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Corentin Tresnie

Aspirant FNRS, Université Libre de Bruxelles / KU Leuven, Belgium

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DOI: 10.22618/TP.PJCv.20215.2.114005

The PJCv Journal is published by Trivent Publishing



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Introduction

Ancient Neoplatonism might appear to be the least relevant school of thought for anyone committed to providing a philosophical account of conflict and violence. Its founder, Plotinus, is reputed to be an otherworldly thinker and mystic¹ with little to no practical ethics whatsoever,² while its later members will become increasingly focused on abstract metaphysical systems and close exegesis of earlier texts, aimed at preparing a spiritual ascent, which constitutes their main ethical stance.³ According to such views, their effort towards systematization would result in the oversight of the essentially aporetic and confrontational nature of political life and virtues.⁴ It is certainly true that, apart from a few isolated comments,⁵ no explicit treatment of political or social matters can be found in the

¹ J. Dillon, "An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 331-332. Such a representation is heavily influenced by Porphyry's biography of Plotinus, see C. Tresnie, "Biography as implicit philosophical polemics: Porphyry's Life of Plotinus and Iamblichus' Pythagorean Life," in *Polemics, Rivalry and Networking in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Pieter d'Hoine, Geert Roskam, Stefan Schorn and Jos Verheyden. Forthcoming.

² Arielle Castellan, *Plotin : L'ascension intérieure* (Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2007), 30.

³ D. Baltzly, "The Human Life," in *All From One: A Guide to Proclus*, ed. Pieter d'Hoine & Marije Martijn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 258-275.

⁴ R. Hathaway, "The Neoplatonist Interpretation of Plato: Remarks on its Decisive Characteristics," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 7 (1969): 19-26.

⁵ E.g. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI, 4 [22], 15, 24-33 or Proclus, *In Alk.* 255.3-256.1.

Neoplatonists' extant writings. It is noteworthy that one important rehabilitation of Neoplatonic political thought can only establish its existence by stipulating a meaning of "political" that need not concern conflict management but rather theoretical reflection about the best possible human life.⁶

Despite their lack of any explicit treatment of political conflict, I would like to argue that this topic plays a more important role in Neoplatonic philosophy than commonly assumed. I will mainly focus on two of the most prominent thinkers of Neoplatonism: Plotinus (including his reinterpretation by Porphyry and Iamblichus) and Proclus. I will try to show that each of them used in his own way the concepts attached to political violence. While Plotinus makes efficient survival skills in a violent but just world an essential starting point of the ascent towards virtue, Proclus gives cognitive conflict a place of choice in his theory of learning. Plotinus' stance is partly shared by other early Neoplatonists like Porphyry and Iamblichus, but they are much less radical than him, opening the way to Proclus' epistemic turn in dealing with political conflict.

I. Violence and Providence in Early Neoplatonism

A. Plotinus and the Test of Providence

The third century, during which Neoplatonism was born, could be described as violent and indubitably led many to despair.⁷ Still, even at the darkest of times, there is order in the world, structures and regularities that any appeal to chance fails to explain. For a Platonist like Plotinus, this is the clear sign that there ought to be a grander scheme, namely Providence. As the world is supposedly eternal, this *Providence* (*πρόνοια*) cannot come "before" it in a temporal sense, but should be the work of Intelligence (*νοῦς*), in thinking itself, being another, intelligible, world. Therefore, the world we are living in is ruled by a beneficent Providence inasmuch as it participates in the harmonious intelligible world.⁸ How is it then that there are wars, destructions and killings? Plotinus gives quite classic answers. First, such unfortunate events are but parts of a much more beautiful whole and should not be considered in isolation. Second, they are necessary ingredients of this beauty, opposing voices that together form a harmony. Lastly, those events are only considered as sufferings by the wicked: the virtuous is not afflicted by them or at worse uses them as a profitable exercise.⁹ But comforting as it might be, this picture still raises an important objection: how could there be a Justice or Providence in a world where the righteous are enslaved while bad people can rule cities, thus being given more tools to commit their crimes on a wider scale? Is this the proof that after all, Providence is either neglectful or does not rule everything in mortal affairs? If it did, why could we not be all treated according to what we deserve?¹⁰ Plotinus' answer is implacable: we are.

Wouldn't it, then, be a laughable situation if youths who exercised their bodies but had become inferior in their souls compared to their physical condition due to their lack of education, should defeat in a wrestling match those who

⁶ Dominic J. O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

⁷ See e.g., Eric R. Dodds, *Pagans and Christians in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Harold A. Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006).

⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads* III, 2 [47], 1–2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 2 [47], 3–5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 2 [47], 6–7.

had exercised neither their bodies nor their souls, and stole their food as well as taking their fine garments? In fact, it would be right for a lawgiver to agree that they suffer this as paying the penalty for their laziness and indulgence, youths who, after being shown what exercises they should do, looked idly by as they became fattened lambs, the prey of wolves, as a result of their laziness and their soft and listless living. [...] For if both sets of boys grew bigger while retaining their folly, they would straightaway have to gird themselves and take their weapons, and the spectacle would be finer than that afforded to someone exercising them in wrestling. But the situation now is that one side is unarmed, the other armed and dominant. In this situation, a god must not fight in person for the unwarlike. For the law says that those who are brave, not those who pray, are to come out safe from wars. [...] So, death would be better for them than continuing to be alive in the way that the laws of the universe do not want them to live. So, if the opposite happened and peace was preserved amidst every kind of folly and vice, the role of a providence which allowed what is worse to be really dominant would be one of neglect. The wicked only rule because of the cowardice of those who allow themselves to be ruled by them. For this is right, the reverse is not.¹¹

Violence is not a mere necessary evil, an unfortunate side effect of the universe's striving towards a greater good: it is the means and the mark of cosmic justice. The rule of Providence is not an interference from the Intelligence in the material world, it does not substitute for the latter's laws, but it is their foundation. The law which "says that those who are brave, not those who pray, are to come out safe from wars" is an integral part of the participation in the divine order of Intelligence.¹² Those who fail to live up to the requirements of the universe—including the necessity to be able to defend oneself and to fight back—are by this very failure morally inferior to their better trained bullies or oppressors. This does not prevent both groups from being wicked, to deserve and to get in time their due punishment.¹³ However, they are hierarchized in their folly: neither are cultivating their soul enough to be able to expect a happy life, but at least the bullies did cultivate their bodies. As their victims were not willing to even become able to protect themselves, they deserve their fate. If some god had decided to fight on their behalf, it would have rewarded laziness. As harsh as it may sound, it is if it protected the weak in spite of its own laws that Providence would have been neglectful, or even arbitrary.

Interestingly, Plotinus does not even consider the seemingly obvious possibility of someone who would cultivate his soul (for example by doing philosophy) but not his body or fighting skills. In fact, to him, such a possibility would be contradictory: the essential role of the descended soul is to organize the material world according to the rules of Providence.¹⁴ As these rules include the necessity of engaging in the daily struggle for survival and the requisite to prepare oneself (including one's body) to be able to do so efficiently, no soul can ever properly accomplish its function while neglecting the training of the body. After all, they "have been shown what exercises they should do" from the moment they came to live in this

¹¹ Ibid., III, 2 [47], 8, 16–27; 34–39 & 47–54.

¹² As Gerson and his colleagues remark in a note to their translation of this passage, the "lawgiver" is none other than the *voûç*; see V, 9 [5], 5, 26–28 and Plato's *Laws* 900e1.

¹³ Plotinus, *Enneads* III, 2 [47], 8, 27–28. The punishment of the bullies *is* to be bullies and thus to be ruled by their passions, which will ultimately prevent them from being happy, see IV, 8 [6], 2, 7–14 and Plato's *Republic* 566a4.

¹⁴ E. Song, "Die providentielle Sorge der Seele um den Körper bei Plotin," *Philologus* 153 (2009): 159–172.

universe. This means that, conversely, the need for survival in a violent context can be treated less as a nuisance than as a first criterion to assess whether a soul properly rules its body. Of course, to fare well in the world, whether in peace or war, is by no means sufficient to achieve any kind of serenity: undue attachment to the body's affections or possessions inevitably leads to worry and unease.¹⁵ Nonetheless, without first a strict training, there is no point in considering any spiritual progress through care of the soul. Every war is ultimately an effect of Providence, which tends to lead every soul to improvement. The point of such apparently gratuitous displays of violence is to provide a clear (if painful) feedback to soul about its handling of the body. In this sense we can understand how conflicts contribute to the harmony of the whole: they help souls to become aware of their shortcomings, thus preparing their later improvement.¹⁶ Failure and suffering are the sign that one does not yet behave like one should, it serves to correct our spontaneous tendencies until (after multiple years or incarnations) they fit the cosmic order.¹⁷

B. The Neutralization of Violence in Porphyry and Iamblichus

So harsh and positive an account of worldly violence as cosmic justice is unheard of in later Neoplatonic texts. The general Plotinian argument is, however, not lost to his successors. In line with the broader tradition of philosophical questioning about fate and providence,¹⁸ they occasionally address the same questions as Plotinus.

