Phantasia between Soul and Body in Proclus' Euclid Commentary

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Proclus discusses imagination (phantasia) in the second prologue to his Euclid commentary. In his discussion, he describes phantasia in terms which make it seem like a passive screen, onto which geometrical figures are projected. However, he also speaks of phantasia in this text in terms which make it seem active, as if it were the projector rather than the screen receiving projections. In this paper I will clarify Proclus’ doctrine of phantasia in the Euclid commentary, by situating it within his more general theory of discursive reason (dianoia).

1 At the beginning of the second prologue to the Euclid commentary, Proclus raises a question about the ontological status of geometrical matter (tēn ĝeometrikēn huēn), which leads him to a discussion of phantasia as a projection of geometrical logoi. On the one hand, if the figures which geometers speak about are sensible, and therefore are wedded to sensible mat-

1 The first prologue is about mathematics in general, the second is about geometry.


ter, then it seems that they could not lead us to the contemplation of the intelligibles by making us used to thinking the immaterial. Moreover, we do not find among sensibles the perfect angles, straight lines, or points without breadth which we do find in the objects of geometry. As well, how could geometrical conclusions be irrefutable if the figures about which they speak are in the ever-changing matter of sense-objects (49.04 ff.)? However, if it were the case that the underlying in geometry was outside of matter (εἰς τὸν ἀνάβασιν τῆς γεωμετρίας), pure and separate from sensible objects, other problems arise. In this second case, geometrical objects would have neither parts, nor body, nor magnitude.

For logoi have present to them magnitudes, bulk, and extension in general in virtue of the matter which is their receptacle (ἐν βολῶν ἀναβολῆν), a receptacle which receives the indivisible in a divided manner, the unextended through extension, and the motionless as moving. (49.27–50.02)

The consequence of this would be that the normal operations of the geometrical become impossible, because it is impossible to perform bisections, make comparisons of size, and speak of contact between figures which have no magnitude, extension, or bulk. Thus it must be the case that geometrical matter (βολή) is divisible, but not sensible.

Proclus' solution to this dilemma is to distinguish between two types of underlying matter (ἀναβολὴν ἀναβολῆν):

for matter likewise is twofold, as Aristotle says somewhere: the matter of things tied to sensation and the matter of imagined objects (τὸν πανθητικόν) — and we shall admit that the corresponding universal is of two kinds: the one sensible, because it is participated by sensible things, and the other imaginary (πανθητικόν), because it has its existence in the multiplicity of imagination (πανθητικόν). (51.15–17) 4

4 Morrow notes at this point that he does not follow Friedlein's punctuation, but rather follows Baroccius and Schönberger in understanding βόλη που καὶ ἀναβολή πρὸς τὸ γεγονός, and the previous clause rather than the following διττον εἰναι καὶ καθαρόν, 1 Morrow in this. He also notes that Aristotle distinguishes (Met. 1036a9–12) between ἀνάρ καὶ ἀναβολή and ἀναβολή rather than between ἀνάρ καὶ ἀναβολή and ἀναβολή τὸν ἀναβολικόν. However, Morrow thinks that Proclus is justified in this modification, because as De Anima 433a10 Aristotle assumes that phantasia is a form of nous. Whether or not this is a justifiable reading of Aristotle in general, it is certainly justified for Proclus. See, for example Procli Diadochi in Platonis Timaeum commentario, ed. E. Diehl, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1903–1906) I.243.27–248.06. He is comfortable in using terms in a very fluid manner, even if he thinks that the ontological realities which he names are precisely delineated. For example, he uses both the terms eidos and logos to refer to the contents of the Soul's nous, even though he distinguishes clearly between the primary existence of the eidos in Nous, and their secondary existence as the Soul's nousa. Here it would be natural for Proclus to think of Aristotle's contrast between the sensible and the intelligible as a contrast between the

Phantasia has in it a universal 5 which is different from the universal in sense-objects. But it is also different from the universal in dianoia. 6 And this universal in phantasia finds itself in a matter which is likewise in between the matter of sense and the immateriality of dianoia. 7 Phantasia is able to have in it figures which have extension and are divisible, "through its formative motion, and the fact that it has its existence with and in the body" (51.21–22). Thus the mathematical objects in phantasia are able to admit of divisions and comparisons, and differences of magnitude, because they do have extension in matter. But the matter in which they have their extension is not the matter of sensibles, with its imperfection and ever-changing nature.

