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Citation

Neola, B. (2026). Soul and intellect(s): on human weakness in Neoplatonism and Early Christianity. In E. Anagnostou-Laoutides & G. Steiris (Eds.), *Long Platonism* (pp. 95-120). Berlin: De Gruyter.
doi:10.1515/9783111433226-005

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4306829>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Chapter 4

Soul and Intellect(s): On Human Weakness in Neoplatonism and Early Christianity

Abstract: This paper examines the concept of human weakness and its profound influence on the understanding of the soul and intellect in late antique thought. It begins with Plotinus' theory of the "undescended soul", which envisions a higher aspect of the human soul perpetually contemplating the intelligible realm. However, Plotinus' successors—most notably Iamblichus, Proclus, and Hermias—challenge this view, advocating for a more intricate metaphysical framework. They depict the human intellect as inherently fragmented and incapable of sustaining perpetual contemplation. Instead, they propose merely an intellectual disposition within the soul and emphasize the necessity of external mediation—through angels, demons, or theurgical practices—for the soul's ascent. The paper also explores how this acknowledgment of human weakness echoes within contemporary Christian thought. Christian authors similarly recognize human frailty as a barrier to direct access to the divine. This awareness leads them to stress the indispensable role of mediatorial agents, ultimately justifying the central Christian idea of Christ as mediator. By analysing these intertwined philosophical and theological traditions, this study sheds light on their shared concerns and distinct approaches. It offers a nuanced understanding of how late antique thinkers grappled with the limitations of the human condition and envisioned diverse pathways towards union with the divine.

1 Introduction

According to Plotinus, there is a part of the human soul that never descends from the intelligible and thus always enjoys intellection.¹ Unfortunately, human beings

¹ In this article, I expand on my previous reflections on human intellect in the later Platonic tradition (cf. Neola 2021) having received considerable feedback and suggestions during the conference *The Reception of Plato from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Macquarie University with the support of Australian Research Council and in collaboration with the Kapodistrian University

Note: This chapter has been finalized as part of a research project funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101148944 (TRANEX).

are not usually aware of their “undescended” psychic component and, since they do not identify themselves with it—or rather, since they do not recognize themselves in it—they ignore to be perpetually happy. This famous doctrine, the so-called “undescended soul” theory, has been contested since Plotinus’ time, and Plotinus himself seemed to be aware of this debate. While Porphyry’s position on the subject is still not quite clear, we have evidence that Theodorus of Asine, Iamblichus’ pupil, endorsed Plotinus’ psychic stance. On the contrary, Iamblichus, Proclus, and Hermias plainly rejected the doctrine, with an abundance of arguments.

In this paper, I will try to reconstruct Plotinus’ and Iamblichus’ position on the human intellect to make the case, on the one hand, that the difference underlying their respective constructions is primarily about the qualitative aspect of the human soul’s intellectual activity and, on the other, that this very same difference discloses significant and distinct views on the overall ontic structure of the human soul and, notably, the metaphysical universe wherein it finds its place. Then, I will reveal a meaningful pun on Iamblichus’ part, which has so far escaped the notice of modern scholarship. Lastly, I will examine how Neoplatonic and Christian discourses intersect with one another in exploring the concept of human weakness as a necessary component for the immanentization of the divine. This analysis will shed light on the intricate relationship between the two traditions and provide valuable insights into their shared concerns and divergent perspectives.

2 On Human Intellect and Its Relationship to the Intellect(s)

Plotinus notoriously holds that our soul never falls into the sensible realm in its entirety, but that something of it (τι αὐτῆς) always remains in the intelligible (ἐν τῷ νοητῷ αἰεί), contemplating the hypostatic Intellect: οὐ πᾶσα οὐδ’ ἡ ἡμετέρα ψυχή ἔδω, ἀλλ’ ἔστι τι αὐτῆς ἐν τῷ νοητῷ αἰεί.² We, as human beings, are not usually aware of this psychic part. Plotinus sets out to explain that the sensible di-

of Athens, June 6–8, 2021). I am also grateful for some important insights provided by the organizers and participants of the conference *Esegesi medio e neoplatoniche* (Università degli studi di Napoli Federico II, December 6, 2021), where I also delivered a paper on the *Esegesi neoplatoniche de anima fra Plotino e Giamblico*.

2 Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.8(6).8.2–3 (Henry and Schwyzer); see also *Enn.* IV.2(21).1.12–13: Οὐ γὰρ ὅλη ἀπέστη, ἀλλ’ ἔστι τι αὐτῆς οὐκ ἐληλυθός, ὃ οὐ πέφυκε μερίζεσθαι. On Plotinus’ psychology cf. Rist 1967; Linguisti 2001; D’Ancona 2002 and 2003; Chiaradonna 2005; Steel 2006, 47–54; Remes 2007; Tornau 2009; and Chiaradonna 2012, 81–115.

mension does not allow us (οὐκ ἔῤ) to perceive the objects that the highest part of our soul (τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἄνω) always contemplates.³ For this reason, Szlezák spoke of an authentic theory of the unconscious, insightfully highlighting that this version of Plotinus' unconscious goes even beyond the instinctual one recognized by Plato in the *Republic*. In other words, while Plato uncovers the lower aspect of our unconscious, which shows itself during dreams, Plotinus shifts the focus to the higher unconscious, which reveals and urges us to recognize our own authentic essence.⁴ Plotinus' doctrine leads to a kind of psychic trichotomy, in that it poses an authentic "self" undescended, a conscious "self" (τὸ ἡμεῖς),⁵ and, lastly, a lower part, which drags the soul to the sensible.⁶ The empirical self is not usually aware of either the authentic self or the deleterious effect of the lower part,⁷ and it is only through intense, cathartic activity (εἰς τὸ εἶσω ἐπιστρέφειν) that it can come to recognize its own essence—the undescended self.⁸ As a matter of fact, τὸ ἡμεῖς betrays a dynamic aspect, in the sense that, if the apprehension (ἀντίληψις) of the ongoing self-reflective activity of the undescended self (νοοῦμεν μὲν αἰεί) does indeed take place and we do consequently identify with it, then τὸ ἡμεῖς no longer corresponds to the empirical and ordinary self, but rather to that undescended, intellectual, and always contemplating τὴν of our soul.⁹ However, this is just one of the corollaries stemming from the innovative doctrine put forth by Plotinus.¹⁰ From an ethical point of view, it leads us to consider pains and miseries as affecting only that which in a human being is different from the intellect (τὸ δ' ἐν αὐτῷ νοῦν οὐκ ἔχον), i.e., the lower self.¹¹ That which is liable to be affected by passions and sensible desires would be but a trace of our real soul (ἵχνος ψυχικόν).¹² Instead, the higher self is always happy in that it is always contemplating, and hence the wise will be happy even while burning in the Sicilian bull.¹³ From an anthropological point of view, the human being no longer turns out to be a composite of a soul and a body, but identifies itself solely with the intelligible part of its soul. Lastly, from an epistemological point of view, the exis-

3 Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.8(10).8.5–6.

4 Cf. Szlezák 1992, 329. On Plotinus' unconscious intellectualism, see Steel 2006, 38, 48–51.

5 Cf. Plotinus *Alc.* I 128e–130a.

6 Cf. Rist 1967, 416.

7 Cf. Rist 1967, 418; Remes 2007, 92–124; and Chiaradonna 2008 and 2012, 97–102.

8 Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.3(27).30.13–15: Ἄλλο γὰρ ἡ νόησις, καὶ ἄλλο ἡ τῆς νοήσεως ἀντίληψις, καὶ νοοῦμεν μὲν αἰεί, ἀντιλαμβάνομεθα δὲ οὐκ αἰεί; cf. V.1(10).12.12–14.

9 Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.4(22).14.16–21; also, Marzolo 2006, 164–175; and Tornau 2009, 334.

10 Cf. Linguisti 2001, 215–217; Tornau 2009, 335; and Longo 2010, 221–223.

11 Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* I.4(46).4.30–36.