In his protreptic *Letter* to his wife Marcella, Porphyry distinguishes three kinds, or levels, of law, each being an extension of the previous one: the divine law of the Intellect that aims to save our souls, the law of the mortal nature and the laws of the human political communities.¹⁹ The latter kind is rather unproblematic: it is purely conventional, it varies according to culture and political contingencies; moreover, it only concerns observable actions, as neither secret deeds nor mere intentions can realistically be punished by such laws.²⁰ They can safely be ignored by anyone who follows at least one of the two other levels: such a person is likely to be measured enough to avoid any deed that would be considered a crime by human laws²¹. Those who live in accordance with the cosmic order will avoid trouble even in this world; so far this is roughly consistent with the Plotinian argument that we have seen. One difference might lie in the strong distinction between the two superior levels of rules. The divine law, on the one hand, is impossible to either transgress or even disdain, for it is the intelligible structure of reality itself: one can only be unaware of it, at his own expense.²² The law of mortal nature, on the other hand, can be both transgressed and disdained. It is transgressed when the soul indulges in excessive love and attachment for the

¹⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads* IV, 8 [6], 2, 7–30. See also G. Gurtler, “Plotinus and the Alienation of the Soul,” in *The Perennial Tradition of Neoplatonism*, ed. John J. Cleary (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 221–234.

¹⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* III, 2 [47], 16.

¹⁷ See E. Song, “The Ethics of Descent in Plotinus,” *Hermathena* 184 (2009): 27–48.

¹⁸ It is naturally impossible to summarize, let alone embrace, this massive tradition within the scope of this paper. Numerous aspects of it are presented in *Fate, Providence and Moral Responsibility in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought: Studies in Honour of Carlos Steel*, ed. Pieter d’Hoine and Gerd Van Riel (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014). Let us remark that Porphyry and Iamblichus are there given quite a marginal treatment compared to other major figures of Neoplatonism.

¹⁹ Porphyry, *Ad Marcellam* 25, 120.7–25. Remarkably, the distinction and characterization of these three levels is one of the few doctrines of the *Letter* which does not seem to be heavily grounded on collected maxims.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Porphyry, *Ad Marcellam* 27, 121.18–122.11.

²² *Ibid.*, 26, 120.26–121.7.

body; it is disdained when the soul neglects the proper and sufficient care of the body.²³ All of this, however, is compatible with the Plotinian framework. The lazy youths do neglect to properly train their bodies, either transgressing or disdaining the Porphyrian natural law depending on the reason of their neglect. Their bullies follow the natural law at least to some extent (they did, after all, train their body enough to beat the weaker boys), but they ignore the divine law, which will prevent them from reaching happiness. Moreover, the hierarchy between two complementary but nonetheless discrete levels of normativity is in tune with a classification of virtues that Plotinus himself develops elsewhere²⁴ and to some extent with the Plotinian concept of Providence.²⁵

The actual difference is more a matter of emphasis. The example of the wrestling bullies is absent from Porphyry's argument: although the conceptual framework he uses is borrowed from Plotinus' treatise, he is much more interested in showing how important it is to withdraw from the passionate attachment (*προσπάθεια*) to the body.²⁶ Plotinus strove to give a philosophically satisfying account of the providential character of even the most brutal events: violent theft was his case study. Porphyry's point is more generic and even euphemistic: the soul should be a good master of the body, neither neglecting nor spoiling him (thus following the "natural" layer of Providence) and enduring whatever happens in order to be able to set free from the flesh, *i.e.* to follow the "divine" layer of Providence. The least we can say is that the implied ethics is much more pacific, perhaps even passive, than would have advised the Plotinian "lawgiver."²⁷ At any rate, the role of violence is here eclipsed since the ideal of personal purification is given more importance than accounting for cosmic justice, while the conceptual framework itself remains roughly the same.

Let us now turn to another Neoplatonist, Iamblichus. Although he also professes a certain defiance towards any kind of attachment towards the body,²⁸ he usually puts much less emphasis on this moral imperative. Instead, he uses the distinction between levels of law to stress the harmony of the universe. Nature, he says, comprises all the immanent causes of the realm of Becoming, it can explain every event that involves matter and it may be equated with Fate.²⁹ The level of Fate (*εἰμαρομένη*) is different and subordinated to the level of Providence (*πρόνοια*), which directly rules over the immaterial phenomena, including volitions of human beings insofar as they are exercising their freedom unimpaired by physical contingencies.³⁰

²³ *Ibid.*, 25, 120.18-21 and 30, p. 123.14-19.

²⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads* I, 2 [19], 2-3. To be more precise, what Plotinus calls "political" virtues (namely courage, temperance, prudence and justice in their usual sense) are closer to the observance of Porphyry's natural law, while his "superior" or "purificatory" virtues concern spiritual ascension, *i.e.*, observance of divine law. Porphyry himself comments and expands on this second set of virtues in the *Sententia* 32.

²⁵ In *Enneads* III, 3 [48], 5, Plotinus opposes Providence and Fate in terms very similar to the two first Porphyrian levels of law. The terms will be taken over by Iamblichus and the later tradition, see below. However, contrary to Porphyry's divine law Plotinus' Providence can be transgressed, or at least it is possible to fail to follow it, see III, 3 [48], 5.33-51.

²⁶ This is especially apparent in the §32-34, p. 124.14-126.13. Porphyry's quite hostile attitude towards the body can be observed *e.g.*, in *De Abstinentia* I, 56-57 and *De Antro Nympharum*, 34.