In the Euclid commentary Proclus thinks that phantasia is in between dianoia and sensation. 8 This is why Aristotle called it passive nous (nous passive et le phantaion. Indeed, in a passage just following he mentions Aristotle's phrase nous pathetikón, and says that phantasia is called "nous" because of its kinship with the highest sort of knowledge, and "passive" because of its kinship with the lowest. This name manifests its intermediate character.

5 Proclus uses the term to katharou here, but he could have used the term logos.

6 Proclus has already said that mathematical objects are also dianoetic objects. Again we run into Proclus' fluid terminology. Because of their relative multiplicity, geometrical objects are classed below non-mathematical dianoetic objects, and below the objects of arithmetic. So one may think of them as the lowest sort of dianoetic object, as Proclus does when talking about mathematics in general. On the other hand, one may distinguish them from dianoetic objects, because of the extension of their underlying matter, as Proclus does here.

7 At this point Proclus brings up his three-fold distinction between the universal (α) before the many particulars, (β) in the many particulars, and (c) as posterior to and arising from the many particulars. He mentions this distinction, and then remarks that for each of these universals there is a difference in the underlying matter. Proclus then goes on to the passage quoted above, where he says there is a difference in the matter of aistheta and phantastika. Morrow's translation gives one the impression that this latter distinction should be mapped onto two of the three terms mentioned above: the universal before the many in the many, and posterior to the many. However, the phrase kai ta metechonta aitē asti themenos should be read as: "and we must also posit the universal which is participated [i.e., the universal in the many] itself as double." So what Proclus is doing is subdividing the middle term of the three-fold initial division. This fits with his other writings, where the universal before the many is unparticipated, the universal in the many is the participated moment—participated here either by sensible or imaginary matter—, and the universal after the many is the "latter-born" universal produced by Aristotle's abstraction. See Procli Commentarii in Platonis Parmenidem in Procli Opera Inedita, ed. V. Cousin (Paris, 1864) 892.20 ff.

8 The status of phantasia in Proclus in general is a controversial issue. H. Blumenhal is of the opinion that in Proclus' early works, especially the In Timaeum, deoa is thought of as the main faculty between sensation and dianoia. This place is gradually usurped by phantasia, so that in the late In Euclidem deoa is mentioned only marginally, and phantasia has become the main faculty occupying this middle position. See H.J. Blumenhal, "Plato's exposition of the De Anima and the psychology of Proclus," in De Jamblica à Proclus (Geneve, 1975) 123–47. This may be the case. Our interest in phantasia, however, is in particular role in the In Euclidem. For Proclus on phantasia see A. Charles, "L'imagination, miroir de l'âme selon Proclo,"
being only little sisters of the World Soul, do not produce the logos which structure body when we project mathematical logos. Rather, we project these logos into the matter produced by phantasia. In this account, the World Soul does not possess phantasia, because phantasia in partial souls is what takes the place of sensible logos.

I think Proclus’ account here suffers from an internal conflict produced by the difference between the World Soul and the partial soul. In his general account of the structure of the Soul as it is found in the In Euclidem, phantasia lies between diaonia and sense, and is not a parallel to the sensible logos. This should hold for all souls, because all souls share the same structure. Most of his discussion of phantasia at the beginning of the second prologue to the Euclid commentary stays with this account of phantasia as in-between. However, at 53.18ff. Proclus seems to remember that he is speaking of phantasia in a geometrical context, and that it would be strange to think of the World Soul as performing bisections, and other such operations which the geometric performs. Hence he seems to replace phantasia in the World Soul with the logos which structure body. After this one mention of phusi, however, both phusi and sensation seem to be forgotten, and Proclus returns to an account in which we find only diaonia and phantasia. One presumes that in this account sensation has resumed its place below phantasia.