12 Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* I.1(53).7–8, IV.4(28).28.8ff, and VI.4(22).15–16.

13 Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* I.4(46).13.5–12. Cf. Linguisti 2001.

tence of a higher, intelligible part of the soul grants the possibility of direct access to eidetic truth, without the need to resort to tools external to the thinking soul.¹⁴ Against this backdrop, Plotinus turns to the myth of Dionysus' dismemberment to represent not only (and not so much) the soul's descent from the intelligible but also (and above all) its remaining nonetheless anchored in the intelligible realm in virtue of its highest, intellective appendix:

But the souls of men see their images as if in the mirror of Dionysus and come to be on that level with a leap from above: but even these are not cut off from their own principle, from intellect [οὐκ ἀποτμηθεῖσαι οὐδ' αὐταὶ τῆς ἐαυτῶν ἀρχῆς τε καὶ νοῦ]. For they did not come down with Intellect, but went on ahead of it down to earth, but their heads are firmly set above in heaven [ἀλλ' ἔφθασαν μὲν μέχρι γῆς, κἀρα δὲ αὐταῖς ἐστήρικται ὑπὲράνω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ] [*Enn.* IV.3(27).12.1–4, translated by Armstrong 1984, slightly modified].

Plotinus' innovative doctrine was not welcomed by later Neoplatonists,¹⁵ whereas Plotinus himself seemed to be aware of the criticisms put forth by his own contemporaries.¹⁶ Now, it is of interest for the present discussion to go through and articulate the charges that later Neoplatonists levelled against him in order to understand the real *enjeu* of the late antique debates *de anima* and gauge to what extent different views on the human intellect had a bearing on broader conceptualizations of metaphysical systems, and vice versa.

First, later Neoplatonic exegetes regarded *Phaedrus* 248b1–3 as a pivotal passage to overthrow Plotinus' psychological doctrine insofar as it seemed to undoubtedly disprove Plotinus' stance. Hermias of Alexandria¹⁷ refutes the doctrine *ex professo* in a passage from the second book of his *Commentary on Plato's Phaedrus*, wherein he discusses the issue of the charioteers' evilness (κακία ἡνιό-

14 Cf. Chiaradonna 2012, 104–106. However, Gerson 1994, 141–158, casts doubt on the possibility that our “conscious” self could possibly attain the epistemological level of its highest, undescended self already during its earthly stay.

15 Cf. Rist 1967, 415; Blumenthal 1997, 273; van den Berg 1997, 149; and Longo 2010, 228–230. As I mentioned, the only philosopher who seems to have endorsed the doctrine was Theodorus of Asine, pupil of both Porphyry and Iamblichus: cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* III 333.28–30 (Diehl), *infra*, p. 99.

16 Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.8(6).8.1–7. Dillon 2005, 339–340, points to Numenius, Atticus, and Severus.

17 Hermias was a Neoplatonic philosopher active in Alexandria in the first half of the fifth century (ca. 410–455 CE). He studied with his friend Proclus under Syrianus, Diadochus of the Academy of Athens. Once he returned to his hometown (ca. 435 CE), Hermias taught Platonic philosophy until his death (ca. 455 CE). His *Commentary on Plato's Phaedrus* is the only extant ancient commentary on the Platonic dialogue. The true authorship of this commentary represents a much-disputed question, as the *communis opinio* views it as a commentary ἀπὸ φωνῆς (“coming from the voice”) of Syrianus, Hermias' master: cf. for example, Manolea 2004; *contra*, for example, Moreschini 2009. On the philosophical content of this ancient commentary, see Finamore, Manolea, and Klitenic Wear 2020 as well as Neola 2022.

χων) mentioned at *Phaedrus* 248b1–3. If the charioteer is the image of the noblest part of our soul (αὐτῆς τὸ ἀκρότατον) and he is still subject to κακία, as Socrates plainly states, then it is not possible for a part of the soul to remain perfect, in the intelligible.¹⁸ The *Phaedrus* passage receives the same exegesis from Proclus, who infers the necessity of acknowledging the limits of the soul (τὰ μέτρα τῆς ψυχῆς), without elevating to the level of the soul the degree of perfection of the bodies and, notably, without dragging down to the level of the soul the degree of perfection of the gods.¹⁹

Proclus formulates his criticism at several points in his work²⁰—but above all in his exegesis of *Timaeus* 43c–d.²¹ The Diadochus reprimands Plotinus and Theodorus of Asine, according to whom there would be something in us that is impassible and always enjoying intellection: ἀπαθές τι ἐν ἡμῖν καὶ αἰεὶ νοοῦν.²² On the contrary, Proclus holds that, if the highest part of our soul (τὸ ἀκρότατον ἡμῶν) always contemplated the intelligible, then the whole human race would always be happy. Given that Proclus seems to be citing Iamblichus' *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* here, the passage is included among the fragments from Iamblichus' commentaries collected by Dillon. Let us then read Fragment 87 (Dillon):

But if when the best part in us is perfect, then the whole of us is perfect, what would prevent us all, the whole human race, from being happy at this moment, if the highest part of us is always enjoying intellection, and always turned towards to gods? (εἰ τὸ ἀκρότατον ἡμῶν αἰεὶ νοεῖ καὶ αἰεὶ πρὸς τοῖς θεοῖς ἐστίν;)? If the Intellect is this highest part, that has nothing to do with the soul (εἰ μὲν γὰρ ὁ νοῦς τοῦτο, οὐδὲν πρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν). If it is a part of the soul, then the rest of the soul also must be happy (*In Tim.* III 334.10–15 = Iamblichus, *In Tim.* Fragment 87, text and translation by Dillon 1973).

It is worth mentioning the *Timaeus* passage (42c5–d4), which is at the root of Proclus' citing from Iamblichus. *Timaeus* clearly maintains that the sensible perceptions “violently shake” (σφοδρῶς σείουσιν) the circles of the soul. Now, as Proclus carefully highlights, the circles of the soul are just two: the circle of the Same, and the circle of the Different. Sensible perceptions hinder (ἐπέδησαν; ἐπέσχεν; διέσει-

18 Cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 167.3–6 (Lucarini-Moreschini). Cf. Rist 1967, 415; Steel 2006, 67–68; and Motta 2013, 50.

19 Cf. Proclus, *In Alc. I* 227.9–228.1; and 87.22–88.2 (Westerink). Cf. Blumenthal 1997, 278–279; according to Steel 2006, 70, Proclus would here follow Iamblichus' *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*.

20 Cf. Proclus, *ET Prop.* 5211.1–2 (Dodds) and *In Parm.* IV 948.18–20 (Cousin). Cf. Blumenthal 1997, 279–280; Steel 2006, 68–69; and Motta 2013, 49.

21 Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* III 333.28 ff. (Diehl), on which see van den Berg 1997; Blumenthal 1997, 275–277; and Steel 2006, 55.

22 Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* III 333.28–30.

σαν) both. Consequently, if the essence of the human soul consists of two circles alone and if both are hindered by sensible perceptions, then the human soul cannot possibly own another part that always enjoys intellection.

