

INCORPOREALS IN THE ONTOLOGY OF CREATED BEINGS IN THE BYZANTINE PHILOSOPHY OF MICHAEL PSELLOS

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ABSTRACT. In this contribution I tried to show that Psellos has a complex understanding of the ontology of the being of incorporeal entities that is shaped mainly from a Christian position but also supplemented by the methodological use of positions from ancient philosophy. There is surely a lot more to say about this problem, but I think the classical notions of soul or forms cannot be very easily included into Psellos philosophical framework. His discussion with the pagan philosophy is not only complex but depends also on the circumstance and context of the problems he is discussing in specific texts. Regarding incorporeal beings, he seems to advocate the existence of angels and souls while forms do not seem to have an own ontological realm between God and sensible cosmos. The question of Platonic forms as the thoughts of gods is tricky. On the one side Psellos points to God as direct cause of creation, on the other side he holds back on characterizing God's thoughts.

Keywords: forms, incorporeals, creation, ontology, Platonism.

I. Introduction

Several interpreters of Psellos pointed out that the relationship between pagan Platonism and Christianity cannot always be clearly determined in his works. Sometimes he seems to identify the two with each other, sometimes he seems to assert the superiority of the Christian position.² This lead at times to a divided reading of Psellos, separating the Christian Psellos from the Neoplatonic Psellos.³ I would like to take this problem as a general basis for my argument, in which I want to look at an aspect of the ontology of

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² cf. O'Meara 1998, 438-439; Lauritzen 2010, 288

³ e.g. Miles 2017, 84

created being as he presents it in different writings⁴ – more precisely I want to investigate what position he has regarding incorporeal objects. This question is crucial for the evaluation of Psellos' philosophical position and his relation to pagan writers, since it comprises the key problem of how he understands and uses Platonic forms in his thought. We will see that he takes up the question in different argumentative contexts that recommend a synoptic reading of different passages. I will thus collect relevant texts and try to extract a coherent position from them as far as it is possible.

II. The creation as *συναμφότερον*?

From the many statements Psellos uses to describe creation, one of the most explicit can be found in Psell. *Theol.* 1.6, 57-64 Gautier. Psellos says regarding the status of the cosmos:

ἔμοι δὲ κόσμος οὔτε ἡ ὕλη δοκεῖ, τὸ ἄμορφον εἶδος, τὸ ἀδιατύπων αἴσχος, οὔτε τὸ εἶδος (οὐ γὰρ πεποικίλται τοῦτο οὐδὲ κεκόσμηται), ἀλλὰ τὸ συναμφότερον ἦτοι τὸ ἐξ ὕλης καὶ εἶδους συνεσθηκός. τὸ γὰρ τοῦ κόσμου ὄνομα ἀποτέλεσμα οἷόν ἐστι δυεῖν, κοσμοῦντος καὶ κοσμουμένου· κοσμεῖ μὲν γὰρ τὸ εἶδος, κοσμεῖται δὲ ἡ ὕλη· κόσμος δὲ οὐδέτερον, ἀλλὰ τὸ συναμφότερον. κατ' ἀμφοτέρωθεν οὖν ὁ φιλόσοφος κατορθοῖ, καὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν κόσμον λέγων καὶ τὸ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων σύγκριμα· ἄμφω γὰρ ἐξ ὑποκειμένου καὶ εἶδους συνεστήκατον. (Psell. *Theol.* 1.6.57-64 Gautier)

But it seems to me that the cosmos is neither matter, the formless form, the unformed ugliness, nor the form (for this is neither ornamented nor ordered), but the *συναμφότερον*, which is unified from matter and form. For the name cosmos is a result, as it were, of two, the ordering and that which is ordered: For the form orders, but matter is ordered. Cosmos, however, is neither of the two, but the *συναμφότερον*. According to both, therefore, the philosopher proceeds correctly by calling also heaven cosmos and the composite whole of the elements. For it is composed of both the underlying and the form.

This clearly formulated passage with reference to Aristotle immediately raises several questions: Does Psellos really mean here by cosmos the entire creation or only the *κόσμος αἰσθητός*? And are there no other ontological levels

⁴ Psell. *Theol.* I 6; *Theol.* I 10; *Theol.* I 11; *Theol.* I 20; *Theol.* I 32; *Theol.* I 49; *Theol.* I 51; *Theol.* I 52; *Theol.* I 53; *Theol.* I 56; *Theol.* I 75; *Theol.* I 76; *Theol.* I 79; *Theol.* I 90; *Theol.* I 107 Gautier *Phil. Min.* I 7 Duffy; Psell. *Phil. Min.* 2.4; *Phil. Min.* II 5, *Phil. Min.* II 35 O'Meara; *De omnifaria doctrina* chapters 21-29, 84 Westerink.