III

Proclus’ general account of discursive reason (diaonia), is that it is a projection of the logos which constitute the essence (ousia) of the soul (probole ton nousidon logos). The Soul is a fullness (pleroma) of these logos, and diaonia is the activity by which the Soul draws out its implicit content, through a reversion (epistrophè) upon itself and upon Nous. In this projection, the Soul makes its unified nousidai logos to be multiple, as it draws forth out of itself the multiplicity of the sciences (epistemas), and in this case, as it draws forth out of itself the logos which constitute geometrical figures.

Indeed, the account which Proclus gives of phantasia in the Euclid commentary contains some of the most explicit descriptions of the probabil ton nousidon logos in the Procline corpus:

For diaonia possesses the logos but, not being powerful enough to see them when they are wrapped up, unfolds and exposes them and presents them to phantasia sitting in the vestibule. (54.27–55.02)

Thus thinking (nèitos) [in geometry] makes use of phantasia, and the syntheses and divisions of its figures are imaginary (phantastai). Its knowing (gnosis) is a journey (bodos) towards the dialetic being (dianethen ousian), but it has not yet reached it, because diaonia is looking towards the outside, and although investigating what is outside by means of what it has within, and making use of projections of logos (probolai logos), it


3 De Anima 430a24. At this point Aristotel is not referring to phantasia, but to the two types of nous, one which becomes all things and one which makes all things. Moorow refers us as well to In Tim. 1.244.20 and III.158.9.
is from itself moving to what lies outside. But if it should ever be able to roll up its extensions and figures and view their plurality as a unity without figure, then in turning back to itself it would view quite differently the partless, unextended, and essential (ousiódos) geometrical logos of which it is the fullness (plérómata). (55.06–18)

The Form itself (to ge éidos auton) is without motion, ungenerated, indivisible and free of all underlying matter. But whatever exists secretly (krugishthi) in it is brought to phantasia separately and dividedly. That which projects is dianoia; that from which it is projected is the dianoetic Form (dianëtikos éidos); that in which what is projected exists is this thing called ‘passive nouos’ (pathetikos houtos kalumenos nouos) that unfolds itself (circling) around the true Nous, divides out itself from the undividedness of pure intellection (apraziropous noëtikon), shapes itself according to the shapeless Forms (eidos) and becomes all things, all that dianoia and the partless logos in us is. (56.11–22)

All of the elements of Proclus’ general account of the probolê tòn ousiódôn logon are present. Dianoia is thought of as a unified fullness of logos, which produces out of itself the divided projections which are its own thoughts. These thoughts produce the divided sciences, which have as their aim to lead the soul back towards its united centre, and to pass from these to the higher unity which is Nous. However, this account differs from Proclus’ general account in one small way. The account of dianoia in the Euclid commentary seems to present dianoia as a unified plérómata, which is subsequently unfolded by phantasia. In his more general account, it is the ousia of the soul which is the plérómata tòn ousiódôn logos, and this plérómata is unfolded by the soul’s dianoia. We have here an example of the relativity of Proclus’ descriptions. The probolê tòn ousiódôn logos is moving at this point from one level of multiplicity, the temporal, to another level, the spatial. From the lower perspective, dianoia’s projection of the soul’s logos into temporal multiplicity appears as a dianoetic unity, even though in itself it does not appear so. Further, Proclus goes back and forth between a description of dianoia as the projector and that which is projected. Proclus says both that it is phantasia which projects geometrical logos and that it is dianoia which projects them into phantasia (52.20–53.05; 56.11–22).

IV

There is another important difference between this account in the Euclid commentary and Proclus’ main account of the probolê tòn ousiódôn logos, however, and it has to do with the passivity of phantasia as a receptacle for the projected geometrical logos. At 56.14–15, Morrow translates diastatîs kai meritiskos eis phantastian prongetai as “produced distinctly and individually on the screen of imagination.” Morrow supplies the term ‘screen,’ where the Greek has only “in imagination.” In his forward to the 1992 edition of Morrow’s translation, Ian Mueller writes:

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[Imagination in Neoplatonism] serves as a kind of depository for sensations and thus provides the basis for an account of empirical knowledge. But more importantly, particularly in Proclus’ Euclid commentary, it serves as a kind of movie screen on which dianoia projects images for mathematical reflection. (cx)

The other accounts which we have of the probolê tòn ousiódôn logos do not include this element of passivity in the projection. Rather, the usual description is of a spontaneous throwing forth of the ousiódês logos into a multiplicity which is the soul’s energêia. Both Morrow and Mueller regard phantasia in the Euclid commentary as a completely passive receptacle.

