence of power, since it fails to achieve the power proper to it. (*in Remp.* I 34.6–17)

Weakness, inferiority and defect are always predicated relative to a kind. A thing of kind K is weak if and only if it fails to achieve the power proper to things of kind K. Since different orders of divinity in no way fall short of the powers proper to gods of their rank, none of them is inferior, weak or subordinate. This is true even if there are orders of gods superior to them. In the case of gods, the reciprocal character of relative terms like ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ fails. It does not follow from the fact that a god of kind K, x, is superior to a god of kind K-1, y, that y is inferior to x.

Why should we accept this exception to the typical semantic features of relative terms? Suppose that we do not and suppose that inferiority is an evil. Then everything except the One would be evil. Proclus obviously regards this as an unacceptable consequence – though it might be something embraced by those more inclined toward gnostic pessimism. So on pain of accepting the evilness of everything, we must deny the ‘x belongs to an order of gods greater than y’ entails ‘y is weaker or inferior to x’.

This also removes the possibility that gods of higher orders can be the *agents of change* for gods of lower orders.

What changes by the agency of something else necessarily has this sort of absence of power, since it fails to achieve the power proper to it. If therefore everything that is divine is the best and most powerful thing in the order in which it belongs, even if one [order] is more powerful than another, then what is inferior submits in no way at all to change by what is superior. For although it is by far the best, nothing among the things that are best is such as to change things that are similar. Instead it plays the leading role in preserving what is best among them. (*in Remp.* I 34.17–22)

¹⁹ οὐδενὶ δὲ ἡ ὑφεσις κακόν· οὐσίωται γὰρ κατὰ ταύτην. The passive verb here indicates that, for example, the Solar Intellect is the very thing that it is in part because of its inferiority to the Demiurge. If it had a different, more potent intrinsic *dynamis*, it would be a different thing.

The gods in the lower order are ‘similar’ to the gods in the higher order in being the best and most powerful *among that order* – just as the gods of higher rank are the best and most powerful among their order. Any potentiality for undergoing change by another presupposes some falling short of the power proper to the thing in question. So the gods of the inferior order are changeless, even by the gods that belong to orders superior to them. Proclus goes on to reinforce this point with another *reductio*:

If then what is superior were [*per impossibile*] to change one of the things that are inferior, it would assimilate the thing that is subject to the change to itself. But what is made like the superior thing becomes more powerful and, having become more powerful, it is consequently more changeless. If therefore that which is superior were to change something inferior, then the subject of the change would become more changeless – something that is in fact impossible. Thus it has been shown that everything that is divine is incapable of being changed by something else. (*in Remp.* I 34.23–35.5)

Proclus then goes on to complete the case for divine immutability by considering whether gods might change themselves, having eliminated the possibility that they might undergo change by some other agency. The argument against self-initiated change proceeds – as one would expect on the basis of Plato’s text – from the thought that any change in a god would be a change for the worse, since the god is in the best condition. However, we can now see that best is relativised to the rank of gods in question. The Solar Intellect is in the best condition for a god of that rank, even if the Demiurge is a greater god.

3. The self-constituted

These concerns about divine immutability within the framework of henotheism put Proclus’ notion of the self-constituted or self-existent (*to authupostaton*) in a useful perspective.²⁰ The *Elements of Theology* proves a number of propositions about things that are self-constituted. It is best to consider the meaning of this concept within the framework of Proclus’ account of the ranks of gods.

Neoplatonic ontology in general, and Proclus theology in particular, posits several orders of gods that mediate between the One – the super-simple first principle of all that is beyond even Being – and the sensible cosmos. These include beings that are simply gods, but – unlike the One – plural. These are the henads. It also includes intelligible gods that are specifically divine objects of intellection or *noêta* like Platonic forms. Other gods are divine acts of self-thinking – the so-called intelligible-and-intellectual gods, while others are divine acts of thinking, but not of self-thinking (the intellectual gods). Further ranks of god are *souls* (rather than objects or acts of *noêsis*) and these divine souls can be distinguished from one another in a variety of ways (e.g. by being within or outside the cosmos).