between *κόσμος αἰσθητός* and God, which he indicates here by the term *εἶδος*?⁵ Psell. *Theol.* 1.6 Gautier does not give us any satisfactory answer to this problem. But a look at e.g. Psell. *Phil. Min.* 2.4, 2.5 and 2.35 Duffy immediately allows the assumption that Psellos could have regarded at least the *νοῦς* and the world-soul as independent levels of being that stand between *κόσμος* and God. And since Psellos in Psell. *Theol.* 1.49, 26-27 Gautier, for instance divides being into the corporeal and incorporeal we can safely ask the rhetorical question: What else could incorporeal mean besides the classical concept of *κόσμος νοητός*? It thus seems that the passage from Psell. *Theol.* 1.6 Gautier mentioned above takes into account only a part of creation, namely the sensible world, leaving out the higher realm of being. Such an interpretation could emphasise the Neoplatonic continuity in Byzantine – or for that matter Psellian – thought by further reference to *De omnifaria doctrina* chapters 21-29 Περὶ νοῦ Westerink, where Psellos frequently makes use of Proclus' ET or for that matter to chapter 84, where he talks about Platonic forms. His reassurance, recurring in different occasions, that in general some of the Hellenic theology is useful for the Christian faith⁶, may consolidate the assumption that he was not averse to the Neoplatonic ontology and, overtly or covertly, integrated it into his so called Christian-Neoplatonic philosophy. However, there is also another side of the problem: a clear statement about what incorporeal beings could exactly be has not been formulated by him in the passages mentioned. The references to the *νοῦς* and the world-soul are always portrayed as Greek or Platonic beliefs, but never praised by statements of approval. Let us thus take a look at other passages in order to formulate a more comprehensive view of his position regarding incorporeal entities.

III. Incorporeal entities

a. Angles as incorporeal entities

I want to start with a remark we find in Psell. *Theol.* 1.52, 16-20 Gautier. In addressing the question of whether God is corporeal or incorporeal, Psellos makes a distinction that informs us also about creation. Psellos writes:

Ἐπεὶ γάρ, φησὶν, 'οὐ σῶμα ὁ θεός, λείπεται δὴ ἀσώματον ὑπολαμβάνειν', ἀντιφάσει γὰρ ἔοικε ταῦτα, τὸ σῶμα καὶ τὸ ἀσώματον, ὧν μέσον οὐδέν, ὥστε εἴ τι μὴ σῶμα, τοῦτο ἀσώματον ὑπολαμβάνειν χρεών, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ μὲν τῶν γεννητῶν ἔχει χώραν ὁ δεύτερος λόγος, ἐπὶ δὲ θεοῦ κενοφωνία τίς ἐστὶν ἢ ἀντίφασις. (Psell. *Theol.* 1.52, 16-20 Gautier).

⁵ A first approach to the passage in Walter (2017, 54ff.)

⁶ e.g. *Phil. Min.* II 35, pp. 118,17-19 Duffy

He [Gregory of Nazianzus, DW] says “God is not body, and it consequently remains to assume that he is incorporeal” and this seems to resemble a contradiction: the body and the incorporeal have no middle, so that it follows that if something is not a body, it is necessary to assume it as incorporeal. But this second thought has place with things that have come into being, but with God the logical contradiction is a kind of empty talk.”

Although Psellos here criticises the attempt to apply logical methodology to God, his statement contains an important piece of information about creation: both, he writes, belong to the things that have become, the corporeal and the incorporeal. The fact that the incorporeal is counted among the γεννητά does not necessarily have any further implications, about its perishability or the like. But this statement calls again into question the assumption about our opening passage from Psell. *Theol.* 1.6, 57-64 Gautier, that the cosmos as συναμφότερον could mean the whole of creation, in that the incorporeal is also explicitly singled out as an independent realm of creation. Just a little later in Psell. *Theol.* 1.52 Gautier, we find a second remark that helps us narrow down Psellos’ position, i.e. a reference to the taxonomy of creation where he writes that God is above the incorporeal⁷, emphasizing thereby also the higher status of the incorporeal compared to the corporeal.

While in Psell. *Theol.* 1.52 Gautier he does not explain in more detail what the incorporeal could exactly be, we can find in Psell. *Theol.* 1.51 Gautier a reference to the ontological status of angels. He writes that they neither consist of ether⁸, nor do they have shapes⁹ or soul chariots¹⁰, but are simply incorporeal. The reason he gives is not immediately clear since his position seems to be formed only by rhetorical questions (18-20, 27-29, 51-52) and assertions (67-70). However, in the following lines¹¹ he gives us a clue in his argument against Proclus and Porphyry: Angels, he writes in his critique of the pagan philosophers, are without matter; but what exists without matter is by definition also without body, for matter always (παντῶς) occurs as formed (εἰδοποιηθεῖσα): ergo as body. Those who want to attribute bodies to angels must therefore also claim that they have matter in the sense of πρώτη ὕλη, which Psellos in turn positions ontologically at the lower end of creation, most distant from God.¹² Since angels are positioned immediately (ἀμέσως) around the divine¹³ they cannot have a share in matter and must thus be incorporeal. So not only do we have a first

