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Plato's Violent Readers*

Pagan Neoplatonists against Christian Appropriations of Plato's Timaeus

When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support. (Plato *Phaedrus* 275d9–e5; tr. Nehamas & Woodruff)¹

Dealing with disagreement in and outside the Platonic tradition

According to the well-known passage from the *Phaedrus* quoted above, a text is always in danger of being misunderstood and – even worse – to be violated by its readers.² This holds especially true in the case of Plato, who, hiding behind the characters of his dialogues, refrains from providing a clear exposition of his own views. If, as is often suggested, Plato's reason for doing so was to stimulate philosophical discourse, he certainly succeeded. From the days of the Old Academy

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1 όταν δὲ ἀπαξ γραφῇ, κυλινδεῖται μὲν πανταχοῦ πᾶς λόγος ὁμοίως παρὰ τοῖς ἐπαίουσιν, ὥς δ' αὐτως παρ' οἷς οὐδὲν προσήκει, καὶ οὐκ ἐπίσταται λέγειν οἷς δεῖ γε καὶ μὴ. πλημμελούμενος δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἐν δίκῃ λαιδορῆθεις τοῦ πατρὸς αἰεὶ δεῖται βοηθοῦ. αὐτὸς γὰρ οὐτ' ἀμύνασθαι οὔτε βοηθῆσαι δυνατὸς αὐτῷ.

2 I borrow the concept of violent interpretation from Sluiter (2013), 203–207, who discusses the above-quoted passage from the *Phaedrus* on 205.

onward, there has always been much discussion among Plato's readers about the correct interpretation of his works and hence of his philosophy. In such debates, emotions could run high. Numenius and Atticus in particular used the trope of violent misinterpretation to discredit their opponents.³ A good illustration is provided by Numenius' treatise *On the Dissension of the Academics from Plato*. While his main target is the skeptical interpretation of Plato that had been championed by Arcesilaus and others, he even accuses Plato's immediate successors, and in particular Xenocrates, of having 'thrown out some elements of Plato's heritage and perverted others' not just out of ignorance, but motivated by ambition to make a name for themselves.⁴

Later Neoplatonists appear to have dealt with alternative interpretations of Plato by other Platonists in a more relaxed way. At the beginning of his *Platonic Theology*, for example, Proclus presents his readers with an overview of

[t]hose exegetes of the Platonic mysteries who have revealed for us the most sacred interpretations concerning the divine and who have received a nature nearly equal to that of their own leader (sc. Plato) (Proclus, *Platonic Theology* I.1, 6.16–18).⁵

This list of venerated Neoplatonic teachers starts with Plotinus, with whom Proclus disagreed about the (to them) crucial matter of the (un)descended soul, and includes, among others, Porphyry, whose interpretation of the *Timaeus* attracts a considerable amount of flak in Proclus' commentary on that dialogue, and Theodore of Asine, whose interpretation of the myth of the winged charioteer from the *Phaedrus* Proclus will reject in *Platonic Theology* IV.23 (69.5–70.17). I assume that Proclus' mild attitude toward fellow Platonists whose interpretations he rejected was in part motivated by the urge that he and others felt to present pagan Platonism as a unified front against Christianity.

In dealing with such competing readings of Plato originating from outside their own circle, the pagan Neoplatonists were far less tolerant. As is widely known, many Christian intellectuals had taken a serious interest in Plato's works. The difference between the Neoplatonists and the Christian readers of Plato is, obviously, that for the latter Plato was not 'their own leader', i.e. they did not accept Plato's authority. As Dirk Baltzly observes in regard to the passage just quoted, this authority was 'not merely epistemic, but moral', i.e. the Neoplatonists claimed that Plato's texts offered a path to salvation and divinization.⁶ Hence, authority in Neoplatonic circles – or textual communities, as Baltzly calls them – was 'not so much a matter of doctrine as an attitude towards the text of Plato.'⁷ It is

3 As the anonymous reader kindly pointed out to me.

4 Numenius frg. 24.10–14.

5 Τούτους δὴ τοὺς τῆς Πλατωνικῆς ἐποπτείας ἐξηγητὰς καὶ τὰς παναγεστάτας ἡμῖν περὶ τῶν θείων ὑφηγήσεις ἀναπλώσαντας καὶ τῷ σφετέρῳ καθηγεμόνι παραπλησίαν τὴν φύσιν λαχόντας [...].