What makes all of these things *divine* is the fact that they exercise providential care over their products. The exercise of providence is the distinguishing mark of what is divine (*ET* prop. 134). Even human souls may be ‘divinised’ or assimilated to the divine by playing their role in the vast army of beings that administers divine providence. A god or a henad is merely one kind of divinity and Proclus often speaks of any divine being as a god. For the neoplatonists, it is the adjective that is primary: divine intellects and souls can be called gods and are not to be sharply distinguished from the

²⁰ Proclus’ doctrine of the self-constituted is significant and difficult topic in its own right. See John Whittaker, “The Historical Background of Proclus’ Doctrine of the Authypostata,” in *De Jamblique à Proclus*, ed. Heinrich Dörrie (Genève: Foundation Hardt, 1975). My concern in this paper is with the much more circumscribed topic of how the concept of the self-constituted can be illuminated by considering the challenges that divine immutability raises for henotheists.

simpler henads that admit of no sortal term like intellect or soul.²¹ A divine soul is a god – albeit a god manifesting itself in a psychic manner or at the level of soul.²²

Now, each of these orders of gods both ‘proceeds from’ from the One²³ as well as from the orders of gods higher than themselves.²⁴ They are dependent upon these higher causes, but are *also* self-caused or self-constituted. Thus just as we have an order of gods that is simultaneously intelligible-and-intellectual and an order that is simultaneously hypercosmic-and-encosmic that mediates between the terms that are frozen in this ordered conjunction, so too there will be divinities that are both products of higher order gods and also self-caused.

Why think that this must be so? In *ET* 40 Proclus presents an argument by elimination: either (a) nothing at all is self-constituted or (b) the Good alone is self-constituted or (c) the things that arise first from the Good are self-constituted. The first option (a) yields the result that nothing is truly self-sufficient since Proclus regards it as obvious that what is self-constituted is self-sufficient. Proclus does not say why this is an unacceptable result, but it is not difficult to speculate. If nothing is self-sufficient, then everything is dependent upon something else both for its existence and for its good. This creates exactly the sort of regress that Proclus deems unacceptable in proposition 11 of the *Elements of Theology*. Option (b) is that the Good itself is the only thing that is self-constituted. But given that self-constitution entails self-sufficiency, this too is impossible. First, the One or the Good is *beyond* self-sufficiency just as it is beyond Being (cf. *Rep.* 509b) and so – taking liberties with language – not even correctly said to be or exist. Similarly, it is not self-sufficient for the reason that it does not *possess* the Good. Rather it *is* the Good. Second, what is self-constituted produces itself. But this opens up a distinction within the Good between itself qua producer and itself qua product. It was just such a duality in the Prime Mover – thought thinking itself – that led the neoplatonists to reject Aristotle’s conception of the first principle of all things. So (b) threatens the unity of the One. By process of elimination, then, we are left with (c): the things that arise first from the One or the Good are self-constituted.

Now, it may be objected that this is simply incoherent. Nothing can be *both* a result of the One and also self-constituted or self-caused. Surely this absurdity is just another instance of the neoplatonists’ propensity to propound apparent contradictions. The order of gods that are both hypercosmic-and-encosmic is another glaring example; or the insistence that soul is both generated and ungenerated (*in Tim.* II 119.30, ff). This, it will be objected, is merely mystery-mongering – a transparent attempt to have one’s philosophical cake and eat it too.

Certainly the claim that some things are both products of the One and also self-constituted is initially puzzling. We might suppose that Proclus is propounding a theory according to which some non-temporal (prop. 45, 51), imperishable (prop. 46) simple and partless (prop. 47) entities whose existence is *causally over-determined*. They are self-caused – to be sure. But if they hadn’t caused themselves, then they would have been caused by the One.

This interpretation, I think, is not Proclus’ understanding of the situation. Our notion of causal overdetermination involves a kind of co-causation that is best explained by reference to alternative possibilities: if the pistol shot hadn’t killed him, the poison would have. But nothing in the realm of

²¹ This is why translators typically let ‘henad’ stand on its own. We use an English neologism to express a Greek neologism – one whose purpose is precisely to deny that a henad is one *anything*.

²² *ET* prop. 185 Πᾶσαι μὲν αἱ θεῖαι ψυχαὶ θεοὶ εἰσι ψυχικῶς,

²³ *ET* props 11 and 12.