It seems, then, that Iamblichus' criticism starts as a reaction against the ethical corollary of Plotinus' doctrine and becomes a metaphysical and epistemological criticism. In other words, the empirical observation of human misery²³ stands as the starting point for overarching criticism of Plotinus' psychology and ontological system. In the eyes of Iamblichus and later Neoplatonists, Plotinus conceived of the $\tau\iota\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\eta\varsigma\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \tau\tilde{\omega}\ \nu\omicron\eta\tau\tilde{\omega}\ \acute{\alpha}\epsilon\acute{\iota}$ ("something of it always in the intelligible") as an intellect always contemplating ($\acute{\alpha}\epsilon\acute{\iota}\ \nu\omicron\epsilon\acute{\iota}$) and yet embedded within the human soul. The problem lies precisely behind this "and yet". While the existence of an intellect always enjoying contemplation is taken for granted by Iamblichus as well, the fact that a perennial contemplation of the intelligible dimension could be internal to the human soul is by no means acceptable. Therefore, strictly speaking, what arouses Iamblichus' and later Neoplatonic criticism is the "interiorization" of the hypostatic intellectual principle within the human soul: the entity conceptualized by Plotinus that is always contemplating does indeed exist, but it does not belong to, is not interior to the human soul. As proposition 211 of Proclus' *Elements of Theology* makes clear, perpetual intellection belongs to an intellect, and not to a specific component of a soul: $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\ \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\alpha\iota,\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \omicron\upsilon\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\rho\omicron\varsigma\ \psi\upsilon\chi\eta\varsigma$.²⁴ As a consequence, if the definition of "intellect" is something which is always enjoying intellection and is always turned towards the gods, then this intellect has nothing to do with the human soul. On the contrary, it stands as the archetypical Intellect abiding $\acute{\alpha}\nu\omega$ and guaranteeing as a source an intellectual flow throughout the *cosmos* and within the human soul. As a matter of fact, Iamblichus' denying the human soul an intellect that always contemplates does not obviously mean that the human soul is deprived of any form of intellectual activity whatsoever. Yet this intellectual component must be clearly distinguished from its causative source and recognized as such in terms of an intellectual disposition framed within a much ampler and superior chain of intellects. This latter point marks the second significant difference between Plotinus and later Neoplatonists, as we will see shortly.²⁵ However, drilling down this time into the aforementioned *Phaedrus* passage, Iamblichus sharpens his criticisms as follows:

And what is the charioteer [$\delta\ \eta\nu\acute{\iota}\omicron\chi\omicron\varsigma$] of the Soul? Is it not the most attractive, and, one might say, consummate part of us? And how can we avoid this conclusion, if indeed this is

²³ Cf. Struck 2004, 210.

²⁴ Cf. Proclus, *ET* 211.

²⁵ On this expanded web of intellects, see p. 102–103.

what directs our whole being and with its own head views the supracaelestial sphere and is assimilated to the “great leader” of the gods, who “drives a winged chariot” and “journeys through the heaven as a first” charioteer? And if the charioteer is the highest element in us [τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν ἀκρότατον], and he, as is said in the *Phaedrus*, sometimes [ποτὲ μὲν] is carried up aloft and “raises his head into the region outside”, while at other times [ποτὲ δέ] he descends and (fills his pair) with lameness and moulting, it plainly follows that the highest element in us experiences different states at different times (*In Tim.* III 334.15–27 = Iamblichus, *In Tim.* Fragment 87, translated by Dillon).

Here, we need to return to the central myth of Plato’s *Phaedrus*.²⁶ In *Phaedrus* 248a1–7, Socrates states that at one time (ποτὲ μὲν) a soul rises the head of its charioteer (τοῦ ἡνιόχου) up to the supercaelestial place, while at another (ποτὲ δέ) it fails to do it and falls downwards (ἔδω), since it is troubled by the horses and violently dragged in different directions (βιαζομένη).²⁷ As in the *Timaeus*, here again we come across the vocabulary of “violence” which describes the act of “hindering”, “hampering”, “thwarting” the intellective component of the human soul. This latter is certainly endowed with an intellective faculty, represented by the ἡνιόχος/charioteer in the *Phaedrus* and the circle of the Same in the *Timaeus*, but this component, albeit being τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν ἀκρότατον (“the highest in us”), is not always enjoying intellection (ἀεὶ νοεῖ): if that were the case, all human souls, to resume the first part of Fragment 87, would already be happy, here on Earth, within a body. In order to underpin his argument and refute Plotinus’ stance, all Iamblichus had to do was refashion Plato’s anaphora ποτὲ μὲν . . . ποτὲ δέ into the form ποτὲ μὲν . . . ποτὲ δέ, underline Plato’s ἔδω, and finally compare and contrast it with Plotinus’ battle cry οὐ πᾶσα οὐδ’ ἡ ἡμετέρα ψυχὴ ἔδω (“even our soul does not altogether come down”). The Plotinian τι αὐτῆς, then, is definitely an intellect, but a wavering and erratic one (ποτὲ μὲν . . . ποτὲ δέ) rather than a μόριον interior to the soul and always contemplating the intelligible (ἀεὶ νοοῦν): for the human soul does indeed sink into the sensible realm in its entirety (ἔδω). It is thus that the controversy *de anima* starts to emerge as a dispute on the qualitative aspect of the intellective activity of the human soul (the dialectic ποτὲ μὲν . . . ποτὲ δέ / ἀεὶ νοοῦν), which could be regarded alternatively as permanently in the act (Plotinus) or potential and, therefore, intermittent (Iamblichus).

Against this background, Iamblichus can bluntly state that the intellect has nothing to do with the soul (οὐδὲν πρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν). Although Fragment 87 does not exactly say that this intellect is “active”, Hermias patently allows this formulation. Adopting the Peripatetic vocabulary, the Alexandrian philosopher names the

²⁶ On the late antique reception of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, see Bielmeier 1930; Moreschini 1992; Motta 2013; Hoffmann 2017; and Delcomminette, d’Hoine, and Gavray 2020.

²⁷ On Iamblichus’ exegesis of the *Phaedrus*’ passage, see van den Berg 1997.

intellect that transcends the soul (ὑπεριδρυμένος αὐτῆς) and always contemplates the beings (ἀεὶ θεᾶται τὰ ὄντα) “active intellect” (ὁ ἐνεργεῖα νοῦς) and adds, citing Iamblichus almost *verbatim*, that it has nothing to do with our (*i.e.*, human) soul: οὐδὲν τοῦτο πρὸς τὴν ἡμῶν ψυχὴν.²⁸ In addition to strengthening the view that the soul Iamblichus is referring to in Fragment 87 (πρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν) is indeed the human soul (πρὸς τὴν ἡμῶν ψυχὴν), Hermias’ phrasing leads to the conclusion that the always contemplating intellect from Fragment 87 corresponds to the Aristotelian active intellect. Iamblichus identifies the Aristotelian active intellect with the Plotinian hypostatic Intellect and holds that only this intellect *always* contemplates τὰ ὄντα, whereas the human intellect, which Socrates represents through the image of the ἡνίοχος, has the *possibility* of contemplating the intelligible, turning to the transcendent Intellect.²⁹ More precisely, and this is a crucial point to stress, while Plotinus conceptualizes *only one* hypostatic Intellect and further conceives of a portion of the soul in direct contact with it, expanding on Iamblichus and arguably Syrianus, Proclus posits a plenitude of intellects, ranging from the unparticipated, utmost transcendent one to the participable, particular intellect, and conceives of a mere intellectual propensity of the human soul potentially in contact with the particular intellect. We can glean from Simplicius (or Priscianus) that Iamblichus used to link both the δυνάμει and the ἐνεργεῖα νοῦς with the ἀμέθεκτος νοῦς, *i.e.*, the unparticipated intellectual principle holding the entire intellectual essence from above,³⁰ while Proclus firmly maintains that the human soul cannot partake in the purely transcendent, unparticipated Intellect, only in the last trace of the multiplicity of intellects (πλήθος τῶν νόων), namely, the particular intellect (μερικὸς νοῦς). Within what may fairly be described as an innovative unfolding of intellectual instances throughout the scale of beings, the perennial contemplation thus becomes the property (ιδίωμα) of those degrees of being transcending that of the soul. Indeed, it is precisely the acknowledgement of the existence of a multitude of intellects that represents the second core aspect that distinguishes between Plotinus’ and later Neoplatonists’ intellectual construction. This watershed in the evolution of late antique metaphysics certainly falls within the much ampler framework of the well-known post-Plotinian proliferation of beings,³¹ but for the subject under discussion, it is crucial to underline, more than

28 Cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 158.29–30.

29 Cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 158.30–31.

30 Cf. ps-Simplicius, *In An.* 11, 313.1–4 (Hayduck); Proclus, *In Parm.* VI 1070.3–6 (συνέχων ἄνωθεν πᾶσαν τὴν νοεράν οὐσίαν); and *ET Prop.* 166.4 (παντὸς μὲν γὰρ τοῦ πλήθους τῶν νόων ὁ ἀμέθεκτος ἡγείται).