6 Baltzly (2014), 793.

7 Baltzly (2014), 797.

in this context of anti-Christian polemics that the pagan Neoplatonists reverted to the trope of violent misinterpretation. The Neoplatonists explained such misinterpretations by pointing to the inherently immoral character of Christianity. As they saw things, Christians violently rejected both the authority of Plato in the double sense just described and the whole of pagan Greek culture, precisely because they were immoral persons. They approached Plato's texts with the wrong attitude and hence their interpretations of Plato were bound to be no good. To put it in the words of the passage from the *Phaedrus*, Christians were people who had 'no business' with the texts of Plato, whom they 'attacked unfairly'. In the first part of this chapter, I shall discuss the way in which Plotinus and Proclus deal with Christian readings of Plato, and in particular of the *Timaeus*, along these lines. In the second part, we shall look at a Christian response, that by John Philoponus, who in his polemic against Proclus' interpretation of the *Timaeus* turns the tables on his pagan adversary.⁸

Immorality as a cause of violent interpretation: Plotinus against Gnostic readings of the *Timaeus*

According to Porphyry (*Life of Plotinus* c. 16.1–9), '[t]here were in his (i.e. Plotinus') time apart from many other Christians also certain sectarian ones who based their teachings on the ancient philosophy'.⁹ These sectarian groups, listed subsequently by Porphyry, are Gnostics. A modern scholar of Gnosticism might balk at Porphyry's suggestion that these Gnostics were Christians. Even though there were indeed Christian Gnostics around in Porphyry's time, Plotinus and his school seem in particular to have taken issue with the so-called Platonizing Sethian treatises, such as *Zostrianus*, which is mentioned by Porphyry in the passage under discussion (*Life of Plotinus* c. 16.6) and quoted from by Plotinus in his

⁸ The fact that the three cases of contested interpretations that I discuss in this chapter all concern the *Timaeus* is hardly coincidental. As Maren Niehoff (2007) has recently argued, pagan Greek philosophers from the 2nd century CE onward sought to distinguish themselves from Christians on the basis of the alleged superiority of their interpretations of the *Timaeus*, a text that enjoyed great authority among both pagans and Christians.

⁹ Γεγόνασι δὲ κατ' αὐτὸν τῶν Χριστιανῶν πολλοὶ μὲν καὶ ἄλλοι, αἰρετικοὶ δὲ ἐκ τῆς παλαιᾶς φιλοσοφίας ἀνηγγμένοι [...]. The precise meaning of this phrase is debated. I here follow the interpretation of Igal (1981), 138–139; for another reading of the phrase, see M. Tardieu in Brisson et al. (1992), 509–517. I have translated αἰρετικοί here as 'sectarians', rather than 'heretics' as, e.g., Mark Edwards (2000), 28 renders the word. As Edwards (2000), 28 n. 155, observes, the word αἰρετικός 'had been in common use among Christians in the sense of "heretic" since Irenaeus (fl. 170), though among pagans it still denoted merely a "choice" (*haire-sis*) of philosophical alliance'. While Porphyry may have known of this specific Christian use of the word, for him as a prominent pagan all forms of Christianity were equally misguided, so it would make little sense for him to take sides in inner-Christian discussions about orthodoxy and brand some Christian schools as 'heretic'.

Treatise against the Gnostics (Enn. II.9 [33], 10.19–33). These treatises ‘represent a form of Gnosticism virtually devoid of Christian influences’.¹⁰ Be that as it may, these sectarians, according to Porphyry, had ‘claimed that Plato had not reached the depths of intelligible being’. This situation, Porphyry continues, triggered a flow of polemical works by members of Plotinus’ school, including Plotinus’ own lengthy *Treatise against the Gnostics*. Porphyry ascribes to the Gnostics a somewhat ambiguous attitude toward Plato.¹¹ On the one hand, they accused him of having failed to penetrate the secrets of the intelligible realm, on the other they partly derived their doctrines from so-called ‘ancient philosophy’, which included notably that of Plato. As modern scholarship has clearly shown, the Gnostics were not just avid readers of Plato’s dialogues, but were equally well acquainted with the contemporary Platonic commentaries on them.¹² Some Platonists took the Gnostics seriously, as is clear from the afore-mentioned *Treatise against the Gnostics*, which addresses not so much hard-core Gnostics, but rather Platonists who thought that Platonism and Gnosticism could somehow be squared.

From the fact that the Gnostics borrowed from Plato, one could have concluded that Gnosticism is part of the Greek philosophical tradition. In fact, some modern scholars working on Gnosticism have made precisely this claim.¹³ Plotinus, though, insists that the Gnostics are beyond the pale. Admittedly, there is much Platonism in Gnostic texts, yet the Gnostics try to pass their ill-understood version of Plato off as something altogether new.¹⁴ They try to conceal their plagiarism by

inventing a new jargon to recommend their own school. They contrive this meretricious language as if they had no connection with the ancient Hellenic school, though the Hellenes knew all this and spoke **clearly without pomposity** (*atuphôs*) of ascents from the cave and advancing gradually closer

¹⁰ Thus Moore & Turner (2000), 182, who offer a helpful overview of various types of Christian and non-Christian Gnosticism.

¹¹ On the ambiguous relation of the Gnostics with this ‘ancient philosophy’, see further Igal (1981).

¹² For the case of the *Parmenides*, see, e.g., Turner (2011).

¹³ See, e.g., Turner (2012), 153: ‘While I would not wish to assert *tout court* that Gnosticism is a form of Greek philosophy, I do not agree that Gnosticism can be called “unphilosophical” (Dillon), or that Greek philosophy’s influence was “extraneous and for the most part superficial” (Armstrong)’. Elsewhere, I have expressed my reservations about the philosophical nature of Gnosticism (van den Berg (2013b)), yet Turner is obviously right about the strong Platonic influence on Gnosticism.

