

Corentin Tresnie<sup>1</sup>

## Emotions that Foster Learning: Wonder and Shock in Proclus

### 1. Introduction

Ancient philosophy from the Hellenistic period onwards is commonly associated with the goal of absolute freedom from all kinds of emotions. While this might be regarded as a respectable personal ideal, such an endeavour may seem out of place for ordinary educational practices from today's perspective. Indeed, there is an ongoing debate in educational sciences about the exact role of violent emotions in the process of learning. The empirical evidence is complex: while pleasant feelings are well documented to increase motivation and thus cognitive performance, negative emotions like stress are found to impair learning, except when they are mild enough<sup>2</sup>. In particular, surprise, usually considered a positive emotion<sup>3</sup>, has been found to efficiently prepare the mind to assimilate new content, as it consists in a violation of existing expectations<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Corentin Tresnie – Aspirant FNRS – PhD Candidate at Université Libre de Bruxelles (Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Centre PHI) and KU Leuven (Institute of Philosophy, De Wulf Mansion Center); e-mail: corentin.tresnie@ulb.be; ORCID: 0000-0002-1446-3001.

<sup>2</sup> See the meta-analysis of C.M. Tyng – H.U. Amin – M.N.M Saad – A.S. Malik, *The Influences of Emotion on Learning and Memory*, “Frontiers in Psychology” 8 (2017) p. 14-54.

<sup>3</sup> D.L. Robinson, *Brain function, mental experience and personality*, “The Netherlands Journal of Psychology” 64 (2009) p. 152-167.

<sup>4</sup> P.-Y. Oudeyer – J. Gottlieb – M. Lopes, *Intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and learning: theory and applications in educational technologies*, “Progress in Brain Research” 229 (2016) p. 257-284.

fearful uncertainty we describe as anxiety is long known to foster learned helplessness and its cognitive impairments<sup>5</sup>. Modern psychology has more than enough tools to weigh the influence of each of these internal forces. How to theoretically articulate them is, however, a much wider question.

One contribution to this question can nonetheless be found in the tradition of ancient commentators on Plato. By taking very seriously each and every line of the dialogues, they are led to develop sustained reflection on the details of the various characters' interactions. This includes rhetorical devices and expressions of feelings that most recent exegetes would discard as decorative<sup>6</sup>. A good example is provided by the following passage, the opening lines of Plato's *First Alcibiades*:

Son of Cleinias, I think it must surprise you that I, the first of all your lovers, am the only one of them who has not given up his suit and thrown you over, and whereas they have all pestered you with their conversation I have not spoken one word to you for so many years. The cause of this has been nothing human, but a certain daemonic opposition, of whose power you shall be informed at some later time<sup>7</sup>.

The explanation of these lines runs through sixty-eight pages of Proclus' commentary, covering various topics, from the nature of Love to the hierarchies of daemons. Here we shall focus on one layer of exegesis proposed by Proclus, namely, the strategic use of Alcibiades' emotions that the commentator attributes to Socrates. Though it may seem to be a mere playful elaboration on the psychology of characters in a mostly fictionalized encounter, it does have philosophical relevance.

There is in ancient philosophy a general defiance towards strong emotions: the aim of philosophical practice usually consists in purging or at

---

<sup>5</sup> L.I.S. Giel *et al.*, *Fear of failure: A polynomial regression analysis of the joint impact of the perceived learning environment and personal achievement goal orientation*, "Anxiety, Stress & Coping" 33/2 (2020) p. 123-139.

<sup>6</sup> P. Hoffman, *What was Commentary in Late Antiquity? The Example of the Neoplatonic Commentators*, in: *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. M.L. Gill – P. Pellegrin, Oxford 2006, p. 597-622.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Alcibiades Maior* 103a1-6: "ὦ παῖ Κλεινίου, οἷμά σε θαυμάζειν ὅτι πρῶτος ἐραστής σου γενόμενος τῶν ἄλλων πεπαυμένων μόνος οὐκ ἀπαλλάττομαι, καὶ ὅτι οἱ μὲν ἄλλοι δι' ὄχλου ἐγένοντό σοι διαλεγόμενοι, ἐγὼ δὲ τοσοῦτων ἐτῶν οὐδὲ προσεῖπον. τούτου δὲ τὸ αἴτιον γέγονεν οὐκ ἀνθρώπειον, ἀλλὰ τι δαιμόνιον ἐναντίωμα, οὗ σὺ τὴν δύναμιν καὶ ὕστερον πεύσῃ" (tr. Lamb slightly modified).

least in moderating them<sup>8</sup>. Proclus himself is often very critical of emotions or “passions” as he rather names them. The whole point of his philosophy is to help the soul revert towards that which is “remaining” in being and unity, and *away* from the world of generation and emotional attachment. Passions are treated negatively in most cases, typically as irrational desires or impulses that reason needs to dominate in order to ensure knowledge and psychic balance<sup>9</sup>. There is of course one important exception: love. In the Platonic tradition of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, love is the driving force through which beauty sets the soul on the quest for intelligible knowledge. But while love itself is celebrated, its concomitant passions seldom are. In Plotinus, even the highest kind of love is a fascination for intelligible beauty, precious at first but ultimately a distraction, as it provides a pleasure mixed with pain and provokes astonishment and shock (θάμβος καὶ ἔκπληξις), likely to cause error and in any case to divert from the serenity of the Good<sup>10</sup>. According to him, love is necessary for intellectual contemplation, but also dangerous in its effects. Proclus stands out as he appears ready to consider not only love itself, but also the emotional shock it causes, to be instrumental in the process of assimilation to the divine. It translates to his intriguing stance concerning the love of the superior for the inferior. Taking very seriously the Socratic madness of the *Phaedrus*, he holds that even the accomplished philosopher keeps progressing through his love not only for the Forms, but also for less accomplished souls<sup>11</sup>. The

<sup>8</sup> On the goals of ἀπάθεια and μετριοπάθεια, see e.g. M.C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton 1994. There is of course the exception of some hedonistic schools as the Cyrenaics, but their influence on the extant texts seems minimal.

<sup>9</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* I 22, 3-23, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Compare *Enneads* V 5 [32], 12, 30-37 and V 8 [31], 10, 5-44. The latter passage is studied by P. Hadot, *L'union de l'âme avec l'intellect divin dans l'expérience mystique plotinienne*, in: *Proclus et son influence (Actes du Colloque de Neuchâtel, juin 1985)*, ed. G. Boss – G. Seel, Zürich 1987, p. 3-27. While one could certainly agree with him that such a state transcends ordinary consciousness and is already “mystical” in that sense, it would be going too far to ascribe the exact same quality to the union with the Good, which the former passage depicts as experienced very differently as far as serenity is concerned. This being said, intellectual love is still described as more stable and serene than the “lower”, cosmic love with which it is contrasted throughout treatise III 5 [50].

<sup>11</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 34, 12-37, 18. The originality of Proclus' take on love is noted by J.M. Ambury, *Socratic Character: Proclus on the Function of the Erotic Intellect*, in: *The Neoplatonic Socrates*, ed. D.A. Layne – H. Tarrant, Philadelphia 2014, p. 109-117.

status of love in Proclus would deserve an extensive study in itself<sup>12</sup>. Such a study would benefit from an elucidation of how the more passionate correlates of love are considered by Proclus as sufficiently harmless or even useful to allow him to depart from Plotinian (and more generally ancient philosophy's) position on the subject.

I will here try to contribute to this elucidation, on the basis of Proclus' *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*, in which the themes of love, passions and education are mainly developed. For Proclus in this commentary, as we shall see below, both Socrates (as a character) and Plato (as a writer) should be conceived as daemonic guides who, as such, do nothing in vain. Alcibiades and Socrates (as well as Parmenides) are also considered as paradigms of what should be ideal pupils and teachers<sup>13</sup>. As a matter of consequence, the Proclean reading of their interaction carries some implications for a Neoplatonic theory of education.