31 It is commonly held that this salient development ultimately followed on from the theological interpretation of Plato’s *Parmenides* and, notably, of the famous hypothesis and corresponding

has been done hitherto, that it also has far-reaching consequences for defining the ontic structure of the human soul. Therefore, Proclus', Hermias', and ps-Simplicius' remarks help to clarify the ambiguous Paragraph 15 (Finamore/Dillon) of Iamblichus' *On the Soul*, where Iamblichus seems to endorse the Aristotelian distinction between potential intellect (ὁ κατὰ δύναμιν νοῦς) and active intellect (ἡ κατ' ἐνέργειαν νόησις) thus granting the human soul an intellectual *disposition*, a κατὰ νοῦν διάθεσις,³² to be firmly distinguished from perpetual intellection.³³ This reconstruction also squares quite well with Proclus' account of human reason (λόγος), which is not intellectual *per se*, but rather needs to be *made* intellectual (νοοειδής), in the sense that human soul must strive to partake in the particular intellect (μερικὸς νοῦς), *qua* instantiation of the hypostatic, divine Intellect, in order to momentarily—and approximately, as we will see—share in its degree of intellectual knowledge.³⁴

Yet Iamblichus' avowal of human intellectual weakness, inferred from *Phdr.* 248a1–6, is only one side of the coin in Iamblichus' psychology. Iamblichus does indeed develop a well-rounded doctrine of the human soul, within which he carves out a space for something ὑπὲρ νοῦν as well. Fully displaying his exegetical refinement, he makes Plato's text mirror his theoretical construction by posing a distinction between the charioteer (the ἡνίοχος of *Phdr.* 248a1–b2) and the steersman (the κυβερνήτης of *Phdr.* 247c6–8) of the human soul.

What is in this place is without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul's steersman [ψυχῆς κυβερνήτη μόνῳ θεατῇ νῶ] (*Phdr.* 247c6–d1).

Modern scholarship has long acknowledged the existence of a textual problem concerning the phrase ψυχῆς κυβερνήτη μόνῳ θεατῇ νῶ,³⁵ inasmuch as the dative νῶ (“to intelligence”), which stands as a gloss explaining that the mythical κυβερνήτης (“steersman”) is the intellect of the soul, is not unanimously attested in ancient sources. As a matter of fact, Iamblichus and Hermias did not have it in their text and thus, faced with the simple phrase ψυχῆς κυβερνήτη μόνῳ θεατῇ, they

conclusions listed herein: cf. for example, Saffrey and Westerink 1968, lxvii–lxxxix; Saffrey 1984; and Dillon 2009.

32 Cf. Iamblichus, *De An.* 15 and 48 (Finamore/Dillon).

33 According to Finamore and Dillon 2002, 210, in granting the human soul an intellectual disposition, Iamblichus aimed at “preserving the soul's separation from the Intellect itself”. See also Finamore 1997, 166–167. Martone 2014, ad loc.

34 Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* I 245.13–25, on which see Fortier 2020; see also MacIsaac 2011 for a discussion on Proclus' treatment of human νοῦς as an ἑλλαμξίς.

35 Cf. Dillon 1997; van den Berg 1997, 153; and Finamore 2017.

were compelled to specify what the κυβερνήτης was, despite the fact that in all likelihood what Plato meant by “steersman” and “charioteer” was the same thing, *i.e.*, the intellect of the soul. On the contrary, Iamblichus, Hermias says, understands the steersman as “the one of the soul” (τὸ ἐν τῆς ψυχῆς), and the charioteer as its intellect (τὸν νοῦν αὐτῆς). The steersman would be something more perfect (τελειότερόν τι) than the charioteer and the horses, for the one of the soul is united by its own nature with the gods, not having any discursive or even intellectual knowledge of them, but rather being united with them.³⁶ In rejecting Plotinus’ doctrine of the so-called undescended soul, Iamblichus conceives, then, of a new part of the soul capable of attaining the union with the gods (ἔνωσις τοῖς θεοῖς).³⁷ Moreover, through a careful exegesis of Plato’s text, Iamblichus manages to ascribe to Plato himself the conceptualization of a psychic component, namely, the one, which appears nowhere in the dialogues. The one is the most perfect part of the soul insofar as it is naturally united with the divine, in the sense that between the psychic one and the divine order (τάξις) there is no heterogeneity (ἐτερότης) in nature, the one being a fragment of the divine within the ontic structure of the soul.³⁸ First and foremost, by simultaneously acknowledging the erratic character of the intellect/charioteer and likening the one/steersman to something normally quiescent and dormant,³⁹ Iamblichus succeeds in incorporating “into the soul the faculties necessary for the soul’s ascent beyond the visible gods”,⁴⁰ thus still preserving the contact (συνάφεια) between the human soul and the highest intelligible dimension, *just as* Plotinus had tried to do by putting forth his theory of the undescended part of the soul.⁴¹ However, while Plotinus wished to maintain that the undescended, intellectual fragment of the human soul is perpetually active, whether (the ordinary) τὸ ἡμεῖς is aware of it or not, Iamblichus’ and his followers’ commitment to the notion of human weakness⁴² and their far more complex metaphysical system of intellects (πλήθος τῶν νόων) lead them to deny the perpetual activity of both the intellectual disposition and the one, although their very existence within the ontic structure of the human soul would

³⁶ Cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 157.7–11 and 158.24–159.1.

³⁷ In *V. Pyth.* 33.240.1–9 (Klein), Iamblichus speaks of a θεοκρασία.

³⁸ Cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 89.1–10.

³⁹ Cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 89.16–17: ἐν τῷ ἄλλῳ χρόνῳ παρειμένῳ καὶ καθεύδοντι ἔοικε.

⁴⁰ Finamore and Dillon 2002, 210.

⁴¹ Proclus plainly recognizes that it was precisely to keep a συνάφεια with intelligible realm that Plotinus had come up with his innovative doctrine: cf. Proclus, *In Parm.* IV 948.18–20.

⁴² On human ἀσθένεια cf. Iamblichus, *Myst.* 3.25 and 159.1–11 (Saffrey–Segonds); Hermias, *In Phdr.* 44.18–24; Taormina 1993, 36–39; and Feichtinger 2003, p. 112–116.

potentially grant the contact with the intelligibles (συνάφεια πρὸς τὰ νοητά).⁴³ In this way, Iamblichus forges a coherent parallelism between the metaphysical causative system and the structure of human soul by positing within the latter a reflection of both the One-First Principle and of the unparticipated Intellect. He thereby points out Plotinus' inconsistency, he who is now found guilty of, on the one hand, neglecting the presence of an ἰνδαλμα ("image", "form", "appearance") of the One within us⁴⁴ and, on the other, illegitimately identifying our feeble and intermittent intellectual activity with its hypostatic, αἰεί self-reflective cause.

What is really striking in this context, though, is that Plotinus himself drew on the same passage from the *Phaedrus* (247c5–d1) to formulate his own doctrine of the undescended soul that Iamblichus later criticized, as we have just seen.

That the Soul is of the family of the diviner nature, the eternal, is clear from our demonstration that it is not material: besides it has neither shape or colour nor is it tangible [καὶ μὴν οὐδὲ σχῆμα ἔχει οὐδὲ χρῶμα ἀναφής τε] [*Enn.* IV.7(2).10.1–3].