¹⁴ Ironically, in his discussion of the Gnostic material, Plotinus commits the very offences of which he accuses the Gnostics: ‘Plotinus is overly eager to trace back the Gnostic doctrines to Plato, and this remarkable feat he achieves by the curious procedure of drastic simplification and reinterpretation’ (Igal (1981), 141).

and closer to a truer vision. (Plotinus, *Enn.* II.9 [33], 6.5–10; trans. Armstrong LCL adapted)¹⁵

Especially relevant for my present purpose is the characterization of Hellene, i.e. traditional Greek, philosophical writings as ‘clear’ and ‘without pomposity’. The idea that a philosopher ought to express himself clearly goes back to Aristotle (*Rhet.* III.2, 1404b1–4), who had argued that, since the function of language is communication, the one virtue of language is clarity (*saphêneia*). This idea was subsequently embraced by almost all Greek philosophical schools, including Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Neoplatonism, hence Plotinus’ remark that Greek philosophers express themselves clearly.¹⁶ Plotinus next suggests that the Gnostics’ lack of clarity – their main stylistic failure – is due to the very moral failure that made them break away from the Greek tradition in the first place: Plotinus describes the style of the old Greek philosophers as *atyphos* (‘without pomposity’). The word, of course, recalls the beginning of the *Phaedrus*. There Socrates declares that he is not interested in rationalizing local mythology, such as the story of how Boreas abducted a girl on the spot where the dialogue is said to take place. He has no time for such things, since, he says, ‘I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself’. Rather than speculating about mythological accounts of violent winds, Socrates says, he does not

look into them, but into my own self. Am I a beast more complicated and savage than **Typhon**, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and **atyphos** nature? (Plato, *Phdr.* 230a3–6; trans. Nehamas-Woodruff adapted)¹⁷

The word *atyphos* is difficult to render into English. *Typhos* is associated with the verb *epityphô*, ‘to puff up’. It implies that a philosopher who cultivates the divine element in himself should be free from vanity and the sort of violent behaviour that goes with it. The Stoics, who had adopted Socrates as their role model, make being *atyphos* one of the qualities of their sage, as do the Cynics.¹⁸ Likewise, Plotinus here uses the word to contrast the true, i.e. Greek, philosophers to the puffed up Gnostics, whose eagerness for renown motivates their plagiarism of Plato. Thus, when Neoplatonists use the term ‘typhonic’ to refer to Christians, as

15 καινολογούντων ἐστὶν εἰς σύστασιν τῆς ἰδίας αἰρέσεως· ὥς γὰρ τῆς ἀρχαίας Ἑλληνικῆς οὐχ ἀπτόμενοι ταῦτα σκευωροῦνται εἰδότες καὶ σαφῶς τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἀτύφως λεγόντων ἀναβάσεις ἐκ τοῦ σπηλαίου καὶ κατὰ βραχὺ εἰς θεᾶν ἀληθεστέραν μᾶλλον καὶ μᾶλλον προιούσας.

16 On the adoption of Aristotle’s principle of clarity by later Greek philosophers such as the Epicureans and Stoics, see van den Berg (2008), 57–58. The Neoplatonic commentators on Aristotle frequently discuss Aristotle’s own lack of clarity (cf. Mansfeld (1994), 22–26).

17 σκοπῶ οὐ ταῦτα ἀλλ’ ἐμαυτόν, εἴτε τι θηρίον ὃν τυγχάνω τυφῶνος πολυπλοκώτερον καὶ μᾶλλον ἐπιτεθυμμένον, εἴτε ἡμερώτερόν τε καὶ ἀπλούστερον ζῶον, θείας τινὸς καὶ ἀτύφου μοίρας φύσει μετέχον.

18 On the Stoic sage as *atyphos* and its relation to the *Phaedrus* passage, see Brouwer (2013), 149–163; on the Cynics, see Long (2006), 80–81.

they do here and elsewhere, it disqualifies them both as Greeks because of their inadequate style and as philosophers because of their vanity.¹⁹

Their typhonic nature makes Christians violent interpreters of ancient texts, i.e. they distort the obvious meanings of those texts. This point is explicitly made by Porphyry when he criticizes Christian interpretations of the writings of Moses, whom many pagan authors were ready to accept as a decent philosopher:²⁰

They boast that things said **clearly** by Moses are riddles and treat these with religious reverence as if they were divine oracles full of hidden mysteries. Having thus cast a spell of pomposity (*typhos*) over the critical faculties of the soul, **they impose their exegesis**. (Porphyry, *Against the Christians* Fr. 39 Harnack = Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI.19.4)²¹

In his new German edition of the remains of Porphyrius' *Against the Christians*, Matthias Becker identifies *typhos* as a *Signalwort* that characterizes the Christians as sophists who practice some sort of verbal witchcraft.²² In a similar vein, Porphyry rejects accusations that Plotinus had plagiarized Numenius on the grounds that Plotinus' detractors despised the latter, 'because they do not understand what he says and because he is entirely free of sophistic deceit and pomposity'.²³ Furthermore, another recent, Italian edition of *Against the Christians* makes the interesting suggestion that the Greek expression that I have rendered above as 'to impose their exegesis' (*epagousin exêgêseis*) is polemical: an exegesis (*exêgêsis*) is supposed to derive from (*ex-*) the text, yet the Christians impose theirs upon (*epi-*) it.²⁴ All of this fits nicely with Plotinus' own accusation that the pompous Gnostics had invented a new jargon to hide the fact that their philosophy was nothing but a travesty of Plato's.