What does Proclus say about Socrates' use of emotions? In a nutshell: not only positive emotions like surprise, but also rather negative ones, like a frightening shock, can be, in the proper context, important tools for preparing one's soul to make moral and cognitive progress, that is, to learn. Before examining more closely how this argument works and assessing its significance, let us see how it fits into the frame of Proclus' metaphysics and psychology.

## 2. Trouble in the soul

Let us first consider passions in general. For the majority of them, Proclus shares the defiance of most ancient thinkers, on ethical and epistemic grounds. Passions cause false beliefs which may conflict with true beliefs held thanks to the activity of reason, they may even blind reason and enslave it altogether so as to serve them and fulfill their every whim. It is true that the absence of such perturbation only prevents the emergence of false beliefs, without guarantying superior (i.e. dianoetic) kinds of cogni-

---

<sup>12</sup> The book of N. D'Andrès (*Socrate néoplatonicien: Une science de l'amour dans le commentaire de Proclus sur le Premier Alcibiade*, Paris 2020) is a first step, focused on intertextuality, in this direction. It discusses the double direction of love (p. 83-90), but passes very briefly (p. 76) on the passionate consequences we are here interested in.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 94, 9-96, 22; 129, 7-11; 132, 3-11; Proclus, *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* IV 926, 9-928, 17; 976, 14-20.

tion<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, passions, when completely dominant, can actually bring a certain kind of peace to the soul precisely by reducing reason to a lenient tool of desire, though this “peace” causes the soul to be “at war” with its own constitutive notions<sup>15</sup>. Despite these qualifications, Proclus repeatedly characterizes passions as the troublemakers of the soul, they are the foes to overcome.

How does the soul come to generate emotions which tend to trouble it or blind its rational faculty? Before it is ready to form sufficiently stable and consistent beliefs (to say nothing of knowing oneself and the universe through proper use of dialectics), the soul must rely on its more readily available faculties: sensation and imagination<sup>16</sup>. But contrary to opinion and actual knowledge, the reliability of sensation is heavily dependent on the intensity of the external stimuli it receives. It may easily be tossed about should its object be inappropriate for what it is currently ready to bear, as its organs are material and, as such, subject to overload or damage, which results in confusion or inaccurate impressions<sup>17</sup>. Imagination faces its own challenges, but as far as passions are concerned, its flaws come from the fact that its material is drawn from sensory experience<sup>18</sup>. One telling case of this overload of sensation is to be found in the experience of young children, who are very prone to experience intense emotions on any occasion. This “trouble” (ταραχή), as Proclus calls it, has two causes. The first is purely physiological: the nutritive faculty of the soul naturally produces vast quantities of wetness in the body it animates, it just needs some time to

---

<sup>14</sup> On the way in which reason produces or allows various kinds of cognition, be it dianoetic grasp, true or false belief, see e.g. C. Helmig, *Proclus on Epistemology, Language, and Logic*, in: *All From One: A Guide to Proclus*, ed. P. d’Hoine – M. Martijn, Oxford 2017, p. 183-206.

<sup>15</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* I 23, 9-15. Cognitive conflict is still preferable to this wicked peace, see Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 341, 7-18 and C. Tresnie, *Conflict and Violence in Neoplatonism: From Cosmic Justice to Cognitive Step*, “Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence” 5/2 (2021) p. 71-84.

<sup>16</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 43, 6-44, 1 and Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 286, 30-31. On the hierarchy of cognitive faculties in Proclus, see C. Helmig, *Forms and Concepts: Concept Formation in the Platonic Tradition*, Berlin 2012, p. 223-261.

<sup>17</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* I 248, 23-26 and III 331, 29-332, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* IV 892, 40-893, 27. On imagination in Neoplatonism, see A. Sheppard, *The Poetics of Phantasia. Imagination in Ancient Aesthetics*, London, 2014.

regulate the flow<sup>19</sup>. The second is cognitive: the sensitive faculty receives a lot of information from the world of becoming, in the form of corporeal impressions. But it is at first fresh and inexperienced, so that each and every one of these impressions deeply affects children. A candle is for them what a blaze would be for adults, a pebble is like a mountain, a breeze like a hurricane. Such powerful a stimulation is a stroke (*πλαγά*) rather than a mere informative impression, it paralyses cognition and brings trouble to the soul<sup>20</sup>. This trouble is what we call emotions. More precisely, the soul itself is not really affected by such strokes, because it is erroneously that it identifies with the structural abilities it provides to the body and which are actually affected by the objects of sensation<sup>21</sup>. Still, as long as the soul believes that the affections of the body are its own, it feels and is troubled in proportion to the intensity of these affections.

Such trouble is erroneous and even dangerous: it impedes reason and thus the ability of a soul to make sound decisions or substantial cognitive progress. Therefore, according to Proclus inspired by Plato's *Laws*, the whole point of traditional education (*παιδεία*) should be to moderate the natural impulses of children (or people in general) through good habits, and to give them sufficient experience to mitigate the trouble caused by sensory impressions<sup>22</sup>. Physical as well as musical training are important parts of this programme: the former to impose order on the soul's impulses, the latter to gradually soften them<sup>23</sup>. Sensation itself can't be educated by such means, but the soul can and should, as it is its trouble that is responsible for emotional instability and subsequent cognitive deficiencies<sup>24</sup>. A portion of classical poetry and myths also contributes to the ordering of the soul and the cleansing of its trouble<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 329, 20-24.

<sup>20</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 329, 24-330, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 330, 9-331, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Proclus, *De providentia et fato et eo quod in nobis ad Theodorum mechanicum* 27, 8-16; Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 349, 30-350, 8; Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 14, 6-10 and 224, 16-225, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* I 40, 24-42, 9; Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 197, 13-198, 1; Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* I 55, 27-56, 20; 61, 2-62, 7; 84, 12-26 and 219, 1-4.

<sup>24</sup> Proclus, *De providentia et fato et eo quod in nobis ad Theodorum mechanicum* 17; Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* I 250, 19-26; Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* I 222, 12-24 and 292, 25-293, 21.

<sup>25</sup> The main relevant passages on this topic are the fifth and sixth dissertations on Plato's Republic, i.e. Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* I 42-205. See in particular the commentary of A. Sheppard, *Studies on the 5th and 6th essays of*

It does so by presenting edifying examples of good conduct, as well as displaying a variety of possible behaviours with their consequences<sup>26</sup>. Παιδεία is a slow process that aims to discipline the irrational part (or “circle”) of the soul and to give basic instruction to the rational part in order to fight back against the irrational trouble<sup>27</sup>. None of this implies any appeal to rational demonstration or philosophical work: passion has first to be moderated according to its own logic in order to prepare the soul for later philosophical and scientific training. It is through irrational and thus potentially troublesome means that the affections are to be kept under control and subdued to reason. Παιδεία so defined is the first of three (sometimes overlapping) steps of cognitive and moral improvement<sup>28</sup>, it is focused on calming the irrational impulses.

Passionate trouble, however, is not always the enemy of cognitive ascent. From the highest grades of reality, Beauty is the principle of all love, a force that awakens everyone through desire and emotional shock (διὰ πόθου καὶ ἐκπλήξεως)<sup>29</sup>. Beauty is the first impression that reveals itself as one is making progress towards intelligible insight (the true knowledge according to Platonists), it is the gateway towards wisdom and union with the divine, which are inseparable from the shocks it provokes<sup>30</sup>. We might wish to value knowledge in itself, Neoplatonists do not: everything, even intellection, draws its worth from the Good, which alone is, properly speaking,

---

*Proclus' Commentary on the Republic*, Göttingen 1980, as well as P. St-Germain, *Mythe et éducation: Proclus et la critique platonicienne de la poésie*, “Laval théologique et philosophique” 62/2 (2006) p. 301-318. Proclus' commentary on Hesiod's *Works and Days* is probably the clearest example, see the analysis by R.M. van den Berg, *Proclus on Hesiod's Works and Days and 'Didactic' Poetry*, “Classical Quarterly” 64/1 (2014) p. 383-397.

<sup>26</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* I 47, 20-49, 12; 201, 4-14 and II 107, 14-110, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Proclus, *In primum Euclidis elementorum librum commentarii* 8-21, 24; Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 351, 19-352, 9.