Plotinus attributes the apophatic qualities of the real being described in the *Phaedrus* to the human soul or, to be more precise, to the divine part of the human soul: namely, the τι αὐτῆς ἐν τῷ νοητῷ αἰεί.⁴⁵ While Szlezák was probably right in pointing to the sea-god Glaucon and thus to the *Republic* as a possible source for Plotinus' doctrine,⁴⁶ we can likewise infer from several Enneadic passages that Plotinus did make use of the *Phaedrus* as well, without refraining from manipulating Plato's text.⁴⁷ This shift in emphasis allows Plotinus to ascribe to the human soul, *qua* divine, that very same ontic structure proper to the eidetic realm. Therefore, saying that a portion of the human soul is *in* the noetic realm (ἐν τῷ νοητῷ) turns out to be tantamount to saying that that portion shares its ontic structure with the noetic realm, namely, that it *is* noetic material. I would thus side with Tornau and lean towards an *interpretation forte* of Plotinus' doc-

⁴³ I have tried to reconstruct elsewhere the difference between the intellectual disposition and the one with reference to their respective objects: cf. Neola 2021.

⁴⁴ Cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 88.29–30.

⁴⁵ See also Plotinus, *Enn.* I.6(1).5.8–12 and IV.7(2).8^c.43–46.

⁴⁶ Cf. Szlezák 1992, 332, with reference to Plat. *Resp.* 608c–611a. For an overview of the modern hypothesis concerning the sources of Plotinus, see Linguisti 2001, 218, n. 17; Longo 2010, 223–224; and Chiaradonna 2012, 111–115.

⁴⁷ Plotinus' move depends on a text of the *Phaedrus* which significantly differs from the one that we read nowadays. While we commonly read the phrase οὐσία ὄντως οὐσα, ψυχῆς κυβερνήτη κτλ. and consequently translate "a being that really is what it is, [visible only to] the soul's steersman etc.", Plotinus, instead, reads οὐσία ὄντως οὐσα ψυχῆς, (comma) κυβερνήτη κτλ., and thus understands "the real being of the soul, [visible only to] the steersman etc.". Cf. Tarán 2001, 553–554; Saffrey and Westerink 2003, xxiii; and Neola 2021, 204–205.

trine, whereas an *interpretation minimale* would undermine the identity between the undescended soul and the hypostatic Intellect by arguing for a “parenté ou une similarité entre les deux termes, parenté dont la nature exacte resterait encore à déterminer”.⁴⁸

It is now quite clear that many Neoplatonic thinkers did indeed linger over the same *Phaedrus* passage (247c6–d1) inasmuch as it lent itself to opposite interpretations. While Plotinus was keen to draw on it in order to flesh out his theory of the undescended soul, Iamblichus resorts to it to substitute Plotinus’ doctrine with a new one centred on a revised version of human intellect as well as on the innovative component of the one of the soul, once he had revealed, on the grounds of another *Phaedrus* passage (248a1–7), that Plato’s text far from warranted Plotinus’ theory. Iamblichus’ criticism certainly bears the mark of a newly established exegetical practice, meaning that Iamblichus’ is the criticism of an exegete and commentator on the *Phaedrus*. In addition to being the first Neoplatonist to write an extensive *Commentary on the Phaedrus*, Iamblichus is the one responsible for establishing the *Phaedrus* at the end of the first cycle of Platonic readings *qua* theological dialogue.⁴⁹ In an almost Scholastic fashion, then, Iamblichus rejects Plotinus’ reading of *Phaedrus* 247c6–7 and defies him on both exegetical and ontological grounds by illustrating that the ontic structure of the soul according to Plato (*i.e.*, according to Truth) arises straight from a careful reading of the text itself. What was at stake was, on the one hand, the quality of the human soul’s intellectual activity and, on the other, the quantity of intellects harmoniously and gradually flowing throughout the scale of beings. These two aspects must fit in with each other, in the sense that the correct identification of the *axiologically connotated quantity* of intellects accounts for the *low-ranking quality* of human intellectual activity. Plotinus held this latter to be always active, though τὸ ἡμεῖς was not usually aware of it, and saw no intermediary intellectual principles between the hypostatic Intellect and the undescended soul, whereas Iamblichus and later Neoplatonists restricted the never-ending intellectual activity to the hypostatic Intellect and its substantial instantiations, transcending the human soul to a greater or lesser degree. As Simplicius (or Priscianus) further clarifies, according to Iamblichus, the human soul does not preserve its permanence purely because of its ἐξω ῥοπή, and it is no longer activity in essence (οὐκέτι τῇ οὐσίᾳ

48 Cf. Tornau 2009, 335–339 (“A relationship or similarity between the two terms, the exact nature of which would remain yet to be determined”).

49 Along with the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* stood as a theological dialogue in virtue of the contents of Socrates’ palinode. After that, the student had to study the *Philebus* (On the Good) before plunging into the *summae* of physics (*Timaeus*) and theology (*Parmenides*). On Iamblichus’ canon, see, for example, Tarrant 2014 and Athanassiadi 2015, 129–142.

οὔσα ἐνέργεια).⁵⁰ The motif of over-engagement with the sensible and the soul's declension towards it (εἰς ἀλογίαν ῥέψωμεν) had already made Proclus state that our intellectual component cannot *always* perceive (οὐκ αἰεὶ [. . .] συναισθανόμεθα) the transcendent intellect *always* shining on it its intellectual light (δίδωσιν αἰεὶ τὸ τῆς νοήσεως φῶς).⁵¹ Significantly, Plotinus had preferred to say, as I mentioned in the beginning, that our conscious self does not always perceive (ἀντιλαμβανόμεθα δὲ οὐκ αἰεὶ) *the transcendent part of our own soul* always enjoying intellection (νοοῦμεν μὲν αἰεὶ).⁵² Otherwise said, in the view of later Neoplatonists, the perpetual intellectual activity belongs to a degree of being higher than that of the human soul, namely, to an intellect higher than that of the human soul (κρείττων τῆς ψυχῆς).⁵³ Plotinus had blurred this basic distinction insofar as he disregarded the existence of an axiologically connotated πλῆθος τῶν νόων between the hypostatic Intellect and the intellect of the human soul, the latter actually being, in his view, *in* the intelligible and thus equivalent to the hypostatic Intellect. On the contrary, what a human soul does possess is an inner reflection of that highest degree of being, *i.e.*, an intellectual disposition (κατὰ νοῦν διάθεσις) or simply a λόγος susceptible to being activated intellectual by partaking in the intellectual activity of a particular, yet substantial, intellect. However, this does not amount to saying that, when partaking in the intellectual light, a human soul experiences the same kind of intellection proper to the particular intellect participated in, for its νόσις will always remain transitive and involved in time.⁵⁴ In a sense, later Neoplatonists, too, gave an *interpretation forte* to Plotinus' doctrine, since it was precisely the identity in nature between the human intellect and the hypostatic Intellect that was in their crosshairs. While in Plotinus' system the identity in nature between the undescended soul and the intelligible realm would have granted the soul the possibility of sharing in pure intellection, according to, for instance, Proclus, the soul, even if it partakes in the intellectual light of the particular intellect, contemplates the being μεταβατικῶς ("in a transitive manner"), whereas the particular intellect does it ἀπλῆ νοήσει ("by a simple insight"),⁵⁵ not to mention the purest intellection of the divine Intellect. Within a metaphysical framework in which, as Hermias *lato sensu* noted, the Intellect utterly transcends (ὑπεριδρυμένος) our human souls, Proclus adds details by saying that the particular intellect, *i.e.*, the ultimate instantiation of the unparticipated Intellect, *immediately* transcends (προσεχῶς ὑπερί-

50 Cf. ps-Simplicius, *In An.* 11, 90.20–27, on which see Dillon 2005, 349–351.

51 Cf. Proclus, *In Alc.* 44.11–17.

52 Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.3(27).30.13–15.