Plotinus elaborates on the Gnostics' misguided interpretation of Plato in the next passage, which deals with their misunderstanding of the *Timaeus* and particularly of the Demiurge:

And the idea to construct a plurality in the intelligible world – Being, and Intellect, and the Demiurge (as different from Intellect), and Soul –

19 For an example of 'typhonic winds' as a cryptic reference to ('code phrase' for) Christians, see Marinus, *Proclus* c. 15, 16 together with the instructive comments by the editors Saffrey & Segonds (2001), 117 n. 3 to 18.

20 Cf., e.g., Numenius' famous rhetorical question 'What is Plato, but Moses speaking in Attic Greek?' (frg. 8.9–13).

21 αἰνίγματα γὰρ τὰ φανερώς παρὰ Μωυσεῖ λεγόμενα εἶναι κομπάσαντες καὶ ἐπιθειάσαντες ὡς θεσπίσματα πλήρη κρυφίων μυστηρίων διὰ τε τοῦ τύφου τὸ κριτικὸν τῆς ψυχῆς καταγοητεύσαντες, ἐπάγουσιν ἐξηγήσεις.

22 Becker (2016), 148–149.

23 Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* c. 18.4–6: κατεφρόνουν τῷ μὴ νοεῖν ἃ λέγει καὶ τῷ πάσης σοφιστικῆς αὐτὸν σκηνῆς καθαρεῖν καὶ τύφου.

24 Muscolino and Girgenti (2009): 'sovrappongono le (loro) interpretazioni'; cf. their note 164 on 478.

is taken from the words in the *Timaeus*: for Plato says, ‘The maker of this universe thought that it should contain all the forms that intelligence discerns contained in the Living Being that truly is’ (*Tim.* 39e7–9). **But they did not understand**, and took it to mean that there is one intellect (*nous*) which contains in it in repose all realities, and another intellect different from it which contemplates them, and another which plans – but often they have soul as the Demiurge instead of the planning intellect – and **they think that this is the Demiurge according to Plato, being a long way from knowing who the Demiurge is**. And in general they give a false account of him both concerning the manner of demiurgy and concerning many other topics, and **they drag the great man’s teachings towards the worse** as if they had understood the intelligible nature, but he and the other blessed philosophers had not. (Plotinus, *Enn.* II.9 [33], 6.14–24; trans. Armstrong LCL adapted)²⁵

Once again, Plotinus here presses the charge of plagiarism against the Gnostics. They borrow the figure of the Demiurge, whom Plotinus identifies with the divine Intellect, from Plato. Yet, the Gnostics fail to grasp the unity that characterizes the divine Intellect, coming as it does directly after the One, by distinguishing between various forms of Intellect and by conflating Intellect with Soul. Such is, of course, only to be expected in the case of *typhonic* souls that are characterized by plurality rather than simplicity and that are out of touch with the Intellect. They thus ‘drag (*helkô*) the teachings of Plato towards the worse’. The verb ‘to drag’ (*helkô*) suggests that the Gnostics do a fair amount of violence to Plato’s text.²⁶ According to Plotinus, the Gnostics’ violent treatment of Plato is part of a bigger pattern. Out of vanity, in order to appear original, the Gnostics seek to violate Greek intellectual authorities: they ‘tear to pieces and insult (*hybrizein*) the Hellenes’. In doing so, they show themselves to be the opposite of a real philosopher, who always treats the views of his opponents ‘courteously’ (*eumenôs*) and ‘fairly’ (*dikaiôs*).²⁷