²⁷ The *Letter to Marcella* and in particular the passages on the natural law are deeply influenced by Epicureanism, as can be deduced from the frequent use of Epicurean themes and quotations, see on this question Édouard des Places, *Porphyre. Vie de Pythagore. Lettre à Marcella* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1982), 121-124.

²⁸ Iamblichus, Letter 3, fr. 2: temperance demands that we forfeit everything that nails us to the body, following the *Phaedo* 83d.

²⁹ Iamblichus, Letter 12, fr. 1.

³⁰ Iamblichus, Letter 8, fr. 4.

Intellectual activity answers only to Providence, but we are drawn beneath the sway of Fate every time we get distracted by the flow of Becoming.³¹ Still, there is no dualism to assume: even the works of Chance (which seems to be a part of Fate) in the physical world are an integral part of the divine action of Providence.³² Indeed, anything that exists, whether unified or multiple, intelligible or material, derives from the One; therefore Fate must be included in the greatest chain of causality that stems from the One.³³ That means that nothing that happens under the action of Fate—that is: nothing at all—can be considered an evil or even a real deviation from the divine plan; everything that seems to be unjust or chaotic is but a step in the most efficient process towards virtue, guided by Providence.³⁴ Fate is the instrument by which the gods impose Providence on the realm of generations, making it the least possible bad world.³⁵ As a matter of consequence, every event, including pandemics and wars, is itself necessarily good, as Abaris is supposed to have taught it on behalf of the Iamblichean model, Pythagoras.³⁶ The gods are the cause of wars and do not hesitate to influence their outcome for the greater good by giving information or commands to mortals.³⁷

While Porphyry gave importance to the pressing need of detaching oneself from the body to follow a higher law, sometimes to the detriment of questions of cosmicity, Iamblichus resolutely focuses on the latter. He stresses the omnipresence of Providence (albeit sometimes through Fate) and the unrestricted goodness of the world, to the extent that one may be left to wonder why we experience suffering at all. Iamblichus does naturally have an answer: it is for lack of adequate philosophical training that we fail to understand how every event in our lives, however violent, is beneficial for each of us as well as for the world as a whole, being part of the beneficent Providence of the gods.³⁸ Nonetheless, such an optimistic picture tends to downplay the specific character of violent episodes: if they are but one more aspect of the divine administration, how do they differ from rain or any trivial event? The example of bullies in Plotinus was quite vivid and cruel, even for the ancient world, and this may have been intentional. In both Porphyry and Iamblichus, all we find is vague references to war and diseases as necessary ordeals and steps towards salvation. They have sound arguments and no reason to go into such topics in depth, as developing a philosophy of conflict is certainly not among their priorities. Each of them, in a nutshell, elaborated on a different aspect already present in Plotinus' treatise: the goodness and justice of all events as ruled by Providence on the one hand, their function of encouraging us to overcome the body on the other hand. By developing Plotinus' point in their respective ways, both of them contributed to weaken the importance and tragedy of worldly violence, to neutralize its philosophical significance, or at any rate to subordinate it to issues deemed more important. We will see that their legacy is paramount to understand Proclus' contribution.

³¹ Ibid., fr. 2.

³² Ibid., fr. 5.

³³ Ibid., fr. 1. ἀπορροιστέον should here mean “included in” or “assigned to” rather than “defined as” (*pace* Dillon *ad loc.*), as it is otherwise impossible to understand how Fate would be subordinated to Providence (fr. 4).

³⁴ Iamblichus, Letter 8, fr. 6.

³⁵ Iamblichus, Letter 11, fr. 1.

³⁶ Iamblichus, *Pythagorean Life* 32, p. 217.1-8.

³⁷ Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* III, 3, p. 108.6-13.

³⁸ Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 3 and 8; *De Mysteriis* I, 1-2; Letter 13, fr. 2. See also A. Smith, “Iamblichus' Views on the Relationship of Philosophy to Religion in *De Mysteriis*” in *The Divine Iamblichus: Philosopher and Man of Gods*, ed. Henry J. Blumenthal and Gillian Clark (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 74–86.

II. Conflict and Cognition in Proclus

A. Providential Justice

In many respects, Proclus can be said to elaborate an original synthesis of the earlier Neoplatonic tradition. This holds true for the account he gives of hardships. Providence, Proclus says, gives to every individual exactly what he worked for: health to those who take care of the body, wealth and power to those who seriously seek them, true virtue to those who actually bother to cultivate it; to each according to his way of life.³⁹ But what seems to be a re-enactment of the Plotinian argument is actually used to show the reverse of Plotinus' point. Virtue is only worthwhile when it can excel in the face of adversity, therefore those who seek it above all are given more hardships than others, so they can shine all the more.⁴⁰ Health and success are thus no more testimonies to the mastering of a first level of virtue, but rather to the lack of it. Indeed, these are worth little without virtue and can actually distract from its acquiring, which requires a complete indifference (or even contempt) towards the body. As such an attitude is often hindered by prosperity and comfort, he who wants to become virtuous needs hardships to progress, and may even want to actively provoke them.⁴¹