<sup>28</sup> These three steps are listed at Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 224, 1-225, 9; on their articulation and especially the role of the second one, see R. M. van den Berg, *Proclus and Iamblichus on Moral Education*, “Phronesis” 59/3 (2014) p. 272-296. In this passage (as well as in van den Berg's paper), παιδεία denotes all of the three levels, while in most other texts, Proclus rather uses it only for the first one, see for example the passages quoted in the previous notes.

<sup>29</sup> Proclus, *Theologia Platonica* I 24, p. 108, 7-11. It might be an echo of the aforementioned passage of Plotinus (V 5 [32], 12, 30-37): Proclus agrees on the description of the experience, although he draws different practical conclusions from it.

<sup>30</sup> Proclus, *Theologia Platonica* I 24, p. 108, 23-109, 2.

valuable in itself, and of which there is no knowledge, but only union, once wisdom is reached, as they conceive of no other driving force<sup>31</sup>. Moreover, they argue, nothing is ever valued by anyone unless perceived as beautiful, and this perception occurs with violence and trouble, for its object, Truth, is grander than blazes or hurricanes. Love aroused by this beauty, with all its violence, is the necessary driving force of philosophical learning. It is the recognition of the presence of the Good in the universe, which implies that it is both possible and desirable to know its structure<sup>32</sup>. In other words, to learn is first to love, namely to be troubled and set in motion by beauty. It is because Alcibiades is proud and ambitious, because he loves honour and power, that Socrates deems him a promising pupil: he already has the necessary drive towards divine beauty, which is the true source of ambition and power, and only needs to be corrected<sup>33</sup>. So much for moderation, in that regard. Now the importance of erotics in Platonic and Neoplatonic recollection is well known and documented<sup>34</sup>; I won't elaborate any longer on this topic. What matters here is that a violent and troubling emotion is not only tolerated in the process of learning but also a necessary condition thereof. It certainly does not mean that passionate love is unambiguously a good thing for the soul and its progress<sup>35</sup>, but rather that *some* form of love is required to launch and sustain the cognitive ascent. It is likewise reasonable to postulate that other emotions could perhaps fulfill a comparable role, or at least that emotional trouble, however dangerous it might be, can find its usefulness if properly exploited.

---

<sup>31</sup> Proclus, *De malorum subsistentia* 2; Proclus, *Elementatio Theologica* 8 and 12. The core of the whole Neoplatonic system consists in the equation One = Good = Supreme principle = God, which is argued for in the propositions 1-24 of the *Elementatio Theologica*.

<sup>32</sup> See W. Beierwaltes, *Proklos' Begriff des Guten aus der Perspektive seiner Platon-Deutung*, in: *Being or Good? Metamorphoses of Neoplatonism*, ed. A. Kijewska, Lublin 2004, p. 99-120 and C. Tornau, *Der Eros und das Gute bei Plotin und Proklos*, in: *Proklos: Methode, Seelenlehre, Metaphysik*, ed. M. Perkams – R.-M. Piccione, Leiden 2006, p. 206-229.

<sup>33</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 99, 9-100, 1 and 148, 10-149, 12. See C. Tresnie, *Orgueil et enseignement: À propos de quelques remarques du Commentaire au Premier Alcibiade de Proclus*, "Philosophie Antique" 20 (2020) p. 237-261.

<sup>34</sup> See for example the recent work and extensive bibliography by d'Andrès, *Socrate néoplatonicien*.

<sup>35</sup> On the contrary, Proclus repeatedly insists on the difference with inferior love, see e.g. Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 53, 12-17 and 115, 13-119, 6. The reference text on this question is Plotinus' treatise III 5 [50].

### 3. Teaching is providence

Emotions, as we have seen, can have ambiguous or even explosive manifestations: on the one hand, they can be useful or even required for triggering the drive to learn; on the other, they are definitely a source of violent and perilous trouble in the soul. Before playing sorcerer's apprentices and looking into how to put into practice this ambiguous potential, there is at least one question to ask and answer. How reasonable and legitimate is it to purposely make use of a pupil's emotions to motivate him or to improve his understanding? Proclus' system also provides us with some answers.

If the ultimate and sole principle of all reality is the divine Good, everything in the universe (and all the more so the whole itself) must be good. Then, how does it come that the very same emotions that can bring us closer to the Good through wisdom also plunge our soul into confusion and unrest? That is but an instance of the more general problem of the existence of (albeit necessary) evils in reality, and Proclus' famous treatment of this question is twofold. First, evil does not have an existence of its own; it is a *παρρησίασις*, a degree of reality lacking positivity, a side-product of the Good, an inevitable yet unessential consequence of its action. It is a subcontrary of the Good, a partial privation only: to harm, it needs to somehow exist, to exist it needs to be good; evil is but a parasitic aspect within the realm of goodness<sup>36</sup>. According to this first answer, we could say that the troublesome aspect of emotions is inevitable but unessential: their true nature lies in their good, namely, their capacity to motivate one's reversion<sup>37</sup>. Second, even this side-being is not gratuitous nor vain: the divine order of things – Providence – uses evils as tools to improve the goodness of the whole and advance the cognitive and moral progress of everything, as these deficiencies either destroy themselves in the process, or result in a net benefit for every soul involved<sup>38</sup>.

In the case of the various passions of the soul, they are privations of good indeed, as they often impede the rule of reason and intellect by which a soul can be good. This is related to the particular nature of human souls:

<sup>36</sup> The whole treatise *De Malorum Subsistentia* is dedicated to this question.

<sup>37</sup> In support of this interpretation, let us mention that Proclus praises Socrates for being able to address his interlocutors according to their own character and passions, choosing his approach and set of arguments appropriately, see Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 3, 11-13; 28, 12-29, 1; 151, 12-154, 16.

<sup>38</sup> For an analysis of these two aspects of Proclus' theodicy and how they are linked, see Steel, *Providence and Evil*, p. 240-257.

there are “descended” souls, insofar as they have a faculty of choice, which is actually more of a propensity for mistake than a positive capacity<sup>39</sup>. They may be led to follow their impulses and in so doing dig further into confusion; this is why they can use providential guidance to restore reason to its proper place. But reason itself can only find its full perfection through a complete deployment in the corporeal world; it is better for it to organize the body and to give structure to inferior faculties like sensation, even if it means getting temporarily blinded in the process. Its knowledge is more complete, more perfect after the soul has descended into the body, has been troubled by its impressions and passions, and has regulated them. Passion itself is instrumental in the realization of reason’s potential<sup>40</sup>. Providence, like an omniscient physician, makes use of apparently harmful means and of the diseases themselves to cure more efficiently our souls<sup>41</sup>. Like an omniscient educator, it distributes hardships and prosperity according to the current needs of each soul<sup>42</sup>.

It is all well and good, but how is that relevant to *our* teaching purposes? Neoplatonic “Providence” is a well-defined but very abstract and general concept. It denotes the sum of all forces in the universe and the coherent picture formed by those forces, oriented by and toward the divine Good. As they all proceed from the Good, Providence is its action, the way in which it creates and sustains reality. That means that it constitutes no supernatural power magically solving problems from above: Providence acts by means of each and every one. Now, some beings are better disposed to smoothly conduct the ways of Providence than others. Through their attitude and their actions, they contribute more than others to the harmonious structure

---

<sup>39</sup> Proclus, *De providentia et fato et eo quod in nobis ad Theodorum mechanicum* 61. It is the well-studied protestation on Iamblichus’ and Proclus’ part against Plotinus’ doctrine of the undescended (rational) soul: compare *Enneads* IV 7 [2], 14, 9-14 and IV 8 [6], 8, 1-12 with Iamblichus’ *Commentary on the Timaeus*, fr. 87 (= Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 334, 3-8) as well as Proclus’ *Elementatio Theologica* 211 and Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 226, 9-228, 7. For the details of this disagreement within Neoplatonism, see J.M. Rist, *Integration and the Undescended Soul in Plotinus*, “The American Journal of Philology” 88/4 (1967) p. 410-422; C. Steel, *The Changing Self. A Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius and Priscianus*, Brussels 1978, p. 38-42 and D.G. MacIsaac, *The Nous of the Partial Soul in Proclus’ Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato*, “Dionysius” 29 (2011) p. 29-60.