25 Καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν νοητῶν δὲ πλῆθος ποιῆσαι, τὸ δὲ καὶ τὸν νοῦν καὶ τὸν δημιουργὸν ἄλλον καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν, ἐκ τῶν ἐν τῷ Τιμαίῳ λεχθέντων εἰληπται· εἰπόντος γὰρ αὐτοῦ «ἤπερ οὖν νοῦς ἐνούσας ἰδέας ἐν τῷ ὃ ἐστὶ ζῶον καθορᾷ, τοσαύτας καὶ ὁ τὸδε ποιῶν τὸ πᾶν διενόηθη σχεῖν». Οἱ δὲ οὐ συνέντες τὸν μὲν ἔλαβον ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ ἔχοντα ἐν αὐτῷ πάντα τὰ ὄντα, τὸν δὲ νοῦν ἕτερον παρ’ αὐτὸν θεωροῦντα, τὸν δὲ διανοούμενον – πολλάκις δὲ αὐτοῖς ἀντὶ τοῦ διανοουμένου ψυχῇ ἐστὶν ἡ δημιουργοῦσα – καὶ κατὰ Πλάτωνα τοῦτον οἰοῦνται εἶναι τὸν δημιουργὸν ἀφεστηκότες τοῦ εἰδέναι τίς ὁ δημιουργός. Καὶ ὁλως τὸν τρόπον τῆς δημιουργίας καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ καταψεύδονται αὐτοῦ καὶ πρὸς τὸ χεῖρον ἔλκουσι τὰς δόξας τοῦ ἀνδρός ὡς αὐτοὶ μὲν τὴν νοητὴν φύσιν κατανενοηκότες, ἐκείνου δὲ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν μακαρίων ἀνδρῶν μή.

26 Cf. Sleeman and Pollet, *Lexicon Plotinianum* s.v. ἔλκειν: ‘drag about with violence’.

27 Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* II.9 [33], 6.43–52.

Proclus on interpreting the *Timaeus* correctly, immortality, and speaking Greek (*hellênizein*)

About two centuries after Plotinus' attack on the Gnostic appropriation of the *Timaeus*, Proclus, in part inspired by Plotinus' treatise, elaborated on the relation between immortality and misinterpretation when criticizing Christian readings of the *Timaeus*. In *Tim.* 29e4–30a2 we are told that if one receives (*apodechomenos*) the words of 'the wise men' (*andres phronimoi*) correctly (*orthotata*), one will find that they say that God's goodness is the 'most sovereign principle' (*kuriôtata aitia*) for the coming to be of the world. Proclus insists that Plato here does not have the goodness of the Demiurge in mind but the Good that is the ultimate principle of Neoplatonic metaphysics. This prompts Proclus to reflect on the intellectual qualities required to read Plato successfully:

And since in [teachings of] doctrines about the very highest causes there is need both of a speaker with intellectual capacity and of wise (*emphrôn*) judgement on the part of the listeners, and especially so in accounts of the Good – for Intellect (*Nous*) can reach up towards the Good, both the universal [Intellect] towards the absolute Good and the intellect in us towards [the good] in us – for this reason he believes that those who say anything about the 'most sovereign principle' should be 'wise' (*phronimos*) and that those who listen should 'receive' these words 'correctly'. (Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* I.369.12–19; trans. Runia & Share (2008), 232 adapted)²⁸

Proclus next imagines the following objection:

What then? Couldn't also any chance person say something about God and the final cause? Furthermore, couldn't one every day hear the many say 'God is good?'. But this 'God' is a mere name when it is said without virtue, as Plotinus says,²⁹ and used by the many without wisdom (*ou kata phronêsin*), but in an arbitrary manner. (Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* I, 369.19–25)³⁰

Proclus here is probably referring to the following passage from Plotinus' *Treatise against the Gnostics*:

²⁸ ἐπει δὲ ἐν τοῖς περὶ αὐτῶν τῶν ἀκροτάτων αἰτίων δόγμασι τοῦ τε λέγοντος δεῖ νοερὰν ἔχοντος ἔξιν καὶ τῆς ἔμφορος τῶν ἀκούοντων κρίσεως καὶ μάλιστα ἐν τοῖς περὶ τάγαθου λόγοις – νοῦς γὰρ ἐπὶ τάγαθον ἀνατείνεσθαι δύναται, ὃ τε ὅλος ἐπὶ τὸ ἀπλῶς ἀγαθὸν καὶ ὁ ἐν ἡμῖν νοῦς ἐπὶ τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν – διὰ δὴ τοῦτο καὶ τοὺς λέγοντάς τι περὶ τῆς κυριωτάτης ἀρχῆς φρονίμους οἰεῖται δεῖν εἶναι καὶ τοὺς ἀκούοντας ὁρθότατα ἀποδέχεσθαι τοὺς λόγους.

²⁹ Runia and Share (2008), 232 n. 116 rightly assume that Proclus is here referring to Plotinus, *Enn.* II.9 [33], 15 (i.e. the passage discussed below), not to *Enn.* I.2 [19], 1 (*pace* Diehl); their translation – 'Yes, but the word "God" is, as Plotinus says, "a different thing from (*chôris*) virtue"' – however, seems to miss the point that both Plotinus and Proclus wish to make.

³⁰ τί οὖν; οὐχὶ καὶ ὁ ἐπιτυχὼν εἴπειεν <ἄν> τι περὶ θεοῦ καὶ τῆς τελικῆς αἰτίας; τί δέ; οὐ καθ' ἑκάστην ἡμέραν πολλῶν ἔστιν ἀκούειν λεγόντων. ὁ θεὸς ἀγαθός; ἀλλὰ τὸ θεὸς ὀνομά ἐστι χωρὶς ἀρετῆς, ὡς φησι Πλωτίνιος, καὶ οὐ κατὰ φρόνησιν, ἀλλὰ κατ' ἐπιτυχίαν λέγεται παρὰ τῶν πολλῶν.