The close relationship between asceticism and compliance with a higher law is not unlike the one drawn by Porphyry, except that Proclus goes one step further: His Providence actively intervenes to ensure that everyone tries his best to reach this disaffection.⁴² It organizes every incident in our lives as to optimize the moral progress of each soul. To this end, it generates and makes use of Fate, which is the deterministic organization of the material world and of the souls inasmuch as they are influenced by this world.⁴³ It allows divine Providence to extend to every detail of our daily life, none of which can thus be considered as essentially bad.⁴⁴ This culminates in the Proclean doctrine of evil as *παρὰ πῶστασις*: Evil has by itself no reality, no independent existence or even positive content, it is only the name we give to an incomplete or weakened good.⁴⁵ In such a worldview, all events are identically tools of the beneficial action of Providence, whose appreciation may vary according to perspective, but whose actual value is necessarily positive. As with Iamblichus, violent episodes are given no special place in this optimistic divine plan: they are good, like everything else. The Plotinian doctrine of violence as a test of our practical conformity with Providence's action is read through the lens of Porphyry and Iamblichus. Although their conceptual framework is inherited from Plotinus himself, this ultimately leads Proclus to differ from Plotinus in important aspects. Among other things, it completely neutralizes the special role of violence, which becomes an ordinary beneficial event, with no more usefulness than any other.

B. Psychic War and Peace as Degrees of Error

This is, however, not the whole story. If we leave the pacified field of ethics and henodicy to turn our attention to psychology, we can observe an unexpected resurgence of warlike vocabulary. Specifically, error is to be thought of as a form of conflict within the soul, according to Proclus. Two layers may be distinguished: on the one hand, error in general is a

³⁹ Proclus, *Dec. Dub.* 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.11-15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34.1-11 and 35-36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37: Providence may deprive someone of the wealth or physical condition he worked hard to obtain when he has become able to move on to the next step, *i.e.* a virtuous life.

⁴³ Proclus, *De Prov.* 7-14.

⁴⁴ Proclus, *De Mal. Subst.* 41; 58 and 61.

⁴⁵ Proclus, *De Mal. Subst.* 50-57. See for example C. Steel, "Providence and Evil," in *All From One: A Guide to Proclus*, ed. Pieter d'Hoine & Marije Martijn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 240-257.

form of disharmony within the so-called Circles of the soul, on the other, one particular kind of error is described as a civil war between opinions. Let us examine each of these layers more closely.

It is first to be said that soul itself is considered as a harmony between two “Circles,” which are themselves made of mathematical ratios.⁴⁶ The “Circle of the Same” is what is otherwise called discursive reason (διάνοια), the “Circle of the Other” is opinion (δόξα); the former serves to know intelligible harmonies, the latter sensible ones, although in practice both are always used simultaneously.⁴⁷ However, under the pressure of the bodily passions, this beneficial collaboration can be disrupted. Then, each Circle acts on its own, like the horses of the *Phaedrus*: both Circles remain self-identical (the soul would not survive otherwise), but their joint powers and activities are altered.⁴⁸ When it happens, it results in a failure both cognitive and ethical: the soul no longer discerns properly what it should do or think.⁴⁹

Depending on the severity of the disturbance brought by passions, the resulting disruption between the Circles of the soul may differ and express itself in various ways. These are inspired by the different “positions” of the soul of a young person as described in the *Timaeus* 43e3-44b2. **1.** The worst possible case is when the soul is “upside down”: it is no more able to judge things according to what they are, but only according to its own skewed perception. The soul is led like a slave by its passions, either **1a.** its pleasures or even worse: **1b.** its sheer caprice. It thus wanders aimlessly, in a state of strong and harmful perspectivism.⁵⁰ **2.** Such a fall is preceded by another state, slightly better, of “obliqueness.” When it is oblique, the soul is not yet completely irrational but it is already dominated by perception, which leads it to generate unsound conclusions. But as reason is still present, these conclusions display a certain degree of consistency: the oblique soul will not say that justice is naïve and injustice a vice, but rather that justice is naïve and injustice clever.⁵¹ **3.** For the choice of unsound opinions by reason to be possible, we have to suppose beforehand a state of opposition (ἐναντιότητά) between true and false opinions. At this point, reason is still intact and has not given up to perception, but it is not strong enough to clearly distinguish between what it should believe and what it should not. This dissent (διάφορα) may take place between propositions or between rational representation and irrational desire. In the first two mentioned perturbations, the powers of the Circle of the Other are distorted; in other words, soul is no more able to properly form an opinion of its own. With the conflict internal to reason, only the powers of the Circle of the Same are affected, and they are only paralyzed: one may still reason, but not clearly enough to decide between truth and falsity.⁵²

⁴⁶ Or at least, mathematical ratios are our best approximation to understand the components of the soul. See Proclus, *In Tim.* II.174.15-27; II.236.18-27 and III.336.20-337.26, as well as Marije Martijn, *Proclus on Nature: Philosophy of Nature and Its Methods in Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 192–202.