<sup>40</sup> Proclus, *De decem dubitationibus circa providentiam* 29-31.

<sup>41</sup> Proclus, *De malorum subsistentia* 59, 13-22; Proclus, *De decem dubitationibus circa providentiam* 51-54.

<sup>42</sup> Proclus, *De decem dubitationibus circa providentiam* 35.

of the whole. More often than not, they do so by leading other beings, especially other souls, to align themselves with the divine order. Such guides are called daemons, either because they actually are the semi-divine beings that guide souls toward perfection according to Platonic tradition, or simply because they play a similar role. In the first case, they are daemons “by essence” (τῆ οὐσίᾳ), in the second, they are daemons “by relation” (κατὰ σχέσιν)<sup>43</sup>. Human teachers like Socrates fall into this latter category. Like actual daemons, they dispense good influence to those ready to receive it, and guide them according to their capacity, giving the impulsion that is necessary to bring these souls to συμπάθεια with the Good<sup>44</sup>. By so doing, they contribute much more to the actual progress of the soul than by any other didactic device, and most of Proclus’ reading of Socrates’ behaviour towards Alcibiades concerns this protreptic role. But it does not fall outside the range of providential action: gods, daemons and wise souls like Socrates’ all participate in the teaching design of Providence. Providence is not said to be an educator only because the whole sequence of events provides edifying examples, but also because guardian daemons and teaching souls are particularly salient agents of its benevolent influence. They carry Providence more than anything else, for they are themselves, by their more advanced knowledge of the structure of reality, particularly well aligned with its logic<sup>45</sup>.

Agents *par excellence* of divine Providence are likely to make use of its tools, especially as its action is mostly mediated by those agents. Just like Providence, they might need to provoke and exploit other souls’ emotions

<sup>43</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 73, 18-75, 13 and 158, 2-159, 1. On this question, see A. Timotin, *La démonologie platonicienne: Histoire de la notion de daimōn de Platon aux derniers néoplatoniciens*, Leiden – Boston 2012, p. 228-237 and C. Addey, *The Daimonion of Socrates: Daimones and Divination in Neoplatonism*, in: *The Neoplatonic Socrates*, ed. D.A. Layne – H. Tarrant, Philadelphia 2014, p. 51-72.

<sup>44</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 41, 15-42, 4; 59, 10-62, 2 and 141, 25-144, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* II 254, 5-23; Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 324, 5-24; Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 32, 15-33, 9 and 62, 24-63, 8. This doctrine comes from Iamblichus (*De Anima*, fr. 21, 26, 28, 29 and 35), as Proclus himself reports: Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 234, 32-235, 9. On its philosophical implications, see M. Erler, *Hilfe der Götter und Erkenntnis der Selbst: Sokrates als Göttergeschenk bei Platon und den Platonikern*, in: *Metaphysik und Religion: Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens*, ed. T. Kobusch – M. Erler, Leipzig 2002, p. 387-413 and J. Trouillard, *Le sens des médiations proclusiennes*, “Revue philosophique de Louvain” 47 (1957) p. 331-342.

in order to foster these souls' moral and cognitive progress. The teacher or educator operates like a smaller providence and may arrange the course of events so as to trigger the right (that is: appropriate or situationally useful) emotions in the pupil's soul. For example, Socrates might make absurdly grand promises or compliments in order to work on Alcibiades' existent state of mind and make him more accessible to philosophical reversion in the long run<sup>46</sup>. It should not strike us that the emotions thus triggered seem to cloud either moral or intellectual judgment: teachers, like Providence, often have to use convoluted ways to achieve the goal of leading souls to greater perfection. Provided the benefit for the guided soul turns out to be greater autonomy and clearer perception, passions and their associated trouble are acceptable educational tools<sup>47</sup>. This does not mean that any emotion will do; Proclus maintains some of Plato's serious defiance towards the feelings unleashed by uncensored tragedy and poetry<sup>48</sup>. But the problem resides less in the emotions themselves than in their uncritical and irresponsible use. How exactly the teacher should proceed is to be handled on a case-by-case basis; we can still draw some general principles from Proclus' remarks on wonder and shock.

#### 4. An easy case: surprise

We are now better prepared to examine Proclus' commentary on the beginning of the *First Alcibiades*. Socrates affirms that his own behaviour is likely to have surprised the young Alcibiades. He had been observing him from a distance, without uttering a word in years, while several pretenders were trying to win the favour of the son of Cleinias, the noble Alcmeonid. It is only now, just as his beauty begins to fade and the pre-

<sup>46</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 100, 24-102, 5 and 154, 17-155, 16.

<sup>47</sup> One might still be wary of such a slippery slope. Doesn't this line of thought allow the use of absolutely any tool, however questionable, by the teacher? It does. However, the "teacher" is defined not by his social role, but rather by his own progress and alignment with divine Providence, which is, for Proclus, the deepest ground of morality. In recent terminology, he adheres both to virtue ethics and virtue epistemology, even merging the two. Accordingly, anyone wise enough to know and teach can't possibly lack morality, since his will is supposedly aligned with divine Providence.

<sup>48</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* I 46, 7-47, 19 and 144, 15-146, 6: mimetic poetry is like some pleasant yet harmful medicine. In addition to Sheppard's studies cited above, see the essay "Types of Poetry" of R.M. van den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary*, Leiden 2001, p. 112-142.

tenders to disappear, that the philosopher approaches him and actually speaks. Proclus gives a handful of reasons for this attitude. Socrates does not need any reciprocity from Alcibiades, his interest is in the soul of his pupil rather than in his body, he represents a higher level of cause whose effect lasts longer<sup>49</sup>. Furthermore, he plays the role of a good and provident daemon for Alcibiades, watching over him, invisible and silent, before and after anyone else<sup>50</sup>. But his quite disturbing stalking of the young man also serves another purpose: to surprise him, to make him wonder, for surprise or wonder (θαῦμα) is the beginning of philosophy and motivation to learn<sup>51</sup>.

The claim that surprise and wonder are an excellent starting point for curiosity and motivation to learn is relatively unproblematic<sup>52</sup>. But before moving on to another, less easy claim, let us stop to see how precisely wonder is supposed to properly incline the soul to cognitive reversion and why it is needed. Souls naturally tend to form beliefs or opinions (δόξαι) based on their experiences. These are a first attempt to organize sensitive confusion into a reliable discourse, relatively consistent with the soul's innate notions<sup>53</sup>. Such tentative modellings of reality often blatantly contradict each other, revealing their shortcomings after a quick examination. Sometimes, however, they seem to cohere to the point of discouraging further examination, although they carry hidden false (and actually inconsistent) implications<sup>54</sup>. Such is common sense, usually so pragmatically efficient that it is oblivious to its own contradictions until something or someone makes them no longer bearable. This is the point of philosophical refutation. Now the problem is that such an exercise requires honest and prolonged discussion: Plato's Callicles might be formally refuted, but he shows no intention of reforming his ways or learning anything new about philosophy, for he wasn't taking

<sup>49</sup> These themes recur throughout the commentary but are summarized at Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 33, 15-39, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 40, 17-42, 4; 53, 19-56, 19; 60, 1-63, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 42, 5-43, 5, quoting Aristotle's *Metaphysics* A2, 982b12 and 983a13.

<sup>52</sup> See for example C. L'Ecuyer, *The Wonder Approach to Learning*, "Frontiers in Human Neuroscience" 8 (2014), in: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00764> (accessed: 15.03.2022).

<sup>53</sup> C. Helmig, *What is the systematic place of abstraction and concept formation in Plato's philosophy? Ancient and modern readings of Phaedrus 249b-c*, in: *Platonic ideas and concept formation in ancient and medieval thought*, ed. A. Macé – G. Van Riel, Leuven 2004, p. 94-96.

<sup>54</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 341, 6-346, 8.