This characterization of phantasia as a passive projection screen is accurate in a certain sense, but is also misleading. While there seems to be a sort of ambiguous passivity in phantasia in this commentary, it is also clear that phantasia is an active principle. The evidence for a passive characterization of phantasia seems initially strong. Mueller points us to a passage in which Proclus refers to phantasia as a sort of mirror:

It is reasonable, then, that he [Euclid] should define this particular surface [the plane], and go on to construct all of his figures upon it. For this reason also he gives his work the subtitle “plane geometry.” And so one must understand the plane as like something projected (probolêmenon), and lying before our eyes, and dianoia as writing everything upon it, with phantasia as it were resembling a plane mirror, and the logos in dianoia sending down impressions of themselves to it. (120.25–121.07)

In this passage, phantasia does seem to be simply a screen on which dianoia projects logos, and hence a mere passivity. However, the context of this passage is Euclid’s definition of the plane. Proclus says that it is reasonable for Euclid to have chosen one of the two sorts of simple surfaces, the plane surface as opposed to the spherical surface, as the subject in which he will study the figures and their properties. The reason for this is that it is more easily done on a plane than on a sphere, because there are certain figures which cannot be represented on a sphere, such as a straight line or a rectilinear angle. For this reason we should think of phantasia as a plane projected in front of us, and of dianoia as writing everything on it, so that phantasia is like a plane mirror to which dianoia sends reflections of itself. Clearly here the emphasis is on the fact that a plane mirror is flat instead of curved, rather than on its reflectivity and passivity, because a flat surface is the most useful and basic for geometrical demonstrations.

Further, the most explicit passage in which phantasia is called ‘passive’ is the phrase at 56.16–18 “to de en hoi to probolêmenon pathetikos touto kalumenos nouo.” I have translated this above as “that in which what is projected exists is this thing called ‘passive nouo.’” This is an obvious reference back to 52.03–04 where Proclus refers to someone (Aristotle) who referred
to phantasia as "passive nous." But the phrase that Proclus uses at 52.03–04 is "nous pathētikon iš autēn prosepein ouk òkërēn," which literally means "someone did not shrink from calling [phantasia] passive nous." The phrase 'did not shrink from' indicates that Proclus thinks that this appellation is a bit strange. Indeed, he goes on to ask how anything could be nous and passive at the same time. The solution is that this name points towards the upper neighbour of phantasia, which is a sort of nous, and towards the lower neighbour, which is passive. We cannot draw the conclusion here, then, that phantasia itself is passive at all. Further, we cannot draw this conclusion from the use of the phrase at 56.16–18, because it is a clear reference back to 52.03–04. Finally, there are clear indications that phantasia is as much activity as passivity. The strongest indication of this is at 52.22, "[phantasia] is awakened by itself and projects (proballei) its object of knowledge (anagēretai men ap' hēmatēs kai proballei te gnôton)." So while a case might be made for the passivity of phantasia because it is that in which the logos which dianoia projects exist, it is more likely itself an activity, itself a projection of mathematical logos. It is possible that Proclus' thoughts here are ambiguous, because phantasia holds this middle place between the activity of dianoia's active projection, and the passivity of aisthēsis. Perhaps phantasia's projection is both active and passive, active in the sense that all projection is énergēia, and passive in the sense that the logos once projected seem to be their own receptacle, i.e., they are themselves both the 'mirror' of imagination and what is seen in the mirror.