⁴⁷ Proclus, *In Tim.* II.253.21-255.24 and III.337.28-338.21.

⁴⁸ Proclus, *In Tim.* II.203.28-209.8; II.253.1-8 and III.338.22-26. See Gregory MacIsaac, *The Soul and Discursive Reason in the Philosophy of Proclus* (dissertation, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2001), 156–161.

⁴⁹ Proclus, *In Tim.* III.333.10-28 and 335.2-10.

⁵⁰ Proclus, *In Tim.* II.113.25-29; III.341.29-342.9 and 343.18-346.8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, III.341.19-29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, III.338.13-21; 341.6-7; 342.2-5 and III.351.29-352.4. For a general presentation of the three states of the soul's disruption, see D. Baltzly, “Pathways to Purification: The Cathartic Virtues in the Neoplatonic Commentary Tradition,” in *Reading Plato in Antiquity*, ed. Harold Tarrant and Dirk Baltzly (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 169–184.

C. Conflict as a Condition of Philosophy

This kind of disruption of the soul (*i.e.*, of error), namely dissent, will be the second layer in our inquiry about psychic conflict. Two complementary though contrasting features of it deserve to be noted. On the one hand, the illustrations given by Proclus of such a state are striking: the deviant and dangerous Thrasymachus and Callicles. Indeed, it is only because they still assume some true opinions, albeit implicitly or unconsciously, that Socrates is able to refute their false conceptions on the basis of those true opinions.⁵³ It would not have been possible if they were consistent enough in their error, e.g. if their soul was oblique. This means, on the other hand, that dissent, while *per se* an undesirable state, is the least worrying, or the most redeemable, kind of error.

Yet, every evil, with the reservation that we have seen about this concept, is to be originated in such an internal strife, a civil war (στάσις) within the soul.⁵⁴ However, what transforms the psychic conflict into an evil is precisely its calming down. As long as lasts the internal struggle, reason is unable to decide what to believe: The soul is hesitant and likely to do little, or to display an equal proportion of good and bad behaviors. It is when a wicked peace has been signed that the soul really begins to sink: reason consistently obeys to perception and passions, before finally disappearing. Or to render more exactly the Proclean analogy: the sound exercise of reason is comparable to a walking man, dissension to his rushing, obliqueness to his fall, the position “upside down” to his final state, now unable to stand up again.⁵⁵ What is important to note here is that, although running can be seen as the cause of the fall, when internal strife is raging the man is still on his feet. Conflict plays the role of the last reasonable stage before the soul subordinates its reason to passion then sacrifices it altogether. When someone is in a state of internal strife, it is still possible to have a philosophical discussion with them and hopefully to show them the truth. When reason has agreed to the terms of perception and thus made peace with it, progress is no longer possible, unless perhaps war is declared again.

But is that even possible? In the metaphor of the running man, his haste makes him fall and his fall results in him lying upside down, unable to move anymore. Does it mean that the ethical and cognitive aggravation is a one-way process, that the surrender of reason is irrevocable? It seems to be the case: each level of error corresponds to a kind of life (dissent to the life of quarrel and ambition, obliqueness to the love of wealth, the two variants of the position upside down to the life of pleasure and to tyranny), not unlike those described along the political regimes in the books VII-VIII of the *Republic*.⁵⁶ In Proclus as in Plato, each regime leads only to a worse one, there is no turning back once the oligarchy, democracy or tyranny has taken over, nor hope of a *natural* transformation of the tyrant to a philosopher.⁵⁷

There is only one exception to this rule. Elsewhere in his commentary on the *Republic*, Proclus remarks that Socrates’ argument about the might of Justice (just people as well as souls are always stronger than unjust ones because they are less prone to internal conflicts) does not hold if one takes the case of a completely unjust soul. He then distinguishes five possible cases. **a.** Justice and reason can be the sole masters of the soul. **b.** There may also be

⁵³ Proclus, *In Tim.* III.341.7-18. For the fact that Thrasymachus and Callicles are described as wicked and dangerous, see *In Remp.* I.159.25-160.10 and II.176.4-9; *In Alc.* 295.11-14 and 322.23-323.2.

⁵⁴ Proclus, *De Mal.* 50.53-68, for the word στάσις, see the Greek version of Sebastocrator, 60.21, as well as *In Alc.* 264.24-25.

⁵⁵ Proclus, *In Tim.* III.339.22-340.9 and 344.7-15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, III.344.14-19. See *In Remp.* I.11.14-14.13.