Socrates' questions seriously to begin with<sup>55</sup>. As a matter of fact, Alcibiades is proud and ambitious, which is precious a drive for further learning, but may constitute an obstacle to constructive discussion. Ambitious people are often fond of strife (φιλόνεικος), they are likely to take any argument or refutation as a provocation, a challenge to their prestige, that calls for an impressive display of skill rather than a genuine investigation<sup>56</sup>.

So here is the challenge: to bypass this fierce defiance without undermining the promising pride that caused it. It is in response to this challenge that Socrates resorts to surprise. His strange attitude is a discrepancy in Alcibiades' worldview: older men are supposed to court him, to seek pleasure, admiration or reciprocal love, unless perhaps they are too weak or shy to do so at all. Nobody uninterested spends so much time merely stalking a youth. But here comes a famous local figure, without an *eromenos*, he doesn't say a word and just observes; it isn't even some kind of seduction technique, as he waits long enough for the young man to lose much of his physical appeal. This oddity is such a break in the expected course of action that it can't be ignored, but calls for an explanation. Neither can proud Alcibiades help but wonder about this new kind of love that is so patient yet cares so little about physical attractiveness, and look after the causes that motivate Socrates to so behave<sup>57</sup>. His unexpected behaviour is a better and less confrontational refutation of the young man's worldview than any argument or ironic question. It also preserves his future pupil's autonomy: although Socrates is the one approaching him, all curiosity and desire for further discussion will arise from Alcibiades. "For to crave to learn why Socrates acts this way, is to become a lover of the science which is pre-existent in him"<sup>58</sup>. Wonder is the beginning of philos-

<sup>55</sup> One precision about characters: Proclus appears to be more optimistic about the progress of Callicles, as he considers him to actually be conscious of his contradictions and in a state of intimate hesitation between true and false opinions, see Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 341, 7-15. In other passages, however, he still treats him as a misguided and misleading influence, see e. g. Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* I 159, 25-160, 10; II 176, 4-9; Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 295, 11-14 and 322, 23-323, 2. Likewise, Alcibiades is described as quite ready to admit his own contradictions compared to other interlocutors encountered by Socrates: Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 218, 3-219, 13.

<sup>56</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 23, 16-25; Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 288, 3-6.

<sup>57</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 19, 18-20, 1 and 46, 14-47, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 21, 7-9: "τὸ γὰρ τὴν αἰτίαν ποθῆσαι μαθεῖν ὧν πράττει Σωκράτης, ἐραστὴν ἔστι γενέσθαι τῆς ἐν αὐτῷ προὔπαρχούσης ἐπιστήμης".

ophy because the surprise provoked by the unexpected leads to a curiosity which is a first kind of love (in the full sense of the term) of knowledge.

There is more to this argument than elaboration on individual (and fictional) contingencies. Socrates and Alcibiades are characters, they are also archetypes. The former is the perfect philosopher: ideal pupil in the *Parmenides*<sup>59</sup>, ideal teacher in the *Alcibiades*. The latter is not just any promising pupil; he is, according to Proclus, an example of Plato's philosopher by nature<sup>60</sup>. Their didactic relationship itself might be read as paradigmatic. In fact, the psychological dynamics illustrated by this encounter can be found in more ordinary teacher-pupil relationships. The underlying problem is the question of double ignorance. It is commonly (and rightly) assumed that learning effort is much more efficient when it comes from the pupil's initiative, but how can it be triggered when the pupil does not know what is at stake and has no reason to willingly make any substantial effort? Proclus actually suggests a creative solution, which complements more classical answers based on recollection. It consists of displaying something impossible to explain within the pupil's current worldview (and as disturbing as possible), though meaningful once the relevant knowledge is acquired. The bet is that the pupil's soul will try to bridge the newfound gap in its opinions, as is its natural tendency. In order to do so, it will need to understand the explanation of the oddity, which happens quite coincidentally to be identical with the content it is supposed to learn. Such a soul thus proceeds on its own initiative and circumvents most incidental sources of reluctance, for it is puzzled, which allows curiosity and love. Wonder, in itself an irrational emotion, contains the germs of a cognitive movement that can end up in rational investigation.

---

<sup>59</sup> See e.g. Proclus, *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* IV 926, 9-927, 10, where the good disposition (ἐπιτηδειότης) of the pupil is detailed on the basis of Socrates' example. More precisely, he is a paradigmatic case of an advanced pupil, who only lacks dialectical preparation, while Alcibiades would rather be a very promising but still unrefined pupil.

<sup>60</sup> As argued in Tresnie, *Orgueil et enseignement*, p. 252; compare for example Proclus, *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* IV 854, 20-24 and Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 134, 7-11 with the Plato, *Res Publica* 374e-377b and 487a.

## 5. A more difficult case: shock

Being surprised stimulates curiosity. Yet, surprises come in many forms, with various degrees of intensity and pleasantness. Wonder, as previously described, is a mild (if perhaps slightly disturbing) perplexity; it puzzles and stimulates quite harmlessly. But there are “surprises” we would rather avoid and certainly not consider likely to help us learn. Such is the case with profound disgust, with fright and terror, and more generally with anything violent enough to shake us up. It would appear to generate stress, anxiety, stupefaction maybe, or restlessness, but not a genuine desire for knowledge comparable to what wonder provides. Still, Proclus claims (perhaps surprisingly as far as Plato’s text is concerned) that the mention by Socrates of his daemon serves the purpose of deliberately shocking and frightening Alcibiades. Let us quote the passage at length:

It is suitable for Socrates to do this, for such shocks often draw us towards affinity with the Good. As in the holiest initiations, some stupefaction precedes the rites, either through words or through what is shown, in order to submit the soul to the divine, thus at the threshold of philosophy, the master arouses in the young man wonder and emotional shock about himself, so that the words coming to him may have an effect and encourage him to live a philosophical life<sup>61</sup>.

Socrates hints at the explanation of his unusual attitude, confirming that there is one but also that it is nothing trivial: neither a quirk of character nor conflicting commitments, but the intervention of a daemon. One might think that it is only the continuation of his strategy aimed at producing wonder and curiosity: a daemon, really? According to Proclus, it

---

<sup>61</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 61, 10-62, 2: “Καὶ τοῦτο εἰκότως ὁ Σωκράτης ποιεῖ· πολλαχοῦ γὰρ αἱ τοιαῦται ἐκπλήξεις εἰς τὴν περὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἡμᾶς ἐπισπῶνται συμπάθειαν. ὡσπερ οὖν ἐν ταῖς ἀγιωτάταις τῶν τελετῶν προηγούνται τῶν δρωμένων καταπλήξεις τινές, αἱ μὲν διὰ τῶν λεγομένων, αἱ δὲ διὰ τῶν δεικνυμένων ὑποκατακλίνουσαι τῷ θεῷ τὴν ψυχὴν, οὕτω δὴ καὶ ἐν τοῖς τῆς φιλοσοφίας προθύροις ἀνεγείρει θαῦμα τῷ νεανίσκῳ καὶ ἐκπληξιν περὶ ἑαυτὸν ὁ καθηγούμενος, ἵνα δράσωσιν εἰς αὐτὸν οἱ λόγοι προϊόντες καὶ ἐκκαλέσονται πρὸς τὴν φιλόσοφον ζωὴν”. Here, “shock” (ἐκπληξίς) and “stupefaction” (καταπλήξίς) are etymologically related, along with the stroke (πλάγᾶ) we had encounter earlier with Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* III 330, 9. Their respective entries in the Liddel-Scott-Jones Lexicon show how close they are: amazement, consternation (καταπλήξίς); consternation, terror, mental disturbance (ἐκπληξίς); blow, stroke, shock (πλάγᾶ, s.v. πληγή).

is not so, or not the whole story. There is wonder indeed, there is also an emotional shock (ἔκπληξις), which is arguably something else than the mild perplexity following surprise. The context clearly suggests that the evocation of a supernatural power is supposed to startle the young man at the very least, maybe to frighten him. Moreover, the word is the same as we have encountered about the force that arises in the presence of Beauty, it is characteristic of love in its noblest form, the erotic impetus toward wisdom and goodness<sup>62</sup>. Two elements can help clarify the nature of this shock.