V

Be all this as it may, what is missed in the account of phantasia as a mere passive screen is that the sort of probolē tôn oustodòn logos which phantasia performs is a projection of explicitly spatial logos.10 The logos in question are lines, angles, and figures. Phantasia is the moment of the unfolding of the cosmos where space, as interval (dianastai), emerges, just as dianoia in general is the moment where time emerges. The Soul is the first principle to exist in time, because it is unable to view all of the logos which it possesses in its óusia in one simple act. Its dianoetic movement from one logos to the next is described metaphorically as a circling around the nous in which it participates;

matter and Form are separate principles, such that matter is a sort of passive receptacle for the order imposed by immaterial Form. Here, however, matter is not so much a passive receptacle for Form, but has become a concomitant characteristic of a certain sort of low-level Form. Extension, which seems to be the cardinal character of material things, results from the declension of Form itself, rather than being supplied by an external principle. Another way to think of this is that the passive potentiality of matter has been subsumed under the active potentiality of Form, in Proclus. For this reason "intellegible matter" (53.01) is not a contradiction. Geometrical logoi are in intellegible matter because they are a sort of Form or logos which have extension, or interval. It is for this reason that phantasia is ambiguous, in that it seems to be both activity and passivity. Phantasia projects geometrical logoi, which because of their extension are in matter, but this matter is itself a product of the activity geometrical projection. So on the one hand phantasia, as that in which extended geometrical logoi exist, is a sort of passivity. But on the other hand, this extension which receives geometrical logoi is a product of phantasia's own projection, and is thus the issue of an activity.

Thus the sort of spatiality which emerges in phantasia is not the spatiality of Body, but rather is a cause or paradigm of the spatiality of Body. According to Proclus' doctrine of mean terms, between that which possess the perfection and precision of the unextended, and that which is extended but admits of all sorts of imprecision, is that which is both extended and precise; between dianoia and aisthēsis is phantasia. Geometrical figures, which are extended but precise, are the paradigms, and hence the causes of the imprecise order in Body. In Proclus' account of the seven main portions of the Soul, given in the Timaeus commentary, he holds that in its division into portions, the Soul's ousia possesses the principles of the remaining procession, and return of both two and three dimensional being. These portions of the Soul's ousia are not themselves the proximate causes of Body because they are not themselves two or three dimensional. They are rather the principles in which two and three dimensional being exist, as in their cause. They are portions of the ousia of the Soul which proceed outward into the dunamis and energeia of the Soul. Phantasia is between the Soul's ousia and Body, because unlike the ousia of the Soul, which is the cause of two and three-dimensionality, it actually is ideal two and three-dimensionality, without the imperfection of Body. It is with and in Body, yet the sort of matter in which it projects its ideas is intelligible matter. Intelligible matter in this sense is a peculiarly Neoplatonic invention: i.e., an entity which must exist because of other principles, such as the doctrine of mean terms, but which seems at first blush to be an oxymoron. And its being with and in Body is likely parallel to the way in which the boundaries of a solid are with and in it, without themselves being three-dimensional.

VI

In this paper we began with the question of the status of geometrical matter. This matter was seen to be a sort of in-between. According to Proclus, it shares extension with body, and immateriality with dianoia. We saw that Proclus' account of phantasia in the Euclid commentary is an example of his wider theory of dianoia, as a projection of the soul's essential logoi. In light of this, we examined the case made for a completely passive account of phantasia. We discovered that phantasia is as much an active principle of the projection of geometrical logoi, as it is a passive receptacle for its own projections. Finally, we pointed out that whereas for Proclus dianoia in general is a projection whose multiplicity is measured by Time, with the projection of ideal space by phantasia the soul's activity has reached the next greater level of multiplicity in the stepwise declension of the Procline universe.

ABSTRACT

In his commentary on Euclid's Elements, imagination (phantasia) is a type of discursive reason (dianoia) in which the Soul's logoi are projected into spatial multiplicity, rather than simply temporal multiplicity. Phantasia is both an active principle of projection, and the passive receptacle which receives its own projections. As such, phantasia provides an intelligible matter for its geometrical figures. This matter is itself geometrical extension.

14 This holds if one subscribes to a strong hylomorphism, like Aristotle, as well as if one thinks that the unity of matter and form is less strong.


16 Cf. In Tim. II.24.31–25.23. Proclus seems to think as well that physical logoi put forth their powers into matter as a sort of "exhalation."

17 In Tim. II.205.24–30.

18 Proclus does not allow us to pin him down here, but it is likely that he thought of phantasia as a sort of energeia of the Soul. The energeia is that which projects the euçtkēs logoi, as phantasia projects geometrical logoi; the Soul's energeia is its self-motion, as phantasia has a "formative motion (morphētikē kinesis)." See In Eucl. 51.21.