⁷ οὕτω δὴ καὶ ὑπὲρ τὸ ἀσώματον ὢν, Psell. *Theol.* 1.52. 26-27 Gautier

⁸ Psell. *Theol.* 1.51, 12 Gautier

⁹ morphas, Psell. *Theol.* 1.51, 17 Gautier, tropos ... schématôn, Psell. *Theol.* 1.51, 19 Gautier

¹⁰ ochēmata, Psell. *Theol.* 1.51, 22 Gautier

¹¹ Psell. *Theol.* 1.51, 22-27 Gautier

¹² cf. Psell. *Theol.* 1.56, 26-33 Gautier

¹³ cf. Psell. *Theol.* 1.51, 62-64 Gautier

category of entities that are incorporeal, we find also an explanation for their incorporeality – however unsatisfactory it may be for the moment – namely their proximity to God.

This quite short argument finds a complement in a difficult passage of Psell. *Theol.* 1.10, 30-40 Gautier, where Psellos goes on to explain the hierarchies in creation and where he states better what it means to be close to or distant from God – both in the incorporeal and in the corporeal realm:

Διὰ σοφίας τοίνυν τὰ μὲν νοητὰ πρῶτα, τὰ δὲ αἰσθητὰ δεύτερα πεποίηκεν ὁ θεός, ὅτι τὰ μὲν σύνθετα, τὰ δὲ ἀπλᾶ· δευτέρα δὲ ἡ σύνθεσις τῆς ἀπλότητος. διὰ τοῦτο γοῦν τὰ ἀπλούστερα τῶν συνθετωτέρων προήλθε. πολὺ δὲ βάθος κἂν ταῖς ἀπλότησι κἂν ταῖς συνθέσεσιν· ὅθεν οὔτε τὰ ἀπλᾶ πάντα ὁμότιμα οὔτε τὰ σύνθετα, ἀλλ' ὅσα ἐγγίζει θεῷ τῶν ἀπλῶν, ἐκεῖνα τῶν ἀπωτέρω οὔσιωδέστερα καὶ κρείττονα· ὅσα δ' αὖθις τῶν αἰσθητῶν πλησιάζει τοῖς νοητοῖς, ἐκεῖνα τῶν κατωτέρω λεπτομερέστατα τε καὶ καθαρώτερα, ὥσπερ δὴ οὐρανὸς μὲν τοῦ ὑπὸ σελήνην πυρός, ἐκεῖνο δὲ τοῦ μετ' αὐτὸ ἀέρος καὶ ἀήρ ὕδατος καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ τῆς γῆς· αὕτη γὰρ τῶν ἄλλων στοιχείων παχυτέρα καὶ δυσμετάβλητος καὶ μᾶλλον ἀναπεπλησμένη τῆς ὕλης. (Psell. *Theol.* 1.10, 30-40 Gautier)

Out of wisdom God made the intelligible things first, but the perceivable things second, because the ones are composite, the others simple: but composite is subordinate to simple. Therefore, the simpler preceded the more composite. But there is much depth both among the simple and the compound: Since neither the simple are all equally venerable, nor the composite, all those of the simple who come close to God are in a stronger sense being and more powerful than the more remote: all those again of the perceptible who approach the intelligible are made up of very small parts, and are very clean in comparison with those further down, as certainly the sky in comparison with the sublunary fire, and that with the air which comes after it, and the air with the water, and the water with the earth. For the latter is thicker than the other elements and difficult to change and filled with matter.

What is important for our investigation of incorporeal objects here is how he expands on the reason for the hierarchies: It does not result from an increasing simplicity or unity of the incorporeal entities - for everything incorporeal is simple *per se*. Proximity and distance from God must, of course, not be understood in spatial terms, as he says on another occasion¹⁴, but finds its explanation with reference to virtue. The notion Psellos uses here in Psell. *Theol.* 1.10 is “ἐγγίζει θεῷ” and it goes back to Gen. 18, 23. It is understood in older interpretations as effect of virtue: Gregory of Nazianzus and also by Basil

¹⁴ ...αἱ δὲ ἐγγύτητες αὐται οὐ κατὰ τοπικὴν συνέλευσιν γίνονται..., Psell. *Theol.* 1.32, 109-110 Gautier

the Great refer to Moses stating in resembling wording that one approaches God by good deeds (*di'... praxeis agathas eggus ginetai tou Theou*¹⁵). Psellos now takes up exactly this train of thought in Psell. *Theol.* 1.11, 36-41 Gautier where he describes “ἐγγίζει θεῶ” as follows:

ἀλλ’ ὅσα μὲν ἐγγίζει τῷ θεῷ, ταῦτα δὴ καὶ καθαρωτέρας τοῦ θεοῦ τὰς ἐμφάσεις ἐμφαίνει, ὥσπερ δὴ τὰ καθ’ ἡμᾶς χερουβιμ καὶ ἡ σύμπασα τῶν ἀγγέλων τάξις, ὅσα δὲ ἀπώκισται, ἐν τούτοις ἀμυδροτέροις εἶδεσι τὸ θεῖον ἐξεικονίζεται. (Psell. *Theol.* 1.11, 36-41 Gautier)

All those things which are come close to God, these of course also show the purer reflections of God, as Our cherubim and the whole order of angels; but all those which are remotely situated: The divine is delineated in these weaker forms.

