

The Chain of Ideas

1- Introduction

For many who have read something of Plato, there is a fairly simple schema known as the “theory of forms” which consists of two distinct orders of things – there is a powerful and active order of forms (or ideas), and then there is an order of material instantiations, or material things stamped with impressions of those forms. The first is active, the second passive; the first is the object of intellect and reason, the second is the object of sense and opinion. This is a useful but limited starting point, an understanding which presents the thinker with a number of difficult problems – all of which gather as one major question: how do the two very different orders interact?

We need a much more refined understanding of how the manifested and material world proceeds from, and returns to, the unmanifested and immaterial order. According to Proclus, both these processes – procession and return – work through the law and power of similarity: and since there seems to be a very great dissimilarity between the two orders, we must postulate a series of intermediaries. In this series, each intermediary must have a degree of likeness both to that which is immediately ‘above’ itself, and to that which is immediately ‘below’.

Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Parmenides of Plato*, offers the serious student of ideas a scheme in which a series of intermediaries carry out just such a function, and thus allow a fruitful communication between the otherwise separated orders of reality. We will look at this passage and consider whether it holds together as a viable scheme, and how it informs our understanding of reality at its various levels. It also adds an important element – the issue of how the order of forms itself emerges from the ineffable first principle, which Plato in the *Parmenides* names as the One (and in the *Republic* as the Good). Indeed his exploration of this issue reveals that there is an equally large jump from the One to the complete array of forms as there is from those forms to their instantiation in the material world.

Before we go into Proclus’ explanation, we ought to clarify what we mean by forms or ideas and also what we mean by instantiations because much of what is presented by modern commentators on Platonism is hopelessly inadequate even for an outline suitable for newcomers.

A Platonic idea is not a concept: when we speak of having an idea in everyday language, we mean something born from the workings of the human mind, which may or may not be true, and which is likely to be adjusted in the light of further thought, or different experiences. Concepts, in other words, change. Ideas in the Platonic sense do not. Concepts can mislead, Ideas do not.

Ideas are not abstractions – that is to say, they do not come about by someone abstracting from a number of instances of a thing all the accidental qualities that might adhere to them, leaving only what is left. For example we can abstract any particular size from a number of triangular things, all the colours they might happen to appear with, all particular materials they are made from, as well as even more incidental things such as value, position, heat, and so on that any particular triangular thing might have: what we are left with is deemed to be a universal ‘triangleness’ – but this is not an idea in the Platonic sense, even though the abstraction and a Platonic idea seems to share the attribute of universal. The abstraction was called a “later-born idea” by ancient Platonists – something they considered even lower than an actual single instantiation because such an abstraction does not possess any power to do anything, and only derives what little power it has by borrowing from the abstracting human mind. But Platonic

ideas have immense power – in fact the whole cosmos is brought about through the power of those ideas. They were there before the human mind, not after; they are self-sufficient, the abstraction is always dependent upon the abstracting mind. Abstractions require the mind to go outside itself (towards material instantiations); ideas require the mind to go deeper into itself.

To go into a little of Platonic metaphysics: everything is understood to be the outflow of the One, an outflow which establishes itself in eternity – beautiful beyond our imaginings, full of power, and willing goodness to everything which comes after it. This eternal order can be considered as a series of causal “moments” until, in its final moment it gives birth, so to speak, to the temporal world. The ideas which impress themselves on the manifest temporal world, then, exist at the extremity of the eternal order – and Proclus will explore a number of causal steps which the eternal outflow must go through before it finds itself in a suitable condition to contact the manifested cosmos. To grasp this stepping down, one might see the number of transformers the output of a huge generator must pass through before it arrives at a domestic socket, and does not blow apart your toaster.

We will look at the path of this power in the eternal order in part 2.

After the ideas have passed down out of the eternal, they must continue a series of limiting steps in the temporal universe until their effects are manifest in material form. The temporal order is seen as having three sub-orders with particular characteristics: the first is the order of soul, the second is the order of nature and the last is the order of material bodies. Proclus’ exploration of these and their relation to ideas will be dealt with in part 3.