⁵⁷ The “natural” is, of course, the keyword here: what is described concerning both political and cognitive degeneration are only spontaneous processes, apart from any external intervention; see Proclus, *In Remp.* II.1.12-3.3.

a conflict between reason and passions, either **b1**. dominated by the former thanks to its possession of knowledge (γνώσις) or **b2**. sufficiently balanced to stagnate. **c**. It is also possible that the passions overcome reason; in that case **c1**. they may exploit it in order to obtain more easily the object of their desires, or **c2**. they may blind it altogether.⁵⁸ These possible states of the soul are similar but not identical to those discussed in the commentary on the *Timaeus*: case c2 is quite similar to the utterly irrational tyranny characteristic of cognitive state 1b, case c1 roughly overlap with states 1a and 2, while case b1 and b2 may be seen as a subdivision of state 3 (dissent),⁵⁹ as summarized in table 1 below. As with the metaphor of the running man, if a soul stays for too long in the state of internal conflict, reason will give up and be enslaved by passion. But here arises another way out: if while soul is in the state of dissent, reason gains support from knowledge, it will prevail and eventually rule the soul.

Table 1. Possible States of the Soul according to Proclus

<i>In Tim.</i> III.338–346	<i>In Remp.</i> I.21-23
“Walk”: the soul works normally	Rule of reason
“Rush”: dissent between opinions	Dissent with support of knowledge
	Dissent with victories on both sides
“Fall”: obliqueness as dominance of passions	Passions dominate but do not blind reason
“Upside down”: the soul follows only its pleasures	
“Upside down”: the soul follows only its caprice	Passions dominate and blind reason

There would be much to say about the nature of knowledge in Proclean philosophy. What is relevant to the topic of this paper is that, once again, it is only when the soul is troubled by internal strife that knowledge can be of any help. According to Proclus, such is even among the criteria used by Socrates to recognize a potential learner: his spirited part must be dominant in order to keep desires in check, as ambition is the passion which is closest to reason.⁶⁰ As mentioned just above, the state of dissent corresponds precisely to the life of ambition. Only someone as proud and ambitious as for instance Alcibiades will refuse to be content with a convenient set of opinions only because it fosters his own desires: Something in him will resist, and this is enough (but necessary) to pave the way to the intervention of knowledge. As is illustrated by the case of this young man, the ambitious state of internal conflict is still an occurrence of double ignorance:⁶¹ One may not be aware of one’s own need for knowledge and yet have dissent in the soul. Granted, Alcibiades is contrasted with Thrasymachus for being able to consciously realize that an opinion that would lead to wage war against just people is unacceptable.⁶² In this respect, Alcibiades is certainly more advanced than Thrasymachus. It does not prevent the latter from being in the promising state of

⁵⁸ Proclus, *In Remp.* I.21.7-23.15.

⁵⁹ For Proclus, false opinions (as in state 3) can only be caused by the weakening of reason by passions (as in case b), see *In Alc.* 212.8-16.

⁶⁰ Proclus, *In Alc.* 138.10-139.3 and 159.26-160.12. On ambition as a decisive criterion of Socrates’ choice of pupils, see C. Tresnie, “Orgueil et enseignement : À propos de quelques remarques du Commentaire au Premier Alcibiade de Proclus,” *Philosophie Antique* 20 (2020): 237-261.

⁶¹ See for example Proclus, *In Alc.* 102.24; 174.16-22; 293.17-27 or 301.6.

⁶² Proclus, *In Alc.* 218.3-219.13.

cognitive dissent (after all, Socrates does undertake to teach him), as it suffices for the conflict between true and false opinion to be potential.⁶³ A dormant clash within the soul, yet a clash nonetheless, is a necessary condition for the possibility of learning through the intervention of the philosopher and the knowledge he can provide.

D. A More Intimate Kind of Conflict

Before providing some conclusions, let us qualify the Proclean valorization of conflict. Until now, we have seen that Proclus contrasts the psychic opposition (either between true and false opinions, or between reason and passions) on the one hand to the healthy rule of reason, on the other to the dangerous domination of the passions. But how exactly is it dangerous? Could we not just be satisfied with any kind of inner peace, regardless of the rationality of its nature? This would certainly give us, if nothing else, a quiet life in which reason is aptly used to obtain pleasures without wasting energy in theoretical pursuit, or reduced to silence if it can't. Why would not be such an unexamined life worth living, after all? Because, according to Proclus, it is not as peaceful as it seems to be. The very essence of soul is composed of innate notions (*ἔννοιαι*), the same as those of the universe, and of an urge to grasp them.⁶⁴ When reason has given up to passions and their false opinions, agreeing to serve them without pushing towards actual contemplation, there is no explicit doubt nor implicit hesitation anymore. However, such a soul is—as a whole—at war with its own constitutive notions, that is, with its own essence.⁶⁵ In place of a conflict between opinions or even parts of himself, he who lives the hedonist or tyrannical life is in a state of discord with himself and thus can't even know what he wants, let alone obtain it.⁶⁶ In order to avoid an uncomfortable but fertile cognitive conflict, the obscurantist unknowingly replaced it with another one, deeper and more intimate. The peace thus conquered is doomed to be sullied by endless uneasiness and wandering.