With the contrast between reflections (ἐμφάσεις) and things delineated (ἐξεικονίζεται) – a possible reference to the Platonic allegory of the cave from the Republic book 7 – Psellos means that the different intensity of God's reflection in incorporeal things finds its explanation in a kind of strength and permanence in them. It is given in a stronger degree to angels and in a lesser degree to human beings¹⁶:

καὶ ἡμεῖς μὲν ἀπὸ τοῦ δυνάμει καλοῦ εἰς τὸ ἐνεργεῖα προχωροῦμεν· κἂν ἀποπέσωμεν τοῦ κατ’ ἐνεργεῖαν ἀγαθοῦ, πάλιν εἰς τὴν δύναμιν ἀντιπεριαγόμεθα, ἀφ’ ἧς αὖθις ἡ ἐπάνοδος γίνεται· ἡ γὰρ δύναμις ὁδὸς ἐστὶ πρὸς ἐνεργεῖαν. ἄγγελος δέ, εἶδος ὦν τὸ καθαρώτατον καὶ αὐτοδύναμος ἐνεργεῖα, μᾶλλον δὲ ἐνεργεῖα ἄχραντος...

And we do progress from the potentially good to the actively; but if we fall away from the good in activity, we are, on the other hand, brought back into potentiality, from which the ascent begins again. The potentiality is a road to the activity. But the form of an angel is a very clean and self-empowering activity, even more an immaculate activity...

I take the οὐσιωδέστερα καὶ κρείττονα in Psell. *Theol.* 1.10, 33-35 Gauthier thus not to refer to Platonic forms, but to the hierarchy of angels. And it seems, then, that Psellos truly distinguishes a corporeal part of creation from an incorporeal part and that the first entities that belong to the incorporeal part are the angels. The taxonomy of their ranks is described according to the traditional interpretation of “ἐγγίζει θεῶ” by the virtue and constancy of their activity.

¹⁵ Basilios the Great *Homiliae super Psalmos* 29, p. 380, 14 Migne

¹⁶ Psell. *Theol.* 1.29, 113-117 Gautier

b. The incorporeality of the soul

Having found that for Psellos angels have a prominent position in the category of the incorporeal part of creation and having found a preliminary answer to our question whether by cosmos in Psell. *Theol.* 1.6, 57-64 Gautier Psellos means the whole of creation or also assumes a κόσμος νοητός we now also have to pursue the question whether he does integrate also other presumably incorporeal entities into his understanding of creation.

The soul has an interesting double mode of being, at times incorporeal at times corporeal, a difference that gives the explanation to why it is not always called *psychê* but is also at times called πνεῦμα.¹⁷ In Psell. *Theol.* 1.34, 6-10 Gautier Psellos explains:

ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἡ ψυχὴ κατὰ τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον ἀδιάστατός ἐστι τὴν φύσιν καὶ ἀμερής, ἐν ἡμῖν δὲ γενομένη μεμέρισται, οὐκ αὐτὴ διαστᾶσα καὶ μερισθεῖσα, ἀλλὰ τοῦ ὑποδεξαμένου αὐτὴν σώματος κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν φύσιν μεριστῶς ἐκείνην λαβόντος, διὰ ταῦτά φησιν ὁ προφήτης ‘ὅτι πνεῦμα διήλθεν ἐν αὐτῷ’.
(Psell. *Theol.* 1.34, 6-10 Gautier)

For since the soul, according to the precise concept, is nature without extension and undivided, but divided when it came into being in us, without being extended and divided, but because the body receiving it, according to its proper nature, received it divided, therefore the Prophet said that “the soul extended in it”.¹⁸

This position reminds us of different other passages where Psellos distinguishes the conditions of the soul, living by itself and living with the body.¹⁹ However, the well-known passage from the *Chronographia*²⁰ does, to

¹⁷ Cf. Psell. *Theol.* I 76, 26-27 Gautier; cf. Walter (2017, 70-74).