For it does no good at all to say 'Look to God', unless one teaches how one should look. For one could say, 'What prevents me from looking and refraining from no pleasure, or from having no control over my emotions (*akratê thymou*) and from remembering the name "God" and at the same time being in the grip of all the passions and making no attempt to get rid of any of them?' In reality it is virtue which goes before us to the goal and, when it comes to exist in the soul along with wisdom (*meta phronêseôs*), shows God; but God, if you talk about him without true virtue, is only a name. (Plotinus, *Enn.* II.9 [33], 15.32–40; trans. Armstrong LCL adapted)³¹

Both passages take their inspiration from the well-known digression in the *Theaetetus*. There, becoming God is described in terms of moral virtue: 'a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pious, with wisdom (*meta phronêseôs*)' (Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b; trans. Levett adapted). As Dirk Baltzly rightly stresses, this famous phrase already suggests a close connection between becoming a better person and an understanding of divine nature in the Platonic tradition.³² Let us now briefly examine how Plotinus envisages this connection in the case of the Gnostics. Why exactly does he believe that the akratic state of the Gnostics prevents them from attaining knowledge about God, who is only a name to them? Already Aristotle, when discussing *akrasia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, had compared the akratic person to a drunk who recites mathematical proofs or Empedocles' verses without understanding what he is saying.³³ Such a person does not actualize his passive knowledge of mathematics or Empedocles. Plotinus (*Enn.* III.6 [26], 2.20–32) arrives at a somewhat similar analysis. According to him, virtue consists in listening to *logos*, reason. This applies primarily to the rational part of the human soul, which receives its *logos* directly from *Nous* (the divine Intellect). This virtue of the rational part of the soul amounts to knowledge of the intelligible in a manner that befits the discursive thought of the rational soul, i.e. the wisdom (*phronêsis*) that Plotinus mentions in the passage against the Gnostics quoted above. The rational soul passes *logos* on to its inferior parts, including the desiring part. It thus controls the desiring part, which otherwise would be 'unrestrainedly lustful'. Virtuous behaviour, then, is the result of reason (*logos*), which the rational human soul derives from the divine Intellect (*Nous*).³⁴ Thus, a Gnostic who gives in to his irrational lusts is clearly not tuned in to the divine Intellect. To put it in Aristotelian terms, he has not actualized his passive knowledge of the divine. However, texts are the expression of their authors' *nous*

31 Οὐ γὰρ διὰ τὸ εἰπεῖν 'βλέπε πρὸς θεόν' προὔργου τι ἐργάζεται, ἐὰν μὴ πῶς καὶ βλέψῃ διδάξῃ. Τί γὰρ κωλύει, εἴποι τις ἄν, βλέπειν καὶ μηδεμίᾳ ἀπέχεσθαι ἡδονῆς, ἢ ἀκρατῇ θυμοῦ εἶναι μεμνημένον μὲν ὀνόματος τοῦ 'θεός', συνεχόμενον δὲ ἅπασι πάθεσι, μηδὲν δὲ αὐτῶν πειρώμενον ἐξαιρεῖν; Ἀρετὴ μὲν οὖν εἰς τέλος προιοῦσα καὶ ἐν ψυχῇ ἐγγενομένη μετὰ φρονήσεως θεὸν δείκνυσιν· ἄνευ δὲ ἀρετῆς ἀληθινῆς θεὸς λεγόμενος ὄνομά ἐστιν.

32 Baltzly (2014), 803.

33 Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.3, 1147a17–22.

34 I discuss this passage in van den Berg (2013a), 225–226.

and may only be understood by a reader who has activated his own *nous*. For example, when celebrating Plotinus' qualities as a philosopher and an exegete, Porphyry mentions that Plotinus' *nous* would at times 'visibly light up his face' and that he would 'quickly absorb what was read, and would give the sense (*nous*) of some profound subject of study in a few words'.³⁵