²⁴ *ET* props 25 and 26.

intelligible entities (which includes the things that are self-constituted) admits of being otherwise. To frame such alternatives in their case is already to fall into an error. Proclus' view seems to be that a subjunctive conditional with an impossible antecedent is true if and only if both the denial of the antecedent and the consequent are necessary. In any event, he supposes that Timaeus' statement at *Tim.* 38b6–8 that 'time and the heavens came into being together in order that they might be dissolved together in the event that there should ever be any destruction of them' as equivalent to the claim that it is necessary that both the heavens exist and that time exist (*in Tim.* III 50.15–21).

So how *are* we to square the apparent incompatibility of a god being self-existent with its being a "product" of higher causes? An important first step is to recognise that when Proclus says that something *x* is both *F* and not-*F*, there is often relativity involved. Thus the soul of the universe is said to be both generated and ungenerated. In these cases, the apparent incompatibility of attributes is explained by the relativity of the incompatible attributes to different objects. The soul is both generated and ungenerated by virtue of the fact that, compared with the *atemporal* existence of Forms, its essentially temporal activity makes it count as generated. On the other hand, it is ungenerated because, compared with the individual sensible things that come and go, it *exists always*.²⁵ Thus a first approximation for reconciling the self-caused character of the gods with the fact that there are simultaneously products of the One is to note that the One is beyond being self-caused. Just as, strictly speaking, it is neither existent nor good (but is instead beyond Being and the source rather than a possessor of goodness), so too the One transcends the very distinction between self-caused and caused by another. Since *something* must be the first self-caused being or beings, some of the things subsequent to the One will meet this description. Yet they will meet it whilst still being themselves secondary to, and dependent upon, the One.

That, perhaps, helps to clear the first hurdle to understanding how a thing can be both self-caused and the product of something else. But not all the ranks of gods enumerated above are immediate products of the One. Each one in the lower ranks is also a product of gods in the ranks prior to it.²⁶ Thus the henads depend upon the One alone. But the intelligible gods result from *both* the One and the henads. So we cannot explain their simultaneously self-caused and hetero-caused status by simply noting that what comes immediately prior to them is beyond the scope of being caused – either by itself or by something else. So we are still left with the puzzle about how to understand the idea that something can be both self-caused or self-existent and simultaneously a product of prior causes. By the standards of our ordinary reasoning about causes and effects, this seems genuinely perplexing.

As we ordinarily think about such matters, there does seem to be a deep incoherence in the idea of a thing being both *causa sui* and caused by another. In fact, I think that Proclus' account of the self-constituted is intended to show just how limited our understanding of causality is.

The most fundamental kind of causation in the universe is the double action of procession (*proōdos*) and reversion (*epistrophē*). The propositions in *Elements of Theology* on the self-constituted follow

²⁵ Cf. *in Tim.* II 117.10–19: 'After all, the birth of the soul is not a temporal one (for the soul was shown to be ungenerated and indestructible in the *Phaedrus* 246a1), but rather it proceeds in respect of its essence from intelligible causes. For among the beings, some are intelligible and ungenerated, others are sensible and generated, and yet others are between these in being both intelligible and generated. While the first are entirely incomposite and indivisible and for this reason count as ungenerated, the second are composite and divisible and for this reason count as generated. In between these two we find the intelligible and generated class, being both indivisible and yet divisible in nature, and being simple, yet composite in a different manner.'

²⁶ Cf. *ET* prop. 26: 'Every productive cause produces the next and all subsequent principles while remaining itself steadfast.' So the encosmic gods, for instance, are products of all six of the ranks of gods prior to them and also, in some sense, causes of themselves.

immediately after nineteen propositions on procession and reversion. Causal processes, such as the cyclic motions of the planets, merely provide moving temporal images of these fundamental, atemporal causal processes. When Proclus goes on to prove further propositions about what is self-constituted, these notions of procession and reversion are at the centre of his reasoning. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the self-constituted as a category is that it coincides exactly with the range of things that have the capacity to *revert* upon themselves (props 42 and 43). The category of the self-constituted is not so much *explained* as *systematically related* to procession and reversion. To the extent that procession and reversion are causal processes whose operations run counter to our empirically derived notions of causation – notions in which the efficient cause occupies a central role – so too the self-constituted will seem puzzling to us.