53 Cf. ps-Simplicius, *In An.* 11, 313.3. Cf. Finamore 1997, 166.

54 Cf. for example, Proclus, *In Tim.* I 244.16–19 and *In Parm.* III 809.13–19.

55 Cf. Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 4.13, 43.20–22 (Saffrey and Westerink).

δρυσται) our essence, meaning that it occupies the level of being immediately beyond ours. According to the Athenian Diadochus, human souls ought to purify themselves through philosophy and thus join their intellectual *faculty* (νοερά δύναμις) to its pure intellection.⁵⁶

However, it is quite interesting to note that while, as we have seen, Iamblichus and Hermias interpret the κυβερνήτης of the *Phaedrus*' myth as the one of the soul, Proclus understands it precisely as the particular intellect in which a human soul can sometimes partake, insisting again on its transcendence in respect to the domain of the souls (ὑπεριδρυμένος τῶν ψυχῶν).⁵⁷ These circumstances tell us that Iamblichus ultimately reveals himself to be an innovator just like Plotinus, for Proclus, and his master Syrianus, kept the dative νῶ in *Phdr.* 247c5–d1 (ψυχῆς κυβερνήτη μόνῳ θεατῇ νῶ) and interpreted the κυβερνήτης as the particular intellect transcending the souls. Instead, Iamblichus—and Hermias along with him—draws a clear-cut distinction between κυβερνήτης and ἡνίοχος, and hence opts for a text which authorizes him to interpret the κυβερνήτης as he wishes, the apposition νῶ hindering his exegetical and philosophical purposes. However, while they may sometimes have diverged on the exegetical grounds, Iamblichus, Proclus, and Hermias certainly do agree on the metaphysical aspect and share the same reservations about Plotinus' stance on human intellect and *consequently* on his metaphysical system. As a matter of fact, if we focus merely on the vocabulary later Neoplatonists variably deploy to describe our intellectual disposition (κατὰ νοῦν διάθεσις/νοερόν/νοερά δύναμις), we might even conclude that, in their view, a human soul does not possess an intellect at all. Instead, it only owns an intellectual propensity and disposition susceptible to being actualized, which stands as the last link in a chain of intellects. This faded intellectual image within the soul is that in virtue of which a human soul may partake in the participated intellect,⁵⁸ but even then, it cannot surpass its own ontological limits and experience the utmost pure intellection. The gap between the transcendent, though προσεχῶς, intellect and the psychic intellectual substratum can be bridged on the basis of a kinship (συγγένεια) ultimately connecting our intellectual dispo-

⁵⁶ Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* I 245.13–17.

⁵⁷ Cf. Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 4.13 and 43.16–19.

⁵⁸ Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* II 251.9–10 (= Iamblichus, *In Tim.* Fragment 55, Dillon): μετέχει δὲ ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦ νοῦ, καθόσον ἐστὶ νοερά, καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ συνάπτεται καὶ πρὸς τὸν θεῖον νοῦν. The divine intellect is the unparticipated Intellect (ἀμέθεκτος). A soul may enter into contact with it (συνάπτεται) via the participated intellect (μεθεκτός) once it conjoins with the latter by making its own intellectual component active (διάθεσις/νοερόν). Although in Fragment 55, Iamblichus is talking about the Soul of the Universe, we could (optimistically) conjecture that this process applies to individual souls as well, *qua* instantiations of the universal Soul.

sition with the particular intellect,⁵⁹ and not without some sort of mediation provided by angelic and demonic souls.⁶⁰ When it happens, the human λόγος acts as a “smaller light along with a larger one” (φῶς ἑλαττον μετὰ μείζονος φωτός).⁶¹ Plato would have represented this dynamic momentarily by depicting an erratic charioteer striving to reach the Plain of the Truth.

3 The Dionysian Soul

After this reconstruction of the Neoplatonic debate on the human intellect, I now want to focus on a particular sentence in Fragment 87 (Dillon) from Iamblichus’ *Commentary on the Timaeus*: “If the intellect is this highest part, *that has nothing to do with the soul*” (οὐδὲν πρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν). I wish to first foreground that this phrase, taken up implicitly and clarified by Hermias, as we have seen, alludes to a famous proverb in antiquity referring to the origins of Greek tragedy: οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον. The ancient meaning of this sentence is partially obscure. It seems that, when the first dramatists began to develop plots and thus to divert from simpler celebrations of the god Dionysus, people started blaming them and yelling: “these things have nothing to do with Dionysus!” (οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον). The yell spread and slowly became a proverb, meaning something that has nothing to do with the present situation, that is out of place.⁶²

At first sight, this is the meaning of Iamblichus’ phrase: an intellect always contemplating has nothing to do with the human soul. Of course, this reading makes complete sense, and hence no one has tried to delve deeper into it. I, too, hold on to this straightforward view, but I want to add something more. That is, Iamblichus is not simply alluding to a proverb but also alluding to the psychic theory I have just tried to reconstruct: to him, *the human intellect is Dionysian*. In other words, we could also read: “If the intellect is this highest part, that has nothing to do with our *Dionysian soul* / *our Dionysus* / *our Dionysian intellect*”. This is why Iamblichus chooses to pick up that proverb, rearrange it by substituting the

⁵⁹ Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* I 246.28–31.

⁶⁰ Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* I 245.17–22, wherein Proclus clarifies that the souls do not enter into contact with the particular intellect directly (αὐτόθεν), but through the mediation of angelic and demonic souls. While these latter always (ἀεί) act according to that intellect, particular souls may participate in it only at times (ποτε). Again, we are confronted with the previously outlined dialectic between perpetual (ἀεί) and erratic (ποτε) intellection.

⁶¹ Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* I 245.22–31 and 246.5–9.

⁶² Cf. *Suda* 806.1–15, s.v. Οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον; see also Winkler and Zeitlin 1990; Scullion 2002; and Rhodes 2003.

word ψυχή for the name Διόνυσος, and to round off with it his charge against Plotinus. This insight finds confirmation first in Proclus.

In a brief but deep passage from his *Commentary on Plato's Cratylus*, Proclus deals with human intellect. He states:

The intellect in us is Dionysian and truly an image of Dionysus [Ὅτι ὁ ἐν ἡμῖν νοῦς Διονυσιακός ἐστιν καὶ ἄγαλμα ὄντως τοῦ Διονύσου]. Therefore, anyone that transgresses [πλημμελῇ] against it and, like the Titans, scatters [διασπᾷ] its undivided nature by fragmented falsehood, this person clearly sins against Dionysus himself, even more than those who transgress against external images of the God, to the extent that the intellect more than other things is akin to the God (*In Crat.* 133.1–7, Pasquali, translated by Duvick 2007).

I take this passage as a clear reference to Iamblichus' position on the soul and likewise as a clear confirmation of the pun on Iamblichus' part preserved in Fragment 87 (Dillon): "that has nothing to do with the soul" is a meaningful rephrasing of the proverb "that has nothing to do with Dionysus". We can easily see how the ἀπαθές τι ἐν ἡμῖν καὶ ἀεὶ νοοῦν ("that which in us is impassible and always contemplating") that Plotinus and Theodorus strived to defend (φυλάττειν) becomes an intellective disposition to actualize. In the *Commentary on Plato's Cratylus*, too, we find the same vocabulary of "violence" (διασπᾷ) already detected in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus* and already highlighted by Iamblichus and Proclus. In addition, the verb πλημμελέω ("to transgress", in Duvick's translation) is a clear reference to the *Timaeus*, wherein matter is notoriously depicted as moving in an erratic and disorderly manner (κινούμενον πλημμελῶς καὶ ἀτάκτως).⁶³ This amounts to saying that human beings act like the Titans dismembering Dionysus each time that, having fallen prey to passions, desires, vices, and particular and sensible things, they dismember their intellect, incapable as they are of identifying with their intellective power, except in rare moments—the "sometimes" in Plato's *Phaedrus* (τοτὲ μὲν) and in Iamblichus' Fragment 87 (ποτὲ μὲν). As we saw in the first part of this paper, Plotinus likened the pre-embodied souls to Dionysus looking into his mirror: distracted by his reflection, the young Dionysus was attacked and torn apart by the Titans. Nevertheless, Plotinus immediately put an end to this comparison, stating "but even these are not cut off from their own principle, from intellect" (οὐκ ἀποτμηθεῖσαι οὐδ' αὐταὶ τῆς ἑαυτῶν ἀρχῆς τε καὶ νοῦ). On the contrary, in the eyes of Iamblichus, Proclus, and Hermias, the human souls *qua* intellects are indeed cut off from their origin, they are indeed images of Dionysus. In other words, Iamblichus takes up, emphasizes, and gives full meaning to the Plotinian metaphor. This is the meaning hidden behind the apparently anodyne pun in Fragment 87, "nothing to do with the soul".