2 – From the One Being to the multitude of eternal and creative Ideas

The fully worked out metaphysics of the Platonic tradition is derived from a thousand years of profound thought – meditations and contemplations – as philosopher-sages, guided by the dialogues of Plato, look deeper and deeper into the reality of the universe, which so many take to be merely what appears on its ever-changing surfaces. This metaphysics unfolds what is most simple, and yet paradoxically most full and rich in terms of causes, downwards and outwards towards what is most complicated – a complexity which without the mysterious presence of those higher causes would itself be more or less empty.

To outline this structure in order to understand the chain of ideas, we might say that the First Principle is the simply One, but in order to give itself to a worked-out universe, it emerges as a pantheon of Gods. The Gods – each of them unities which transcend being – give rise to being; for without *being* none of the hidden possibilities of the Gods could become manifest, even to thought, let alone to the senses. It is here that the metaphysics of theology can become the metaphysics of ontology (that is to say it moves from pure unity to being (in Greek being is *on*, plural *onta*)).

The first layer, so to speak, of the ontological universe is pure being. It abides without further qualities as simply itself – a *one being*. But if there was only this *abiding*, it would be the end of the story and we would be at a loss to explain how the universe which we see and understand can be. So it must proceed (while retaining its inviolable abiding self): and this is understood as the great procession of life itself – for every being, as we understand being must proceed into a kind of movement which announces itself to all else.

But if reality consisted only of an abiding being and a procession of life, the destiny of the universe would be to run down into an impotent almost nothingness – an entropic ugliness. In order to be truly good and complete, it must also revert back to its simple self, so that the eternal order abides, proceeds and returns. What is it that by its very nature turns itself back to its

source? Platonists answer that it is intellect: for intellect must look inward to its own nature, and the causes that lie within that nature. Our experience as intellectual beings is that when we want to understand some phenomena we must connect it with some idea which we already possess – the very act of understanding is the act of reversion to what lies hidden within us, prompted, perhaps, by some external thing or event, but only intelligible when we turn inwards. The being of something is that which intellect knows – the intelligible is then being, and being is the intelligible, at least from the point of view of intellect.

The eternal order can be understood as a single but triadic order which abides, proceeds and returns – or, in other words, an order of being, life and intellect. It is this scheme that Proclus has in mind when he discusses the nature of ideas. He begins his exposition:¹

For it is necessary, in order that we should make manifest the whole chain of Ideas, to establish prior to the numerical multiplicity of the Ideas the unitary cause of beings, and the "hidden" and the unitary level of Being, and that being which is above Form, from which the number of the most unified Ideas has gone forth to all the secondary levels and orders of Being; for the primal Forms are the intelligible ones . . .

Proclus calls this starting point unitary because until the procession by life from the primary being, the multiplicity of ideas is not explicit (although, of course, implicit); and he calls it hidden because it is hidden by its own light, in much the same way that the car with headlights is not to be seen by the approaching pedestrian on a dark night – he knows that it is there, but cannot see what kind of car it is.

He then moves on the proceeding order of life, which he understand to be triple, sitting as it does between intelligible being and intellect itself; for this intermediary must in part be *like* the intelligible, in part a mixture of the intelligible and intellectual, and in part *like* the intellectual. So he gives the chain of ideas three links as it passes through the order of life:

...and secondary are those which are intelligible on the one hand, but in the intellectual, and the third are those which are cohesive of all things, and fourth are those which bring to completion all intellectual and supra-cosmic realities ...

The second, third and fourth phases of ideas add a series of necessary powers to allow ideas to emerge as things graspable by intellect proper – such as plurality, the power to connect, and the power to perfect. Once these have been introduced, the effective divine intellect which Plato in the *Timaeus* calls the Demiurge emerges. Proclus describes the ideas at this level in these words:

...and after these again are the intellectual forms, such as have this characteristic in its proper form...

Because the Demiurge contemplates the first idea which is the great paradigm of the cosmos as a whole, he produces the universe as “one living animal”, but because of all the intermediary levels (as the chain unfolds in the second, third and fourth “moments”) he also embraces the numerous specific ideas which are to populate the cosmos with particular forms.

This brings to completion the eternal order – so that the final phase is, in itself, both a singularity and plurality reflective of that first idea, with its implicit fullness now explicit, in terms of invisible intelligibility. But the unbounded power of the demiurgic ideas, full of being, life and intellect, will now not only return to their source, but also further manifest in a new order springing from the Demiurge – which many systems know as the Creator God.