First, there is the goal ascribed by the commentator: to draw us towards affinity (συμπάθεια) with the Good. This is consistent with the connection between shock and love: the point is to orient the soul in the direction of the most beautiful realities, which culminate in the Good as the principle and final cause of everything. But this orientation is passive, at least in its starting moment, perhaps as well in its continuation<sup>63</sup>. Automotricity and autonomous learning are paramount, the whole point of using wonder rather than dogmatic predication is to preserve them. Still, it seems that they can only be fostered after a phase of passivity that seems to negate them<sup>64</sup>. We might note here that one can willingly accept passivity or even choose to be shocked, for example in the hope of reaching a higher insight by so doing. But it would not solve the issue: it is not Alcibiades who is exposing himself to some thrilling content, but Socrates who undertakes to startle him without being asked to do so. It appears that intrigued curiosity is not strong enough a result for the philosopher's tastes: one needs to be shaken and deeply moved by emotion, from without, to autonomous rationality. This incongruity at least highlights some shortcomings of mere curiosity: one may wonder about an explanation in a very detached and mundane way, without any serious commitment, as you would ask yourself what your neighbours are celebrating tonight. That is not what philosophical reversion is about. Wonder must be complemented by something more powerful in order to have an effect.

<sup>62</sup> Proclus, *Theologia Platonica* I 24, p. 108, 7-109, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 153, 6-8 is troubling: "the learner should surrender to the teacher and be led quietly toward the truth" (τὸν δὲ παιδευόμενον ἑαυτὸν ἐπιιδόναι προσήκει τῷ παιδεύοντι καὶ ἡρέμα περιάγεσθαι πρὸς τὸ ἀληθές).

<sup>64</sup> See the broader commentary of M. Erler, *Hilfe der Götter und Erkenntnis der Selbst*, p. 387-413. I would however be much less affirmative than he is concerning the alleged pessimism of Neoplatonic philosophers (especially Proclus) regarding the possibility of the preservation of a soul's autonomy throughout learning, and I hope the present study may contribute to somewhat qualify that claim.

We may thus better understand the second point of interest: the comparison with the Mysteries, to which the “holiest initiations” are likely to refer<sup>65</sup>. Just before embarking on truly autonomous research by the means of philosophy, one needs a shock analogous to the stupefaction (κατάπληξις) experienced during initiation just before the sacred rites. A lively depiction of this part of the ritual can be found in a fragment of Plutarch or Themistios preserved by Stobaeus:

There are at first wanderings and wearying walks, worried and aimless roaming in the gloom, then just before the end came the most terrible things, with chills, quivering, sweat and amazement. But after that, some wonderful light presents itself, meadows and pure grounds appear, with songs and dances, and the most venerable of sacred words and holy apparitions<sup>66</sup>.

We can leave aside the details of the mixed symbolic legacy here to focus on the point of the comparison. The rite of initiation involves disconcerting practices where the initiates are expected to lose their bearings. The strange words and displays are not only intriguing, they are also scary. This confusion translates into feelings and signs of fear, of anxiety, preparing and magnifying the final release of *epopteia*<sup>67</sup>. The whole ritual would lose much of its strength without this emotional adventure: in Proclus’ words, the stupefaction aims to first submit the soul to the divine, before the rite may have an effect. Likewise, philosophy has little power over a soul that is too firmly rooted in its comfortable certainties. It takes more than curiosity to accomplish meaningful learning: Socrates might have remained a fancy oddity, admittedly intriguing, but not worth a deep self-reassessment. It

<sup>65</sup> It is not the first time that Proclus evokes the Mysteries in relation to the encounter he is commenting on, as is pointed out by the editor *ad loc.*: see Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* 9, 1-7 and 39, 7-40, 21. However, the former passage is quite vague, while the second rather compares the apparition of (evil) daemons to the irrational lures of sophistry and sensible matter.

<sup>66</sup> Stobaeus, *Anthologium* IV 52, 49, 8-13: “Πλάναι τὰ πρῶτα καὶ περιδρομαὶ κοπώδεις καὶ διὰ σκότους τινὲς ὑποποιοὶ πορεῖαι καὶ ἀτέλεστοι, εἶτα πρὸ τοῦ τέλους αὐτοῦ τὰ δεινὰ πάντα, φρίκη καὶ τρόμος καὶ ἰδρῶς καὶ θάμβος· ἐκ δὲ τούτου φῶς τι θαυμάσιον ἀπήντησεν καὶ τόποι καθαροὶ καὶ λειμῶνες ἐδέξαντο, φωνὰς καὶ χορείας καὶ σεμνότητος ἀκουσμάτων ἱερῶν καὶ φασμάτων ἀγίων ἔχοντες”. On the disputed authority of the fragment see F. Graf, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit*, Berlin 1974, p. 132-138.

<sup>67</sup> For a summary of the proceedings of such ceremonies, see for example H. Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, Princeton 2010.

requires to have been at a loss, to have quivered and shivered, if the later lesson is to be taken seriously. Let us insist on Proclus' choice of words: the strategy of shock is aimed at preparing Alcibiades not to learn more *about* philosophy (wonder might have sufficed), but to live a philosophical life. That is by far more demanding a change than asking for attention.

What about the philosophical analogon of "submitting to the divine"? Is there, after all, no need or hope for autonomy? That is certainly one of the trickiest aspects of the problem. If we recall section 3, we know that in Neoplatonism, and in any case in Proclus, the divine is in practice none other than Providence. Now Providence is the order, intelligible and rational, of all reality, the structure of the universe. Submitting to it is little else than acknowledging that there is order in the world and that it can be grasped through our higher intellectual faculties. This is indeed an important break from ordinary common sense, but certainly not a withdrawal from rationality. On the other hand, we have seen that the teacher is the instantiation of Providence in the teaching relationship. This should lead us to conclude that, in some sense at least, there is a need for the submission of the pupil to the providential care of the teacher, in a quasi-religious way. This is closer to faith than to reasonable trust. But it is a philosophically (albeit later on) grounded faith: it is inasmuch as the teacher embodies the rational order of reality that submission of the soul is warranted<sup>68</sup>. Irrational states like shock, as far as they prepare the soul to reach this condition of agreement with reason, are themselves part of a broader, rational order. The somewhat counter-intuitive, but nonetheless defensible, result is that violent passions, although in themselves irrational and impeding reason, may, in some cir-

---

<sup>68</sup> An important question lies outside the scope of this paper: how could anyone be convinced of the conformity of a teacher's will with the divine order before gaining some knowledge of this order? A likely answer would use the concept of *ἐννοιαί*, the innate notions present in every soul, which serve as the ultimate subjective criterion of truth and the necessary basis of any learning. On how recognition of a teaching's value may be grounded in these notions (and its illustration in Proclus), see D.J. O'Meara, *La science métaphysique (ou théologique) de Proclus comme exercice spirituel*, in: *Proclus et la théologie platonicienne: Actes du Colloque international de Louvain, 13-16 mai 1998, en l'honneur de H.D. Saffrey et L.G. Westerink*, ed. A.P. Segonds – C. Steel, Louvain – Paris 2000, p. 279-290. While his claim that the *Elementatio Theologica* served as a kind of "spiritual exercise" for actual students is unverifiable, it is in any case consistent with Proclean psychology. Another solution is proposed by the later Platonist Olympiodorus: the ultimate criterion of trust is our "allotted daemon", which is to be identified by the summit of our soul, i.e. our consciousness (*συνειδός*), "he" refers to Proclus, so we have to remove either the expression "his own", or the word "Proclus" 23, 1-10.

cumstances and under the right supervision, foster it. They can be steps in the development of rational autonomy, they are even more likely to permit its growth than the undisturbed spontaneity of the individual, which runs the risk of stagnating at the level of opinion and common sense.

The appeal to fear or at least shock is no argument from authority: even according to Proclus, Socrates nowhere says that his teaching is worth listening to *because* a daemon (or a god) said so or revealed it. Neither is it a threat: at no point is there mention of any kind of retribution should the young man walk away. Such an understanding would actually be contrary to Proclus' point: proud and wealthy Alcibiades would have laughed at so exuberant a provocation, but it would have stayed at a very down-to-earth and, in a way, predictable level, failing to confront him with something really unsettling. Here is the key role of shock, of convoking daemons, gods or faeries: to introduce, without being too easily dismissed, the existence of a grade of understanding far beyond ordinary experience.