To renounce contemplation in the hope of gaining some serenity is contrary to the essential role of the soul, as dictated by its own innate notions. Doing so is the closest to being at odds with the laws of the universe, of which soul is but a part as well as an image: they share the same constitutive principles.⁶⁷ Inasmuch as it is possible, such a deep level of discord is a deviation from Providence, which will hopefully be led on the right track again by the sheer course of events. To that extent, we find here a line of thought similar to what we have found in Plotinus: The eventual confusion and despair associated with the inability to live the life of one's own soul is the immanent sign of one's failure to get oneself in the state adequate to philosophical contemplation. Indeed, in Proclus' account as we have reconstructed it, the absence of conflicting opinions and tendencies might mean one of two things. It may mean that reason has received sufficient support from knowledge to rule over the passions and purify the soul from false opinions. However, it is only reasonable to expect such a peace *after* having experienced conflicting opinions and having gained support from knowledge, that is, having discovered or learned.⁶⁸ The other possible meaning of an appearance of peace is that it conceals the deeper and deleterious strife of a soul with its own nature. On the other hand, the presence of a conflict between opinions unambiguously

⁶³ Proclus, *In Tim.* III. 341.15-18: δυνάμει λέγει [...] τὸ ἐναντίον ᾧ λέγει.

⁶⁴ Jean Trouillard, *L'un et l'âme selon Proclus* (Paris : Belles Lettres, 1972), 27-38 (especially 32) and 50-67.

⁶⁵ Proclus, *In Remp.* I.23.9-15.

⁶⁶ Proclus, *In Alc.* 264.16-22.

⁶⁷ Proclus, *In Tim.* II. 288.5-290.30.

⁶⁸ Proclus, *In Alc.* 174.2-178.30, referring to the *Alcibiades* 106c-e.

indicates that the soul is ready to learn and discover that, it has become suitable material for the exercise of philosophy.

Conclusion

Neoplatonism has a complex relationship with conflict and violence. As this philosophical tradition aims at describing the whole of reality, it definitely cannot avoid thinking these aspects of human experience. But their exact place varies from one thinker to another. It is in Plotinus' *Enneads* that the problem of violence is dealt with the most directly. Through a vivid and quite realistic thought experiment, he attempts to give violence a positive meaning consistent with the doctrine of cosmic justice. The relative success of the brute and the suffering of the weak are to be understood as results of the rule of Providence. Worldly prosperity is achieved through sufficient care of the body rather than idle thought. Indeed, Providence organizes the world according to hard but fair laws; violence is but one aspect of the enforcement of these laws and can be considered as a test of one's compliance with them. With Porphyry, the Plotinian conceptual framework is preserved but reinterpreted: Providence is above all the imperative of withdrawing from the body; violent events brought by Fate are part of Providence inasmuch as they stimulate us to limit our attachment to the body. Iamblichus also shifts the emphasis, this time to stress the all-encompassing character of Providence and the fact that every event, no matter how violent, is ultimately beneficial both to the individual and to the whole. In both cases, the special place that Plotinus gave to violence as a test of one's harmony with the decrees of Providence is neutralized, violence becomes one more example of providential action on reality among many others. This orientation is shared by Proclus, who uses a line of thought similar to that of Plotinus to show how not only violent episodes but every event whatsoever is a product of Providence aimed to weaken our attachment to the body. As such, he can be said to finalize the occultation of violence. But at the same time, he gives importance to another kind of conflict within the soul. Dissent between reason and passions, or true and false opinions, is highlighted as a useful and even necessary psychic state, the only one that can receive the assistance of knowledge and philosophy. For lack of such a conflict, the soul is stuck in a fruitless state of hedonism and perspectivism, which is actually a discord between the soul and its own essence. To comply with its nature, soul needs to wage an explicit cognitive war inside itself, it is only thus that it will learn, following the divine Providence and eventually reaching a sustainable inner peace.

Political conflict is not a prominent theme in Late Ancient philosophy. Ethics and political philosophy are increasingly focused on the inner progression rather than social interaction. It is much more when it comes to the topic of Providence that violence remains a major issue to be explained and justified. But as the explanation (*i.e.* the all-encompassing divine plan) is elaborated to the point of being too powerful, the topic of violence becomes an unremarkable occurrence that falls under the most general rule of divine Providence. However, concepts (and even words) associated with conflict do not disappear but are repurposed in a more epistemological context. As in Plotinus, violence was an opportunity to test one's harmony with Providence rather than a mere necessary evil, in Proclus, psychic conflict becomes the moment of truth, where learning and knowledge are possible, rather than a mere perturbation of cognition. Conflict and violence are not so much occulted in Neoplatonism than displaced: first from ethics to cosmody, then from cosmody to epistemology or even pedagogy. These topics are not *per se* considered as a relevant area of inquiry anymore, but they still provide crucial tools to other fields of philosophy.

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