¹⁸ Cf. Psell. *Theol.* 1.34, 19-20 Gautier

¹⁹ Cf. O’Meara 2012, 155

²⁰ Psell. *Chron.* 6a8 Reinsch in Sewter’s Translation: “According to my observations, I distinguish three kinds of soul, each having a character of its own. The first type is that which lives in isolation, by itself, freed from the body, unbending and altogether incapable of compromise; the other two I have examined in the light of their co-existence with the body. For instance, if the soul, despite the deep and numerous emotions to which it is subject, chooses to live the life of moderation, as though it were the exact centre of a circle, then it brings into being the man who plays his part in public affairs. Such a soul is neither really divine nor entirely concerned with the apprehension of spiritual things, nor yet overprone to indulge the body, nor subject to passion. On the other hand, if the soul turns aside from this middle course and marches on the path that leads to low, base passions, then it produces the voluptuous and the sensual man. Suppose then that someone were able to step outside the bounds of all things pertaining to the body, and take up his position at the height of spiritual perfection, what would he have in common with the world around him? ‘I have put off my tunic,’ says the Scripture, ‘and how shall I put it on again?’ By all means let him go up his high and lofty mountain: let him stand with the angels, so that unearthly light may be shed upon him: let him

my mind, not contain a Neoplatonic position even if the wording might suggest so. It is true that Psellos distinguishes there the different ways of existence of the soul, but he does not evaluate them according to the Neoplatonic hierarchy of virtues; the details point to a different direction: As F. Lauritzen (2013) rightly shows, the passage is a long critique of the *ἀπάθεια* as a way of life. And it is also true that Psellos discusses the political man here living a life between the two extremes. However, I don't think the passage advocates the Damascian position of a "mixed life". Damascius explains that intellectual activity is not without pleasure. Speaking about the mixture of intellect and pleasure, he points at the pleasure of cognition, not at bodily pleasure.²¹ Psellos instead clearly speaks about a political activity that is firmly rooted in the sensible world, requiring and believing it possible for this sensible world. It is a mildness that Leo Paraspondylos does not provide. His argument is in my view thus basically an ontological one, not an ethical one. The life separated from the body is neither desirable, nor possible:²²

εἰ δ' οὐδείς τῶν πάντων τῆς φύσεως τοσοῦτον κατεκαυχίσατο,
No one on earth has ever triumphed over the force of nature to such an extent
[...]. (Sewter)

Rather Psellos understands the life separated from the body in the light of Psell. *Theol.* 1.34 Gautier as the time after bodily death, as he says only shortly before in the passage from *Chronographia* 6a7.9-12 Reinsch:

"Εγὼ γ' οὖν τὴν στάθμην τῆς τοιαύτης γνώμης θαυμάζω μὲν, αἰῶσι μὲν ἄλλ' οὐ
χρόνοις πρόσφορον ἡγῆμαι, καὶ βίῳ τῷ μέλλοντι ἄλλ' οὐ τῷ ἐφεστηκότι.
(*Chronographia* 6a7.9-12 Reinsch)

I myself admire the inflexibility of such a mind, but its proper place, in my opinion, lies not in time, but in eternity: not in this present life, but in the existence hereafter. (Sewter)

In research literature the position is found that Psellos here integrates the Neoplatonic doctrine of the levels of virtue with the Aristotelian position about the ethical virtues as middles. In the Neoplatonic theory the different

separate himself from men and avoid their society. No one on earth has ever triumphed over the force of nature to such an extent, but if this imaginary person were by chance entrusted with the direction of state affairs, I would counsel him to take matters in hand like a man dealing with his fellow-men, not to pretend that he was endowed with the unerring straightness of a ruler, for not all have been made equally perfect. If he renounces all deviation from the path of moral rectitude, it naturally follows that he at once rejects also those who traverse the crooked path."

²¹ cf. van Riel 2000, 149-155; and 165 about mild and violent pleasure.

²² Cf. also Reinsch (2015, book VI FN 256)

levels can be reached by virtuousness. But Psellos here denies the possibility to achieve the highest step, detaching the soul from the body. Thus, I understand it as disconnected from the classical ethical discussion in Neoplatonism about virtue, because it refers only to the time after death where soul and body are separated until resurrection. Thus, in my opinion the passage cannot be supported by further references to e.g. Psell. *De omnifaria doctrina* 66-81 Westerink that reproduce more clearly Neoplatonic positions.

c. Platonic Forms

In Psell. *Theol.* 1.79 Gautier, Psellos comments on Maximus Confessor's *λόγοι* theory and criticises it²³ as follows:

ἔστι δὲ ὃ φησι τοιοῦτον. πρὸ τῶν ατόμων εἶδη τινὰ τίθησιν, οὐ πάνυ τι ἐνταῦθα τοῖς ἔξω φιλοσόφοις ἀντικείμενος· ἕκαστον δὲ τῶν εἰδῶν ἀπλοῦν τε δίδωσι καὶ ἑαυτῷ ὁμοιον, ὁποῖόν ἐστι καὶ τὸ εἶδος τὸ ἀνθρώπινον, πρὸ τῶν κατὰ μέρος ἀνθρώπων νοούμενον καὶ ἐν ἀπλότῃτι γνωριζόμενον· (Psell. *Theol.* 1.79 Gautier)

But such is what he says: Before the individuals he placed some forms, not entirely opposed to those of the pagan philosophers. But he gave each form as simple and similar to itself, in which way also the human form is intelligible before the individual human beings and is recognised in simplicity.