In short, then, for both Plato and Proclus to receive the words of the *Timaeus* 'correctly' requires that one adopt a virtuous, i.e. Platonic, lifestyle. In their recent translation of this text, David Runia and Michael Share – rightly, I believe – suggest that Proclus' remark that the many fail to do so constitutes a veiled attack on the Christians.³⁶ The latter, after all, identify the Demiurge with God, an identification that Proclus also criticizes elsewhere.³⁷ Of special interest for our present concern regarding the accusation of misinterpreting Plato because of moral badness is Proclus' remark that Christians use the word 'God' 'in an arbitrary manner'. This should be understood against the background of a discussion of the meaning of *hellênizein*, speaking Greek, in Proclus' *Commentary on the Alcibiades* (258.15–259.21).³⁸ In that dialogue, Socrates and Alcibiades discuss the question whether one can learn something from the many, for example to speak Greek (*hellênizein*). Proclus comments that *hellênizein* is used in three senses. The first sense is that of sticking to the conventions of the Greek language: for example, knowing that Greek speakers use the name *hippos* to refer to a certain type of animal. This is the sort of *hellênizein* that one may learn from the many. It is different from what one may learn from a grammarian, who teaches one to speak Greek correctly, i.e. according to grammatical rules. The third way of speaking Greek is the privilege of the philosopher. The latter knows how to assign names to things in such way as to fit their nature. When describing this third sense of *hellênizein*, Proclus has Plato's *Cratylus* in mind, in which the question is examined whether naming things is a matter of convention and thus arbitrary or not. In the *Cratylus* it is concluded that name-giving requires a profound understanding of the nature of things and thus is the job for the Platonic dialectician, not of any chance person. Proclus' point, both in the *Commentary on the Alcibiades* and in that on the *Timaeus*, is that the many understand what today we would call the rules of the language-game, i.e. they know when to use certain names – for example, when to use the Greek word *hippos* – without being able to produce a clear definition of the entities

35 For the visible expression of Plotinus' *nous*, see Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* c. 13.5–10, for Plotinus easily grasping the *nous* of a text, see Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* c. 14.14–16; translations taken from Armstrong LCL.

36 Cf. Runia and Share (2008), 232 n. 117.

37 Cf. Proclus, *Platonic Theology* II.11, 65.5–7: 'And let us celebrate him (God) as if singing a hymn, but without saying that he made earth and heaven nor that he made the souls and all sorts of living beings.' As Saffrey and Westerink (1974), 123 n. 7 to 65 observe, that is almost certainly an allusion to the Christian creed.

38 I have discussed this passage in greater detail as part of my study of Neoplatonic ideas about language in van den Berg (2008), 89–91.

which those names indicate. By naming a horse '*hippos*', they follow linguistic conventions that are seemingly arbitrary. What they fail to realize is that these names, which are after all the products of a Platonic dialectician, are not arbitrary at all. A philosopher, when he uses that name, realizes this: he is able both to describe the essence of a horse and to explain why the Greek name *hippos* is an appropriate expression of that essence. Thus he uses the Greek name '*hippos*' with understanding (*kata phronêsin*), not arbitrarily. Succinctly put, Christians cannot hope to interpret the *Timaeus* correctly by identifying, as they do, the Demiurge with the first God, since they do not really grasp the meaning of the word 'God'.

Philoponus Against Proclus' '*On the Eternity of the World*'

Pagan Platonists and Platonizing Christians shared a common intellectual upbringing. It comes as no surprise, then, that Christian readers of Plato criticize the pagan readings of Plato in much the same way as the pagans criticized theirs. John Philoponus provides a good illustration of this in his work *Against Proclus' 'On the Eternity of the World'*. In his treatise *On the Eternity of the World*, Proclus had taken on one of the most controversial issues in the ancient interpretation of Plato, i.e. the question whether the material cosmos had a beginning in time, as a literal reading of the *Timaeus* suggests, or not. Proclus rejects such a literal interpretation and argues that Plato rightly holds that the material world is eternal, i.e. that it has no beginning in time. Christian readers of the *Timaeus*, however, tended to favor a literal reading of the text, since in this way they can align Plato with the Christian account of creation. For this reason, it has sometimes been suggested that Proclus' treatise is directed against such a Christian reading of the *Timaeus*. The present consensus, however, is that Proclus is here addressing fellow pagan Neoplatonists as part of an internal debate about the interpretation of the *Timaeus*. As for Philoponus' reply, opinions diverge. The recent translators of Proclus' treatise, Helen S. Lang and A. D. Macro have argued that in the present context Philoponus' Christian identity does not play any role. According to them, it is a debate between two philosophers, whose religious affiliations are irrelevant. The recent translator of Philoponus' reply, Michael Share, disagrees. According to him, Philoponus consciously presents himself as a Christian who criticizes Proclus' pagan reading of the *Timaeus*.³⁹

I concur with Share. The way in which Philoponus addresses Proclus recalls the arguments with which Plotinus and Proclus had sought to disqualify Christian interpretations of Plato. According to Philoponus, Plato's position is crystal clear and can hardly be missed: 'he everywhere **with a clear voice** calls out that the

39 See Lang and Macro (2001), 3–16 and Share (2005a), 1–6.

cosmos has come into being and is generated'.⁴⁰ The pagan interpreters of Plato, however, who

always prefer what is plausible over what is true and who are **too much in love** (*erôtikôs agan*) with the eternity of the cosmos turn everything upside down when they **drag** (*helkô*) Plato's opinions towards their own. However, to those who have a brain it will be immediately clear from the subtlety and versatility of their words that they **violate** (*ekbiazontai*) Plato's ideas. (Philoponus, *On the Eternity of the World* 125.13–19)⁴¹

The first point to observe is that Philoponus shares Plotinus' claim that ancient authors, including Plato, have expressed themselves clearly ('with a clear voice'), but that later interpreters have muddled things. Philoponus ascribes the pagan Neoplatonists' failure to interpret Plato correctly to some sort of mental disorder (in this case excessive erotic feelings), just as Plotinus and Proclus assume that Christians get Plato wrong because of their 'typhonic' and akratic state of mind. Like the Neoplatonists, Philoponus condemns alternative interpretations of the text as violent interpretations. According to Philoponus, the pagan Neoplatonists 'drag' around – *helkô*, the same verb that we found in Plotinus – Plato's opinions and 'violate' (*ekbiazomai*) his text.