## 6. Are there two distinct emotions?

At this point, one might have the impression that wonder and shock are two different, maybe successive, states of the soul of the learner, who would first have to be perplexed in order to awaken its curiosity, then shaken him in order to deepen its level of commitment. But this would be an oversystematization. Those two didactic devices are, in any case, different in their function. Still, isn't an old man silently stalking for years his prospective pupil at least unsettling? Should Alcibiades only be shocked and not also intrigued by Socrates' stories about daemons? There is wonder and shock in both these unusual situations, as Proclus actually suggests when he says that the mention of the daemon serves to cause θαῦμα as well as ἔκπληξις. Yet if the same actions trigger both reactions, why bother distinguishing them?

Let us remember how wonder was caused. It is a kind of surprise, revealing a break in ordinary expectations. In the case of Socrates' silent attitude, it was indeed odd, as older men usually pursue charming Alcibiades. But unless struck by some neurosis, the son of Cleinias should not be overly disturbed: there are eccentric men after all. When the original is a war hero and a local celebrity, it is certainly tempting to try to understand the cause of his behaviour, hence the curiosity. But

when suddenly he speaks of a daemon giving specific instructions concerning young Alcibiades, and does so with enough credibility to be taken seriously, wonder becomes something more. It is one thing to know that, of course, gods and daemons exist, quite another to have them directly involved in one's daily life. The stakes are higher: it is no longer only about Socrates' own motivations, as there is a whole new dimension of experience revealing itself. Without a doubt, anyone will be curious about it. But if we are to call it wonder, for it is wonderful indeed, it is in a different sense than the mild perplexity of the young man who wonders what the reason for Socrates' silence is. We would certainly be justified in calling this strengthened wonder "shock", "amazement" or even "awe", which might here be, or so I argue on the basis of all that has been said, an appropriate alternative translation of ἔκπληξις.

Awe is no mere curiosity. There is stupefaction in the confused stare of the initiate, in the glance one takes at a transcending presence, though it is not a disgusted fright but rather a bewildered astonishment. Such is the state of "shock" that Proclus deems instrumental in the preparation of the pupil, in conjunction with milder wonder. Both are perplexities in front of something new, alien and surprising. Wonder and awe are two sides, two degrees of intensity of this feeling. Each of them has nonetheless its own utility for the providential structuring of the pupil's soul by the teacher. Wonder, thanks to its softness, subtly catches the interest, without alienating any susceptibility, sometimes at the cost of a more superficial commitment. Awe works way deeper on the soul, it moves it to take learning and reversion seriously, although it is on the verge of jeopardizing the soul's autonomy in aiming to reinforce it. Both are thus complementary and contribute to the delicate balance between providential guidance according to the order of the universe and authentic self-discovery through intrinsic motivation. They are aspects of the subjective side of the love of knowledge, the necessary drive to actually commit to intellectual progress, the starting point of philosophy.

## 7. Some conclusions

Recent research on Proclus often focuses either on his powerful account of the functioning of rational cognitive faculties, or on his quasi-religious way to approach philosophical *eros*. The point of this paper was to show that he also considers the cognitive role played by emo-

tions, their importance for subjective commitment to learning. He also incorporates them into the broader evolution and self-exploration of a rational soul. What is specific to his approach is the link between his psychological characterization of emotions and their metaphysical and epistemological groundings. Motivation is not just a welcome mood that can help to learn, it is an instance of the cosmic drive of Love that binds reality together. Producing it is not just a teacher's trick, it is a providential endeavour, in which the teacher participates in divine Providence. Through wonder, the soul is led out of his usual worldview structured by opinion, to a spontaneous inquiry that may culminate in the love of loftier objects of knowledge. Through shock or rather awe, it is moved to seriously and personally engage in the task. In that way, according to Proclus, can a soul be best motivated to discover earnestly and efficiently the rational and intellectual structures of both itself and reality, that is, to experience philosophical reversion. Wonder and awe are not as random affections as it may appear: they are also components of love, even of our ordinary understanding of it, if there is such a thing. But Love is also the way of the gods and of philosophy, by way of the wonder and awe that come with it, there is an affinity, *σμπάθεια*, with the divine, comparable to the transformation that happens in sacred initiations. Learning and communion are different faces of a complex psychic motion of assimilation to the divine, they are unified by a common logic and share some emotional experiences.

There is in Neoplatonism, as in some other great schools of thought, an underlying unified conception of passions that is lacking in the intuitive definitions of various individual emotions used by most of empirical research. It allows Proclus to offer a consistent, if sometimes disconcerting, picture of how curiosity and ardour emerge in the soul. There are, of course, some presuppositions in his narrative: that there is something to be known; that it is by nature supremely lovable, so that it is one and the same to know and love it; that our interior life is somehow already organized by such love. This general Neoplatonic background might be, for many of us, too much to accept without qualification. Still, even the most critical reader may find some value in the Proclean account of wonder and awe, in the continuity between these feelings and erotic drive, didactic charisma, and diligent study.

I would like to mention one more thing about the opening lines of the *First Alcibiades*. In the Neoplatonic school of Proclus, a strict progression seems to have been followed concerning the study of canon-

cal texts. After an ethical preparation which seems to have involved the Pythagorean Golden Verses and a glimpse of Stoic writings, some of Aristotle was deemed necessary as propaedeutics before the actual reading of Plato's texts<sup>69</sup>. The latter were apparently considered as sufficiently contained in twelve dialogs, beginning with the *Alcibiades* and culminating in the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*<sup>70</sup>. Accordingly, the passage with which we have begun this inquiry constitutes the first two *lemmata* of the first Platonic dialogue in the curriculum. Wonder and awe: surely there are worse ways to embark on a self-transforming philosophical journey.

### Emotions that Foster Learning: Wonder and Shock in Proclus

(summary)

In his *Commentaries*, Proclus (Neoplatonic philosopher, 5th century A.D.) describes the ways in which a teacher can awaken the desire for knowledge and philosophy in a given soul, and help this soul to make cognitive and moral progress. He considers such an intervention to be a case of providence, analogous to both the action of divine *Pronoia* and the care of one's personal daemon. As the soul being thus educated is still unaware of the merits of rational thought, the teacher needs to use the emotions of his student to stimulate him; he might even want to generate desirable emotions in his soul. I focus here on two emotions: wonder and shock. The first serves to stimulate interest while preserving autonomy. The second allows deeper commitment at the price of reduced autonomy of the pupil. Both are complementary aspects of philosophical perplexity.

**Keywords:** Proclus; Neoplatonism; Emotion; Surprise; Fear; Anxiety; Wonder; Fright; Thaumata; Learning; Teaching; Autonomy; Mysteries; Reversion; Philosophy; Reason; Passion

<sup>69</sup> This is what we can infer from the various allusions throughout Olympiodorus' *Prolegomena to Aristotle's Logic*, which are admittedly one century posterior to Proclus' time. However, Marinus' *Life of Proclus* (13-14) seems to indicate that Proclus himself followed a comparable curriculum under the guidance of Plutarch and Syrianus.

<sup>70</sup> This is at least the curriculum usually deduced from the *Anonymous Prolegomena to the Platonic Philosophy*, 26, which appear to describe the standard procedure of the school shortly after Proclus' time. This would be consistent with the fact that Proclus wrote complete commentaries to these three dialogs. Marinus also suggests that each step correspond to one of the levels of virtues in Iamblichus' scale, although this might be a later projection. On this question, see the evidence gathered by A.J. Festugière, *L'ordre de lecture des dialogues de Platon aux Ve/VIe siècles*, "Museum Helveticum" 26/4 (1969) p. 281-296 and D.J. O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2003, p. 40-68.