⁶³ Cf. Plato, *Tim.* 30a2–6.

I take one last confirmation from Hermias' *Commentary on Plato's Phaedrus*.⁶⁴ Here, Hermias maintains that, for human souls to νοερώς ἐνεργεῖν ("be active in an intellectual manner/actualize the intellectual power"), they need to experience the *Dionysian* possession (Διονυσιακή κατοκωχή). That is, they need to free themselves from the dianoetic thinking, identify with the intellectual substratum (τὸ νοερόν) within them—actualize their intellectual disposition (διάθεσις)—and thus grasp the intelligible Forms. Dionysus is the god who looks over this process of purification and unification:

Dionysiac possession, then, after the harmonisation of [the soul's] parts, renders it perfect and makes it function with its whole being and live intellectual (*In Phdr.* 94.6–8, translated by Baltzly and Share 2018).⁶⁵

Dionysus, the god who has been dismembered, oversees the recomposition of his statue (ἄγαλμα), to use Proclus' words, the human intellect, which, like him, has been dismembered, hindered, and hampered in the sensible realm. Indeed, the apex of the human soul is just an intellectual disposition (κατὰ νοῦν διάθεσις), a potential intellect (δυνάμει νοῦς).⁶⁶ It goes without saying that, as we have mentioned, beyond the intellectual disposition there is still the one of the soul. Nonetheless, the one is a "divine" component which belongs to the human soul, in that the latter derives ultimately from the divine—just as it possesses a noetic substratum because it also derives from the Intellect.⁶⁷ It is up to the one in the soul to accomplish the union with the divine, which does not result in an act of knowledge, as in the case of the intellection, but in an ineffable union—the divine unites with the divine in us.⁶⁸ However, what really matters in this context is that, just as the one is not always united with the divine, but it is normally dormant and quiescent, perpetual intellection does not belong to the human soul, whose intellectual disposition is fragmented on the model of its divine guardian, Dionysus.⁶⁹ If Dionysus incarnates the dismembered condition of the human intellect,

⁶⁴ Cf. Neola 2021, 211–212.

⁶⁵ The Greek text reads as follows: Ἡ οὖν Διονυσιακή κατοκωχή μετὰ τὴν τῶν μερῶν συναρμοσίαν τελέαν αὐτὴν ἀπεργάζεται καὶ ποιεῖ κατὰ πᾶσαν ἑαυτὴν ἐνεργεῖν καὶ νοερώς ζῆν.

⁶⁶ Hermias, *In Phdr.* 88.24–26.

⁶⁷ Cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 89.1–7.

⁶⁸ On the axiological superiority of the one over the intellect in the human soul, see for example, Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 1.25, 62.12–15; Hermias, *In Phdr.* 89.1–10.

⁶⁹ This qualitative parallelism between the activities of the one and the intellectual disposition may count as an answer to the puzzling issue Dillon 2005, 345, n. 11, broached in highlighting the seemingly paradoxical position held by Iamblichus, according to whom, while contrasting Plotinus' undescended soul, the human soul would own a one naturally united with the divine: "To maintain consistency, we would have to take it that even the 'One' of the soul, on Iamblichus'

torn apart by the enchantments of the sensible realm, at the same time he is the god of the recomposition, a recomposition to be realized through a cathartic process culminating in an ecstatic madness. The Dionysian possession is not the breach through which a human being unleashes its lower, vile instincts, but a way to get rid of its individuality in order to reach the eternal truth, to see what the uninitiated cannot possibly see, a way to become *in rare moments* a non-empirical intellect.⁷⁰ That is why Dionysus is the god of the palingenesis, and that is why an intellect always contemplating “has nothing to do with the Dionysian essence of our soul”.

4 Neoplatonic and Christian ἀσθένεια and the Need for External Mediatorial Means

In light of these considerations, I intend to bring to the fore, however briefly, a specific facet of the above psychological doctrines which has some overlap with contemporary Christian anthropology and soteriology. It behoves me to underline the fact that this is not to prove some direct Neoplatonic influence on Christian theologians (or vice versa), but, rather, to highlight a shared feature of late antique anthropology.

As has been seen, Iamblichus, Proclus, and Hermias disallow Plotinus’ psychological stance mainly on the grounds of the intrinsic human weakness: ἀσθένεια. Otherwise said, it is on account of their intrinsic weakness that human beings, as composites of a soul and a body, cannot possibly attain the ultimate stage of intellectual knowledge, but only partake in the light of the particular intellect. In turn, this idea is strictly connected with that of limitedness (τὰ μέτρα) with clear taxological and thus axiological overtones. Πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν θέσιν ἕκαστον τῶν ὄντων ἀποκριθὲν ἀνεχώρησεν (“each separated being withdrew to its own place”): Gregory of Nyssa describes in these terms the ontological collocation which each created being (πᾶν τὸ φαινόμενον) hastens to take in the immediate aftermath of creation.⁷¹ Far from forcibly making the Christian creationism parallel the Neoplatonic emanationism, it is worth noting nonetheless that the seeming poetic πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν θέσιν ἀναχωρεῖν (“withdrew to its own place”) is actually a meaningful ontological principle equally valid within Neoplatonic on-

view, is subject to periodic ‘descent’”. Rather, even the *activity* of the one of the soul is not perpetual.

⁷⁰ Cf. Colli 1990, 19–20.

⁷¹ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *De opif. hom.* PG 44.128C6–8 (translated by Behr 2023, 153).

tology, and seriously impinges on what ἕκαστον τῶν ὄντων (“each of the beings”) can actually *do*. In other words, the οἰκεία θέσις (“own place”) stands as an ontological marker urging each ὄν to recognize its being τοῦ παντός μέρος. This latter qualification is taken from Proclus’ *Platonic Theology*, in a juncture of the text wherein the Diadochus tackles the issue of the alleged existence of evil. As well known, in the eyes of Proclus, evil is simply a by-product deprived of an authentic existence (παρυπόστασις). More to the point, Proclus holds that everything that finds itself barren τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ (“of the Good”) may fairly be considered as such in respect to itself and its own existence due to a weakness of nature (δι’ ἀσθένειαν φύσεως), whereas it is good in respect to the totality of being and in so much as it is a part of the all (τῷ δὲ ὅλῳ καὶ ὡς τοῦ παντός μέρος ἀγαθόν ἐστιν).⁷² We are once again recalled to—and urged to acknowledge—the connection between weakness and ontological position. If, then, a being is qualified as human, it is weak as such. Its θέσις within the scale of beings colours its weakness. This is the reason why it cannot partake in the unpolluted intellectual knowledge of the unparticipated Intellect. This anthropological stance was equally as true for later Neoplatonists as it was for their Christian contemporaries. Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria qualifies human weakness as ἐνοῦσα (“intrinsic”). Due to this weakness, human nature cannot possibly approach the divine glory in its purity: Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ οἶονεῖ πως γυμνῇ καὶ ἀκράτῳ τῇ τῆς θεότητος δόξῃ προσβαλεῖν οὐχ οἷα τε ἦν ἡ ἀνθρώπου φύσις, διὰ τὴν ἐνοῦσαν ἀσθένειαν κτλ. (“Since human nature is unable to approach the glory of divinity as if naked, so to speak, and immaculate, due to its intrinsic weakness, etc.”). However, what should catch the reader’s eye is not only, and not so much, the reference to the intrinsic, human weakness, but also and above all, that it is placed within a clause of reason introduced by ἐπειδὴ. Indeed, the significance of the human weakness comes out strongest if we consider its consequences. Cyril continues as follows: [. . .] ὑπέδυστο χρησίμως τὴν πρὸς ἡμᾶς ὁμοίωσιν ὁ Μονογενὴς (“The Only Begotten assumed fittingly the likeness towards us”).⁷³ It is because of human ἀσθένεια that God the Word reaches out to humanity and takes on its own weakness to redeem it.