Only a little later, however, he distances himself from this position; in Psell. *Theol.* 1.79, 115-124 Gautier writes:

ἃ δὲ πρὸ τῆς τοῦ παντός ὑπάρξεως ἐθεώρησεν, αὐτῷ ἂν ἢ δῆλα τῷ μόνῳ θεῷ. ἐνάγει δέ με πρὸς τὸν λόγον καὶ ὁ μέγας Βασίλειος, ‘πρεσβυτέραν τινὰ κατὰστασιν’ τοῦ παρόντος κόσμου ἀποφαινόμενος, ἐν ᾗ δεδημιουργῆσθαι τὰς ὑπερκειμένας τάξεις θεολογεῖ. κἂν τοῦτον δέ τις ἀναιροίῃ τὸν λόγον, ἀλλὰ τό γε τοὺς λόγους ἔχειν τῶν μελλόντων συστήναι ‘τὸν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸν’ οὐκ ἂν τις ἀντείποι νοῦν ἔχων, τοῦτο δ’ ἀντικρὺς ἐστὶ τὸ θεωρεῖν· οὐ γὰρ ὥσπερ ἡ φύσις τοὺς λόγους ἔχει τῶν γινομένων ἀνεπαισθήτως, οὕτω δὲ καὶ θεὸς ἀνεκνόητος τῶν ἐσομένων ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ προθεωρῶν πάντα ἀρρήτως καὶ ὑπερουσίως, οἶδεν ἐν τίνι μέρει χρόνου τάδε ἢ τάδε γενήσεται. (Psell. *Theol.* 1.79, 115-124 Gautier)

What he thought before the existence of the universe is clear only to God himself. But the great Basilios convinced me of this thought when he set forth that before the present cosmos there was “an older institution” in which he says that the higher orders were created. And even if someone were to do away

²³ ἔστι δὲ ὁ λόγος ἀσαφής μὲν καὶ δυσείκαστος...; 75

with the thought, no one in his right mind could contradict that “God who is above all” made that the things to come have reasons; but this is contrary to thought. For he does not have the reasons like the nature of things coming to be in an unnoticed way - God, therefore, is not ignorant of things to come, but knows them all in advance in an ineffable and in a supernatural way; he knows at what time this and that will happen.

With Basil the Great, Psellos here hints at an “older institution” known only to God. The difference to the Middle-Platonic position is that Psellos does not speak of ideas “in” God, nor does he separate the *νοῦς* in a Neoplatonic manner, putting it at a lower level between God (the One) and sensible being, but he remains quite vague about the content of this “older institution” and God’s knowledge. The only thing we can learn from this passage is that God is the cause of creation and providence; the ultimate determinable cause of creation is however the divine will *βούλησις*.²⁴

While these two passages speak against a *κόσμος νοητός* of the Middle- or Neoplatonic kind in Psellos writings, the third text that I want to present seems to assert the opposite and opens up another possibility of interpretation: in Psell. *Theol.* 1.90, 29-31 Gautier for example, Psellos declares that everything, both thinkable and perceptible, was present “in” God, but neither separate, nor mixed - a reminiscence of the Calcedonian formula; Psellos further writes affirmatively that God is full of true wisdom, philanthropy and goodness and is himself paradigm for the world. So we might suppose that at least here references to Platonic forms might be meant by these attributes of God; A closer look however shows that none of these expressions are about Platonic forms, but discuss the way we can talk about God. In Psell. *Theol.* 1.76, 80-83 Gautier Psellos retreats to the position that all such designations are ultimately due only to the defectiveness of our language and do not set forth the “content” of God’s thoughts. To a similar enumeration that has its roots in Plato’s *Sophist*, he writes thus:

κοινῶς τε νοῦν μὲν τὴν τριάδα προσαγορεύομεν καὶ ζωὴν καὶ οὐσίαν καὶ ὄν, οὐχ ὅτι νοῦς ἐστίν, οὐδ’ ὅτι κυρίως ὄν, ἀλλ’ ὅτι μηδὲν ἔχομεν τούτων παρ’ ἡμῖν τιμιώτερον, ἵν’ ἐκεῖνο τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν κατονομάσωμεν.

Together we call the Trinity intellect and life and essence and being, neither because it is intellect nor because it is being in the proper sense, but because we have nothing more valuable than this with us to call its nature with.

²⁴ Psell. *Theol.* 1.53, 82-85 Gautier

There are, however, also passages that seem much more Platonic in character. In Psell. *Theol.* 1.107, 100-104 Gautier, for example, Psellos explicitly speaks of separate forms above or beside the individuals.