## Bibliography

### Sources

- Anonymous, *Prolegomena Philosophiae Platonicae*, ed. L.G. Westerink, Amsterdam 1962.
- Aristoteles, *Metaphysica*, ed. W. Jaeger, Oxford 1957.
- Iamblichus, *De anima*, ed. J. Dillon, Leiden 2002.
- Iamblichus, *In Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta*, ed. J. Dillon, Leiden 1973.
- Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum*, ed. L.G. Westerink, Amsterdam 1956.
- Olympiodorus, *Prolegomena et in Categorias Commentarium*, ed. A. Busse, Berlin 1902.
- Plato, *Alcibiades maior*, ed. N. Denyer, Cambridge 2001, tr. W.R.M. Lamb, London 1955.
- Plato, *De republica*, ed. S.R. Slings, Oxford 2003.
- Plotinus, *Opera*, ed. P. Henry – H.-R. Schwyzer, Oxford 1964.
- Proclus, *De decem dubitationibus circa providentiam*, ed. D. Isaac, Paris 1977.
- Proclus, *De malorum subsistentia*, ed. D. Isaac, Paris 1982.
- Proclus, *De providentia et fato et eo quod in nobis ad Theodorum mechanicum*, ed. D. Isaac, Paris 1979.
- Proclus, *Elementatio Theologica*, ed. E.R. Dodds, Oxford 1963.
- Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum*, ed. A.-P. Segonds, Paris 1985-1986.
- Proclus, *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria*, ed. C. Luna – A.-P. Segonds, Paris 2007-2021.
- Proclus, *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii*, ed. W. Kroll, Leipzig 1899-1901.
- Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria*, ed. E. Diehl, Leipzig 1903-1906.
- Proclus, *In primum Euclidis elementorum librum commentarii*, ed. G. Friedlein, Leipzig 1873.
- Proclus, *Theologia Platonica*, ed. H.D. Saffrey – L.G. Westerink, Paris 1968-1997.
- Stobaeus, *Anthologium*, ed. C. Wachsmuth – O. Hense, Berlin 1884-1912.

### Studies

- Addey C., *The Daimonion of Socrates: Daimones and Divination in Neoplatonism*, in: *The Neoplatonic Socrates*, ed. D.A. Layne – H. Tarrant, Philadelphia 2014, p. 51-72.
- Ambury J.M., *Socratic Character: Proclus on the Function of the Erotic Intellect*, in: *The Neoplatonic Socrates*, ed. D.A. Layne – H. Tarrant, Philadelphia 2014, p. 109-117.
- Beierwaltes W., *Proklos' Begriff des Guten aus der Perspektive seiner Platon-Deutung*, in: *Being or Good? Metamorphoses of Neoplatonism*, ed. A. Kijewska, Lublin 2004, p. 99-120.
- Bowden H., *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, Princeton 2010.
- D'Andrès N., *Socrate néoplatonicien: Une science de l'amour dans le commentaire de Proclus sur le Premier Alcibiade*, Paris 2020.

- Erler M., *Hilfe der Götter und Erkenntnis der Selbst: Sokrates als Göttergeschenk bei Platon und den Platonikern*, in: *Metaphysik und Religion: Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens*, ed. T. Kobusch – M. Erler, Leipzig 2002, p. 387-413.
- Festugière A.J., *L'ordre de lecture des dialogues de Platon aux Ve/VIe siècles*, "Museum Helveticum" 26/4 (1969) p. 281-296.
- Graf F., *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit*, Berlin 1974.
- Giel L.I.S. et al., *Fear of failure: A polynomial regression analysis of the joint impact of the perceived learning environment and personal achievement goal orientation*, "Anxiety, Stress & Coping" 33/2 (2020) p. 123-139.
- Hadot P., *L'union de l'âme avec l'intellect divin dans l'expérience mystique plotinienne*, in: *Proclus et son influence (Actes du Colloque de Neuchâtel, juin 1985)*, ed. G. Boss – G. Seel, Zürich 1987, p. 3-27.
- Helmig C., *What is the systematic place of abstraction and concept formation in Plato's philosophy? Ancient and modern readings of Phaedrus 249b-c*, in: *Platonic ideas and concept formation in ancient and medieval thought*, ed. A. Macé – G. Van Riel, Leuven 2004, p. 83-97.
- Helmig C., *Forms and Concepts: Concept Formation in the Platonic Tradition*, Berlin 2012.
- Helmig C., *Proclus on Epistemology, Language, and Logic*, in: *All From One: A Guide to Proclus*, ed. P. d'Hoine – M. Martijn, Oxford 2017, p. 183-206.
- Hoffman P., *What was Commentary in Late Antiquity? The Example of the Neoplatonic Commentators*, in: *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. M.L. Gill – P. Pellegrin, Oxford 2006, p. 597-622.
- L'Ecuyer C., *The Wonder Approach to Learning*, "Frontiers in Human Neuroscience" 8 (2014), in: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00764> (accessed: 15.03.2022).
- MacIsaac D.G., *The Nous of the Partial Soul in Proclus' Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato*, "Dionysius" 29 (2011) p. 29-60.
- Nussbaum M.C., *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton 1994.
- O'Meara D.J., *La science métaphysique (ou théologique) de Proclus comme exercice spirituel*, in: *Proclus et la théologie platonicienne: Actes du Colloque international de Louvain, 13-16 mai 1998, en l'honneur de H.D. Saffrey et L.G. Westerink*, ed. A.P. Segonds – C. Steel, Louvain – Paris 2000, p. 279-290.
- O'Meara D.J., *Platonopolis: Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2003.
- Oudeyer P.-Y. – Gottlieb J. – Lopes M., *Intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and learning: Theory and applications in educational technologies*, "Progress in Brain Research" 229 (2016) p. 257-284.
- Rist J.M., *Integration and the Undescended Soul in Plotinus*, "The American Journal of Philology" 88/4 (1967) p. 410-422
- Robinson D.L., *Brain function, mental experience and personality*, "The Netherlands Journal of Psychology" 64 (2009) p. 152-167.

- Sheppard A., *Studies on the 5th and 6th essays of Proclus' Commentary on the Republic*, Göttingen 1980.
- Sheppard A., *The Poetics of Phantasia. Imagination in Ancient Aesthetics*, London 2014.
- St-Germain P., *Mythe et éducation: Proclus et la critique platonicienne de la poésie*, "Laval théologique et philosophique" 62/2 (2006) p. 301-318.
- Steel C., *The Changing Self. A Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius and Priscianus*, Brussels 1978.
- Steel C., *Providence and Evil*, in: *All From One: A Guide to Proclus*, ed. P. d'Hoine – M. Martijn, Oxford 2017, p. 240-257.
- Tarrant H. – Renaud F. – Baltzly D. – Layne D.A., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plato in Antiquity*, Leiden 2018.
- Timotin A., *La démonologie platonicienne: Histoire de la notion de daimōn de Platon aux derniers néoplatoniciens*, Leiden – Boston 2012.
- Tornau C., *Der Eros und das Gute bei Plotin und Proklos*, in: *Proklos: Methode, Seelenlehre, Metaphysik*, ed. M. Perkams – R.-M. Piccione, Leiden 2006, p. 206-229.
- Tresnie C., *Orgueil et enseignement: À propos de quelques remarques du Commentaire au Premier Alcibiade de Proclus*, "Philosophie Antique" 20 (2020) p. 237-261.
- Tresnie C., *Conflict and Violence in Neoplatonism: From Cosmic Justice to Cognitive Step*, "Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence" 5/2 (2021) p. 71-84.
- Trouillard J., *Le sens des médiations proclusiennes*, "Revue philosophique de Louvain" 47 (1957) p. 331-342.
- Tyng C.M. – Amin H.U. – Saad M.N.M. – Malik A.S., *The Influences of Emotion on Learning and Memory*, "Frontiers in Psychology" 8 (2017) p. 14-54.
- van den Berg R.M., *Proclus and Iamblichus on Moral Education*, "Phronesis" 59/3 (2014) p. 272-296.
- van den Berg R.M., *Proclus' Hymns: Essays, Translations, Commentary*, Leiden 2001.
- van den Berg R.M., *Proclus on Hesiod's Works and Days and 'Didactic' Poetry*, "Classical Quarterly" 64/1 (2014) p. 383-397.