The gist of both later Neoplatonists’ and Christians’ account is that human weakness demands an external mediatorial mean. This holds true for both Christian and Neoplatonic worldviews, however widely Christian and Neoplatonic the-

⁷² Cf. Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 1.18, 46.20–27. For a similar treatment of the evil’s issue understood as “the permanent challenge for a monistic system” in Maximus the Confessor, see Skliris 2023, who convincingly argues that demoting evil to non-being is “one of the most impressive resemblances between Christian and Neoplatonic thinkers” (132) and that Maximus inherits and expands in an original way upon Proclus’ notion of παρυπόστασις.

⁷³ Cf. Cyril, *Dial. de Trin.* 1.399.19–22 (de Durand); my translations.

ologians may have diverged on the exact nature of the mediatorial mean—this is why it would be fairest not to press this parallel too far. The aim of this final section, though, is to spotlight the shared connection between ontology and weakness, the latter causing (ἐπειδὴ) the need for a mediatorial mean, instead of assessing the exact nature of the needed mean.⁷⁴ In the course of our previous analysis of the relationship between human soul and Intellects within later Neoplatonism, we have fleetingly touched upon the mediatorial role of angels and demons,⁷⁵ and the Dionysian possession,⁷⁶ hinting at how the process of partaking in the intellect should be envisaged. According to Proclus, the particular intellect cannot be partaken in by the souls αὐτόθεν (“on their own”), but through (διὰ) demonic and angelic souls. This mediatorial dynamic clearly falls within the broader context of theurgical practices that significantly single out post-Iamblichean Platonism from Plotinian (and Porphyrian) thought. It is my contention here that the notion of ἀσθένεια impinges more on later Neoplatonists and Christians than on Plotinus or Porphyry. There is scope to think that later Neoplatonists’ stress on theurgical practices and mediatorial means arose, partly at least, from their distaste for what they understood to be Plotinus’ view of the human soul. Plotinus was just overly confident that a human soul might attain higher levels of being *on its own*—αὐτόθεν, to use Proclus’ words. “Amazement holds me that thou hast drunk this charm and wast in no wise bewitched”:⁷⁷ in his *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*, Proclus resorts to Homer—the verse is pronounced by Circe to Odysseus—in order to show how rare are the human souls capable of resisting the incantations of the sensible realm.⁷⁸ These rare souls are those of Pythagoras, Socrates, or Syrianus who have been sent to earth to usher the souls entangled in the sensible dimension towards the divine realm. They are entrusted with a salvific mission consisting in awakening feeble souls in order for them to embark upon the epistrophic process leading inward and, hence, upward.⁷⁹ However, this first, profoundly philosophic, mediation paves the way for

74 A comparative enquiry into the relationship between Christian and Neoplatonic treatment of weakness and mediation is the seminal work of Feichtinger 2003, who takes into consideration Iamblichus and Augustine.

75 Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* I 245.17–22: τίς δὲ ὁ μερικὸς νοῦς ἐστὶν οὗτος, καὶ ὡς οὐχ εἷς ἐστὶ κατὰ μίαν ψυχὴν μερικὴν, οὐδὲ αὐτόθεν ὑπὸ τῶν μερικῶν μετέχεται ψυχῶν, ἀλλὰ διὰ τῶν ἀγγελικῶν καὶ δαιμονίων ψυχῶν τῶν αἰεὶ κατ’ αὐτὸν ἐνεργουσῶν, δι’ ἃς καὶ αἱ μερικαὶ ψυχαὶ ποτε μετέχουσι τοῦ νοεροῦ φωτός, διήρθρωται διὰ πλείονων <ἐν ἄλλοις>.

76 Cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 94.6–8.

77 Homer, *Od.* 10.326 (translated by Murray 1945).

78 Cf. Proclus, *In Alc.* I, 257.6–9.

79 Cf. for example, Iamblichus, *V. Pyth.* 2.8.1–7; Hermias, *In Phdr.* 1.5–6; and Proclus, *In Parm.* I 618.8–13; on Neoplatonic “pure souls”, cf. for example, O’Meara 1989, 149–152; Finamore and Dil-

the successive theurgical mediation, involving in its turn an engagement with beings belonging to higher spheres of existence, and the gods themselves reaching out to the souls through their divine illuminations and spirits.⁸⁰ This as well is because of human souls' ἀσθένεια. On the Christian side, the notion of human weakness accounts for the mediatorial function of saints, prophets, and ultimately that of Christ. In his *Against Julian*, for example, Cyril is adamant that Moses, David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah confess that they are not up to the task of salvation and, hence, beg God to send someone else.⁸¹ Since God the Father created the universe through (διὰ) its Word, the latter takes care of re-creating and restoring that which had fallen into sin.⁸² Notwithstanding the fact that the *ontological* corollary of the mediatorial tenet triggered a well-known νυκτομαχία in fourth–fifth century Christology, both Eusebius of Caesarea and Cyril of Alexandria would have given their assent to the mediatorial *function* of Christ in respect to the feeble humanity.⁸³ As Cyril himself put it, “human weakness reveals the absolute necessity of mediation” (τὴν τοῦ μεσιτεύοντος χρείαν ἀναγκαιοτάτην ἀπέδειξε τὸ τῆς ἀνθρωπότητος ἀσθενές).⁸⁴

lon 2002, 159–163; and Neola 2022. It is interesting to note that, in commenting upon Socrates' alleged οὐδένεια (*Phdr.* 235a1), Hermias points out that Socrates' weakness is not to be taken to be tantamount to ordinary human ἀσθένεια but is synonymous with “excess of power” (δυνάμεως ὑπερβολή). Socrates channels his activity toward the intelligible realm and being able to περὶ τὰ νοητὰ ἐνεργεῖν always entails an ἀδυναμία τοῦ προσέχειν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς. On the contrary, a δύναμις ἢ περὶ τὰ ἔνυλα οὖσα is apparent (φαινομένη), since the authentic δύναμις belongs to τὰ ἀγαθὰ καὶ ἄριστα: cf. Hermias, *In Phdr.* 44.18–24.

80 On the relation between human weakness and theurgical practices in Iamblichus, see Feichtinger 2003. As he bluntly states on 132: “The soul's weakness is felt strongly. This weakness is the reason for preferring theurgy to philosophy, and the basis for this weakness can be nothing else but its bond to the body”.

81 Cf. Cyril, *CJ.* 8.37 (Kinzig and Brüggemann PG 76.928B27–C15).

82 Cf. for example, Athanasius, *CA.* 14.36–43, 1.12, 2.53.16–18, 13.7.34–36, and 14.2.14–15 (Metzler and Savvidis); note that in this latter *locus*, Christ is told to re-create the soul according to the image; Cyril, *Dial. de Trin.* 6.620d23–32; 7.651a.

83 On the mediatorial, “deictic” function of Christ in Eusebius of Caesarea, see Robertson 2007. On Christ's mediation according to Cyril, see for example, *Dial. de Trin.* 1.405c–d. However, while Eusebius takes Christ's mediatorial role as a hint of its being ontologically inferior to the Father, Cyril restraints the significance of mediation to the Incarnation, thereby safeguarding the consubstantiality of Father and Son.

84 Cf. Cyril, *Dial. de Trin.* 1.401c20–22.

5 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, while the issue of the mediatorial need should be treated with kid gloves and, hence, evades the scope of this contribution, it is crucial to spotlight that the “since . . . due to the intrinsic weakness” device (ἐπειδὴ . . . δι’ ἐνοῦσαν ἀσθένειαν), implying the existence of mediatorial means external to the human soul for it to attain higher degrees of being (τὸ θεῖον or ὁ Θεός), signals an overriding concern that became more pronounced over time, weighing more heavily upon later Neoplatonic minds than on that of the founder Plotinus, thus bringing Iamblichus, Proclus, and Hermias closer to their Christian contemporaries.

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