φησὶ γὰρ ὡς ἔστι τις καὶ παρ' ἡμῖν οὐσία εἶδος ὀνομαζομένη, ἀνθρώπειον δὲ τοῦτο ἢ ἵππειον ἢ βόειον, ἢ ἄλλο τι τοιουτότροπον ὑπὲρ ταῦτα ἢ παρὰ ταῦτα· ὑφ' ἑκάστων δὲ τῶν εἰδῶν ἄτομα πολλὰ διηρίθμηνται, ἄνθρωποι, ἵπποι, βόες, κατὰ τὰ παραδείγματα τῶν εἰδῶν, ὁρισμός δὲ πᾶσι τοῖς ὑπὸ τὸ εἶδος ἀτόμοις εἷς. (Psell. *Theol.* 1.107, 100-104 Gautier)

For he says that there is also among us a being called form; but this is a human, equine, bovine, or some other such thing above or beside them. Under each form are divided many things according to the models of the forms, men, horses, cattle, but the definition is one for all individuals under the form.

This particularly dense passage is, according to Psellos, based on the statement of Gregory of Nyssa. A close reading reveals its rich and presuppositional content; for Psellos here distinguishes not only individuals (ἄτομα) from forms (εἶδη), but also forms from definitions (ὁρισμοί) and λόγοι - forms and beings (οὐσία) he in turn identifies with each other. A look at the description of the term *logos* (111) further shows that it is dependent on the *eidos* together with the shape (μορφή) and the definition (ὁρισμός, 116-117). The form (μορφή) depends on the εἶδος either κυρίως or ὁμωνυμῶς (115-116). The second type, i.e. ὁμωνυμῶς, occurs, for example, in the case of images, where shape and definition differ: The drawn human being, for example, is modelled on the sensual human being in terms of form, while the definition "rational", "mortal" etc. does not apply to him (116-117).

In addition to this complex ontological and epistemological dependencies, it is also striking that Psellos at one point describes forms by adjectives as if they were qualities (100-101) and refers to individual human beings as human beings in the proper sense (κυρίως ἄνθρωποι, 110-111). It seems as if Psellos in this passage first processes all three main positions regarding forms (*ante rem*, *in re* and *post rem*) in order to then take a position himself and return to the real question of the text, that of the nature of God:

Ὡςπερ οὖν ἡμῖν τοῖς κατὰ μέρος ἀνθρώποις καὶ αὐθις τοῖς κατὰ μέρος ἀγγέλοις μία τις εἰδικὴ οὐσία συμπέφυκεν, οὕτω δὴ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν τριῶν ὑποστάσεων, πατρός φημι καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ ἁγίου πνεύματος, μία τις οὐσία καὶ φύσις ἐστὶ θεότητος καὶ κλήσις. (118-121)

Just as we, the individual human beings, and in turn also the individual angels, are endowed with a form-like being, so also with the three hypostases; I mean of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is a being of some kind, a nature and name of the deity.

ἡμῖν γὰρ μία θεότης τὸ σεβόμενον, ἣν δὴ καὶ οὐσίαν καὶ φύσιν καὶ μορφήν οἱ θεοὶ πατέρες κατωνόμασαν, ἄτμητον, ἀμέριστον, ἀδιάστατον, κἂν ἐπινοίαις τισὶ διαιρουμέναις συνδιαιρῇται καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα. (136-138)

For us, the worshipped is a deity that truly the divine fathers called being and nature and form, indivisible, undivided, unexpanded, yet through divided considerations the names were also divided in the process.

Despite the modes of *εἶδη* enumerated before, it can be seen that Psellos here also describes an Aristotelian-like position of universalia *in re*, as we saw in the lines 110-111. The main message of this extremely complicated text, however, is that Psellos, rejects a “form” of God separated and above the trinity (118-121).

IV. Proclus' role in Psellos' ontology

Already Zervos (1919, 153) drew on the text, now edited as *Phil. Min. II* 5 Duffy, to explain Psellos' ontological position. What is presented there is a collage of Proclus' interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus*, explaining the world-soul through the circles of the same and the different and their movements. Only a little before²⁵, Psellos also offers the mathematical interpretation of the Platonic passage, incorporating the Proclean *Commentary on the Timaeus*. For Zervos, Psellos thus presents a position strongly influenced by Proclean neoplatonism, although sometimes supplemented by references to Jamblich or other pagan thinkers. Robinson has shown, however, that many of Psellos' uses of Proclus are merely methodological and should not be overstated.²⁶

There is a lot to say about the connection between Proclus and Psellos as is also reflected in the growing contributions in research literature to this problem. But if we return to the initial text Psell. *Theol.* 1.10 Gautier, for which we noted that Psellos could refer to angels as incorporeal entities, we will see that he surprisingly draws on Neoplatonic material not for the incorporeals but for the description of the corporeal world.²⁷ The physical world seems to be structured by the following principles: On the one hand, by the existence of the