The accusation of violent interpretation is aired again in the following passage in which Philoponus attacks Proclus' attempts to understand the words *archê* and 'generated' in a special sense that is different from its ordinary usage.

For if, as Porphyry rightly holds, no one is so devoid of wit as to claim that Plato uses invalid premises, then anyone who believed that Plato makes hypotheses that lead to innumerable conclusions that are either worthy of **ridicule** or are **absurdities of the grossest kind** and who claimed that he employs incorrect words and uses ambiguous terms without distinguishing their proper senses and that he is **careless of the normal meanings of words** and uses words in a novel sense **unknown to the Hellenes**, would, I presume, be even more bereft of wits. (Philoponus, *On the Eternity of the World* 161.17–28; trans. Share (2005b))⁴²

40 Philoponus, *Aet. Mundi* 125.7–10: Οὐδαμοῦ τοῦ Πλάτωνος κατ' οὐδένα τρόπον ἀγέννητον εἶναι τὸν κόσμον ἀποφηνάμενον, τούναντίον δὲ πανταχοῦ **λαμπρᾷ τῇ φωνῇ** γεγονέναι τε καὶ γενητὸν εἶναι βοῶντος [...].

41 οἱ τὸ πιθανὸν αἰεὶ τῆς ἀληθείας προκρίνοντες καὶ **ἐρωτικῶς ἄγαν** τῆς τοῦ κόσμου αἰδιότητος ἔχοντες πάντα ἄνω καὶ κάτω κυκῶσι πρὸς τὸ ἑαυτοῖς δοκοῦν τὰ τοῦ Πλάτωνος **ἐλκοντες**. καίτοι δι' αὐτῆς εὐθύς τῆς τῶν λόγων κομψείας τε καὶ ποικιλίας κατάφωροι τοῖς νοῦν ἔχουσιν γίνονται, ὡς **ἐκβιάζονται** τὰ τοῦ Πλάτωνος.

42 εἰ γάρ, ὡς τῷ Πορφυρίῳ καλῶς ἔδοξεν, μηδεὶς τοσοῦτον τῶν φρενῶν ἐξέστηκεν, ὡς λέγειν ἀσυλλογίστοις λήμμασιν κεχρησθαι τὸν Πλάτωνα, πολλῷ δήπου μᾶλλον κενὸς ἂν εἴη φρενῶν ὁ τοιαύτας ὑποθέσεις λαμβάνειν οἰόμενος Πλάτωνα, ὡς μυρία αὐταῖς πῇ μὲν **γέλωτος** ἄξια ἔπεσθαι πῇ δὲ **ἀτοπώτερα πάσης ἀτοπίας**, ἀκύροις τε λέξεσιν λέγων κεχρησθαι καὶ ὁμωνύμοις ἄνευ τῆς

When Philoponus rejects the pagan interpretation of Plato as ridiculous and absurd, he uses the same vocabulary as we find, e.g., in scholia to reject a certain interpretation as forced.⁴³ Moreover, he accuses Proclus of committing an offense against the ideal of *hellênizein*. As Philoponus puts it in the summary of the argument, Proclus uses the word *archê* in a sense that is ‘unusual both among the Hellenes and in common usage.’⁴⁴ ‘Hellenes’ here probably refers to pagan Greek philosophers.⁴⁵ In other words, when we call to mind the three senses that Proclus distinguishes of *hellenizein*, Proclus not just fails to speak Greek with understanding as a philosopher does, he does not even manage to speak Greek by simply sticking to linguistic conventions. In short, Philoponus gives the pagan interpreters of Plato a taste of their own medicine. There is one important difference, though. Unlike the pagan Neoplatonists, Philoponus finds it necessary to refute his opponent in minute detail, thus, ironically, underscoring the importance of Proclus as a reader of Plato.

τούτων εἰς τὰ σημαινόμενα τὰ οἰκεῖα διαιρέσεως καὶ τῆς μὲν συνήθους σημασίας τῶν λέξεων ἀμελεῖν, κατ’ ἄλλων δὲ σημαινόμενων φέρειν τὰς λέξεις μὴ ἐγνωσμένων τοῖς Ἑλλήσιν.

43 For an overview of Greek terms related to forced interpretation, see Sluiter (2013), 208–212.

44 Ὅτι ἀσύνηθες καὶ τοῖς Ἑλλήσι καὶ τῇ κοινῇ χρήσει τὸ προκείμενον τοῦ γενητοῦ σημαινόμενον. (Philoponus, *Aet. Mundi* 122.3–4).

45 As Share (2005b), 130 n. 19 observes.