¹ The following quotes from Proclus are from his *Commentary on the Parmenides*, 969. Trans. Morrow and Dillon.

3 – Ideas in the order of Time

The unfolding of ideas, as outlined in five stages, now continues in the order of time. This order, brought into being by the Demiurge with his array of specific forms must, says Plato, be alive and intelligent (for otherwise it would not be a *good* expression of the Good). And as a consequence of this consideration, firstly, time must be an eternal image of eternity “flowing according to number.” Secondly intelligence and life pervades through the cosmos because the Demiurge introduces soul to the body of the cosmos: for, says Plato’s *Timaeus*, “intellect cannot accede to [manifest] being without the intervention of soul.” In this way the cosmic creation is naturally “the most beautiful and the best.”

Proclus continues:

...the sixth rank is taken up by the assimilative forms, through which all the secondaries are made like to the intellectual forms...

Assimilative forms are those forms which are responsible for material forms to be *like* their eternal exemplars, insofar as it is possible for temporal things to be like eternal things. These forms are held within soul – and the soul’s task is, therefore, to look to eternal ideas and produce a likeness of them in whatever media soul has within her power. Naturally the full nature of an eternal idea which has the whole of its activity present simultaneously as one thing cannot be exactly reproduced by a temporal entity such as soul: but it can produce an image of it by unfolding the idea in a series of sequential manifestations, each of which shows something of the activities of the idea. As Proclus says in his *Commentary on the Timaeus*, “But intellect understands all things as one; and soul understands all things by surveying one at a time. Division, therefore, first subsists in soul.”

Proclus continues with his unfolding of ideas, moving first through the order of nature which follows directly after soul and then to the last rank of forms which arise in the embodied universe:

...while the seventh rank is taken up by the transcendent and supra-celestial forms which have a unifying force in respect of those forms which are divided about the cosmos, and the last rank is held by the forms in the cosmos; and of these some are at the level of intellect, some at the level of soul, others at the level of nature, others at the level of sense-perception, and of these latter some are immaterial and others are material. It is down as far as these that the procession of the forms descends from the intelligible Forms on high, making their first appearance at the limit of intelligible beings, and having their final manifestation at the limit of the sense-world.

To summarize, ideas in the temporal order are forms in soul (which are often called reasons); or they are forms-in-nature (which are immaterial, but tied to matter for their expression) or they are enmattered forms.

This graduated movement from the most transcendent to the most enmattered is an example of the Platonic understanding of the law and power of similarity and continuity, where the change from one state to another is by the minimum possible step. The very lowest of one thing in one order gives way to the highest of the order immediately below it, so that it is hard, for example, to see the difference between the lowest eternal thing (a particular intellect) and the highest temporal thing (a universal soul).

4 – Proclus ideas; “all the world in a grain of sand”

Although we are unlikely to have time to look at what Proclus says after 969 in his commentary, I add this paragraph for the student to further contemplate the extraordinary beauty of the nature of connected reality, as understood by the Platonic tradition, showing how even an enmattered form somehow holds in its inner nature the imprint of everything which has gone before it in the chain:

Indeed, from all the levels of forms there necessarily descends some particular characteristic to all the lower forms which proceed from them, down to the lowest of the forms in the sense-world – as, for instance, from the intelligible forms the characteristic of unchangeability, for they are primally eternal; from the primal level of intelligible-intellectual forms each bears a token, not susceptible to knowledge, of its own paradigms, according as each has been allotted one or other divine characteristic; from the middle rank the characteristic of each being a whole and holding together with its wholeness the multiplicity of its parts; from the third rank the characteristic that each form is perfective of that which previously existed only potentially; from those which are in the realm of the intellectual the characteristic of being distinguished according to all the variety of numbers, and of separating the things that participate in them; from those among the supra-cosmic the characteristic of each being assimilated to their own paradigms; from those which are simultaneously above the cosmos and in the cosmos the characteristic of each being such as to collect all those things which are in a pluralised state into the aggregates proper to each; and from those in the cosmos the characteristic of being unseparated from the nature dependent upon them and the characteristic of, with this nature, bringing to completion the generation of composite entities. From each level of forms, then, there should come some characteristic to the forms in the sense-realm, these being the ultimate limits of the chain of forms.

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To see a World in a Grain of Sand
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
 And Eternity in an hour