²⁵ *Phil. Min.* 2.4 Duffy

²⁶ Robinson 2020, 59

²⁷ See the passage again in its entirety: Διὰ σοφίας τοίνυν τὰ μὲν νοητὰ πρῶτα, τὰ δὲ αἰσθητὰ δευτέρα πεποίηκεν ὁ θεός, ὅτι τὰ μὲν σύνθετα, τὰ δὲ ἀπλᾶ· δευτέρα δὲ ἡ σύνθεσις τῆς ἀπλότητος. διὰ τοῦτο γοῦν τὰ ἀπλούστερα τῶν συνθετωτέρων προῆλθε. πολὺ δὲ βάθος κἀν ταῖς ἀπλότησι κἀν ταῖς συνθέσεσιν· ὅθεν οὔτε τὰ ἀπλᾶ πάντα ὁμότιμα οὔτε τὰ σύνθετα, ἀλλ' ὅσα ἐγγίζει θεῷ τῶν ἀπλῶν, ἐκεῖνα τῶν ἀπωτέρω οὐσιωδέστερα καὶ κρείττονα· ὅσα δ' αὖθις τῶν αἰσθητῶν πλησιάζει τοῖς νοητοῖς, ἐκεῖνα τῶν κατωτέρω λεπτομερέστατά τε καὶ καθαρώτερα, ὥσπερ δὴ οὐρανὸς μὲν τοῦ ὑπὸ σελήνην πυρός, ἐκεῖνο δὲ τοῦ μετ' αὐτὸ ἀέρος καὶ ἀήρ ὕδατος καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ τῆς γῆς· αὕτη γὰρ τῶν ἄλλων στοιχείων παχυτέρα καὶ δυσμετάβλητος καὶ μᾶλλον ἀναπεπλησμένη τῆς ὕλης.

elements, which in a certain sense can be called simple, and on the other hand, by the additional features of the decreasing size of these elements and their purity when they are particularly “close” to incorporeal things. Now the arguments for the corporeal world are taken from Proclus' *Commentary on Timaeus*, which in 2.40, 3-10 asserts the proximity of fire to heaven as well as the low position of the element earth; on the other hand, it refers to the passage 2.51, 20-28 of the *Commentary on Timaeus* which asserts a mixture and thus impurity of low-level elements. In the direct confrontation between Proclus and Dionysius Areopagites in Psell. *Theol.* 1.10 Gautier the latter seems to have the authority regarding incorporeal beings. I want to suggest that this arrangement is to a certain extent also reflected in the *Chronographia* 6.38 and 42, where Psellos says:

Ἐντεῦθεν οὖν ὀρμηθεὶς αὐθις ὥσπερ περὶ ὁδὸν ἐκπληρῶν ἐς Πλωτίνους καὶ Πορφύριους καὶ Ἰαμβλίχους κατήειν, μεθ' οὓς ὁδῶ προβαίνων εἰς τὸν θαυμασιώτατον Πρόκλον ὡς ἐπὶ λιμένα μέγιστον κατασχών, πᾶσαν ἐκεῖθεν ἐπιστήμην τε καὶ νοήσεων ἀκρίβειαν ἔσπασα· μέλλων δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα ἐπὶ τὴν πρώτην ἀναβαίνειν φιλοσοφίαν καὶ τὴν καθαρὰν ἐπιστήμην μυεῖσθαι, τὴν περὶ τῶν ἀσωμάτων θεωρίαν προύλαβον ἐν τοῖς λεγομένοις μαθήμασιν, ἃ δὴ μέσσην τινὰ τάξιν τετάχεται, τῆς τε περὶ τὰ σώματα φύσεως καὶ τῆς ἀσχέτου πρὸς ταῦτα νοήσεως,

Starting from here, I went in circles, as it were, to thinkers like Plotinus, Porphyrios and Jamblich. After these, proceeding methodically, I anchored with the admirable Proclus as in a vast harbour and from there absorbed every kind of knowledge and accuracy of thought. But since I then wanted to ascend to the first philosophy and be initiated into pure knowledge, I first acquainted myself with the doctrine of immaterial things in the so-called sciences (which occupy an intermediate position between the nature of the bodies and the knowledge independent of them, of the entities themselves, to which pure thinking corresponds) [...] (transl. on the basis of Reinsch 2015).

Ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἐστὶ τις καὶ ὑπὲρ ταύτην ἐτέρα φιλοσοφία, ἣν τὸ τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς λόγου μυστήριον συμπληροῖ, (καὶ τοῦτο δὲ διπλοῦν καὶ φύσει καὶ χρόνῳ μεμερισμένον [...])

But since there is another philosophy that stands above this one, which has as its content the mystery of our [i.e. Christian] Logos [...] (transl. on the basis of Reinsch 2015).

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