Though the form of the *Elements of Theology* superficially resembles the proofs in Euclid's *Elements*, they function very differently. Unlike Euclid, the proofs of Proclus' propositions are not preceded by definitions and axioms. The propositions in *ET* do not, I submit, draw out the necessary implications of concepts we *already possess*. Instead the work articulates, through a network of connections, unfamiliar concepts of being and causality that the author believes should *supersede* our existing ones. The propositions are contextual definitions of superior and clearer notions of being and causality that we should substitute for our partially informed empirical concepts. If we find it puzzling that something can be both self-constituted (i.e. something that exists in itself and something that reverts upon itself) and also a product of the One (as all things are), this puzzlement merely shows the limits of our understanding. The *Elements of Theology* is no substitute for Proclus' commentaries on the divine works of Plato (and those of "Orpheus" and the *Chaldean Oracles*). These much longer and discursive works invite the reader to see the world in terms of concepts and metaphors for living that are very different from those that we derive from our embodied experience. Elsewhere I have called this process of conceptual transformation through the shared reading of an authoritative text 'perlocutionary hermeneutics'.²⁷ The neoplatonic notion of a philosophical way of life practiced through the reading of Plato aspires to be much more transformative than the ordinary methods of conceptual analysis. While philosophical reflection may lead contemporary philosophers to the idea that some 'folk concepts' are in need of revision or replacement, this falls far short of the wholesale renovation of one's conceptual scheme that is the goal of neoplatonic reading strategies. Contemporary philosophers may object that such wholesale renovation is more than our discipline can legitimately aspire to. Philosophy is in the business of conceptual purification, but only in very modest ways. The neoplatonists, however, had grander ambitions for philosophy and we will not understand their works if we do not evaluate them in relation to the objectives of those works. We may yet reject those objectives as the right ones for philosophy, but we still need to appreciate the scale of their project in order to understand how their texts were meant to function.

4. Conclusion: divine immutability and henotheism

If gods are immutable, then they are neither created nor destroyed. In addition, they do not undergo change either by their own agency or by the agency of another. Henotheism seems to be incompatible with immutability in both ways. First, it suggests that lower gods are the causal products of higher gods – even if there was no time at which the higher god created the lower god. Mere dependence might seem to be a threat to divine immutability. Second, the acknowledgement that some gods are superior to others seems to leave it open that a more powerful god could change a less powerful one.

²⁷ D Baltzly, "Plato's Authority and the Formation of Textual Communities in Late Antiquity," *Classical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2014).

The concept of the self-constituted is precisely what a henotheist needs to express the idea that there are things that are genuinely gods but nonetheless gods subordinate to a single divine first principle. Self-constituted entities are – in an appropriate sense – independent things that exist ‘in themselves’. Yet at the same time, they are also products of higher orders of divinity. They are simultaneously dependent and independent gods. I have argued that the sense in which this is so is given by the network of concepts illustrated in Proclus’ propositions on the fundamental causal processes of procession and reversion. These do not accord well with our empirically derived notions of causation, but that is to be expected given the limited vantage point of embodied souls. Proclus’ approach to divine immutability does not reconcile henotheism with our ordinary concepts of causation, dependence, etc. Rather, it provides us with improved concepts better adapted to the perplexing, but nonetheless superior, kind of reality had by gods.

- Baltzly, D. "Plato's Authority and the Formation of Textual Communities in Late Antiquity." *Classical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2014): 793-807.
- Barnes, Jonathan. *Presocratic Philosophers*. The Arguments of the Philosophers. edited by Ted Honderich London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Cornford, Francis Macdonald. "The "Polytheism" of Plato: An Apology." *Mind* 47, no. 187 (1938): 321-30.
- Diels, Hermann, and Walther Kranz, eds. *Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*. 5th edn ed. 10 vols. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1934--1938.
- Kirk, G. S., J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Kroll, W., ed. *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Rem Publicam Commentarii*. 2 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1899.
- Lamberton, Robert. *Homer the Theologian : Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage 9. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Leshner, J.H. *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments : A Text and Translation with a Commentary*. University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- McPherran, Mark L. "Socrates and Plato." In *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis. 53-78. Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2009.
- Taylor, A.E. "The "Polytheism" of Plato: An Apologia." *Mind* 47, no. 186 (1938): 180-99.
- Whittaker, John. "The Historical Background of Proclus' Doctrine of the Authypostata." In *De Jamblique À Proclus*, edited by Heinrich Dörrie. 193-201. Genève: Foundation Hardt, 1975.