Philosophy and the Abrahamic Religions: Scriptural Hermeneutics and Epistemology

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CHAPTER EIGHT

PROCLUS:
PHILOSOPHY AS THE EXEGESIS
OF ‘SACRED’ TEXTS

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Introduction

Many of the papers in this volume examine the employment of Greek philosophy for the interpretation of sacred texts in the three Abrahamic religions. A central question which has to be asked about this employment is where the practice of philosophy ends and the practice of scriptural interpretation begins. Is philosophy once it is taken into a sacred discourse still philosophy? I argue in this paper that we have good reason to hold that it is, because an important part of the Greek tradition on which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam draw does not really allow a hard distinction between the two practices. In this Greek tradition, someone who interprets a revealed text is engaging in philosophy, and conversely, the philosopher engaged in reading philosophical texts thinks of them as ‘sacred’ in an important sense.

The main part of my argument consists in an examination of Proclus, a late-antique pagan Greek Neoplatonist. I look at Proclus for a few reasons. First of all, it is sometimes a bit easier to see how reason and revelation interact in a tradition to which one does not oneself subscribe, so the study of pagan Neoplatonism is informative for members of all three Abrahamic faiths. Second, Proclus is the pinnacle of the Greek pagan tradition, whose earlier figures influenced people like Philo and Augustine, and he himself had a great influence on the philosophy of the Abrahamic religions through such conduits as Boethius, the Pseudo-Dionysius, and the Liber de Causis. So he is a very significant figure.

1 412-487 C.E.
Finally, Proclus has what initially seems to be a clear distinction between a more ‘philosophical’ and a more ‘religious’ mode of discourse. At some times he seems to be a rigorous Platonic philosopher, while at others he seems to fall prey to late-antique religious fervour. I will argue that despite its appearance of plausibility, this distinction has no basis in Proclus’ way of thinking.

The particular topic that I will examine is Proclus’ doctrine of the provenance and interpretation of divine names, as it is found in his Commentary on the Cratylus of Plato. Proclus’ Platonic commentaries are valuable for insight into his own system of thought but are in general not very useful for what we would think of as an ‘accurate’ reading of the dialogues. The Cratylus commentary is an extreme example of this. In it, Proclus turns his attention to the etymologies of the names of the gods that Socrates lays out in the Cratylus. However, although it is fairly clear to us that Plato meant them to be taken ironically, these etymologies are taken in earnest by Proclus as sure guides to the divine natures. Therefore, because this text seems to be exclusively and overwhelmingly ‘religious’, and because it seems to be a completely misguided reading of Plato, it has received very little attention even by Proclus scholars.2

This is a shame, because the text is very enlightening. I will argue that according to his Cratylus commentary Proclus thinks that, although an oracle or a poet is the customary promulgator of a divine name, it is the philosopher who is the authoritative interpreter of that divine name. The reason for this is that the philosopher has the same access to the source of revelation as does the oracle or the poet, because the source of revelation is the same as the source of human reason, namely our intellection (noēsis) of the nature of the gods. Because of this, Proclus calls the true philosopher divine. There have not been many of them, but the most important of them was Plato, whose dialogues are therefore to be

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considered as revealed texts. Most importantly, however, although the dialogues are sacred texts, Proclus thinks that Plato’s act of authorship and his own act of interpreting Plato are squarely within the practice of philosophy, because philosophy, or dialectic, is just one mode of discourse that expresses the truth about the gods, alongside the inspired (in the strict sense), the symbolic, and the mode that uses images.

At the end of the paper, I want to suggest that Proclus’ conception is instructive for our understanding of the relation between revelation and philosophy in Medieval Christianity, and likely for Judaism and Islam as well. Further, I want to suggest that it says something about the textual nature of philosophy. Through a very brief comparison with Derrida, an author who engages with Platonism but whose doctrine of interpretation is in some ways diametrically opposed to the Neoplatonic orientation towards truth, I will suggest that there is a certain common philosophical methodology shared not only between pagan ‘theology’ and ‘philosophy’, and between pagan and Abrahamic philosophy, but even between the Ancient and Medieval practice of philosophy and contemporary philosophical schools.

Part One: Late-Antique and Medieval philosophy and scriptural interpretation

A. Proclus’ theory of Names, from his Commentary on the Cratylus of Plato

A.1 Natural names

In his commentary on Plato’s Cratylus Proclus picks up Socrates’ discussion of whether names are by nature (phusei) or by convention (thesei) (4.7). 3

3 Onoma in Greek means “name,” but it also means a “word” as opposed to rhēma which is an expression. In grammatical terms onoma also means a noun as opposed to rhēma which is a verb or predicate.

4 All references to the In Cratylum will be to Pasquali’s Greek Teubner text (1908, repr. 1994), and will be given in the body. In my quotations of Proclus I have in many cases modified published English translations or supplied my own. Note that the Cratylus commentary consists of passages written by Proclus, and passages which seem to have been added by the ‘Excerptor’ who put together the text using Proclus’ original work. This might have been a student of Proclus, and the whole work could possibly be a student’s notes of Proclus’ lectures, with the student’s own ideas interpolated. However, because I do not see any difference between the
He distinguishes four senses of 'by nature': “(1) as both the whole essences of the animals and plants and their parts; (2) as their activities and powers, like the lightness of fire and its heat; (3) as the shadows and reflections in mirrors; or (4) as fabricated images which are similar to their archetypes” (7.17-23). Proclus asserts that some names are natural in the fourth sense. He explains this by distinguishing a material and a formal element in names. As its material element, the way a name sounds is by convention, which is why it can vary from language to language. The name’s formal element, i.e. that which is most properly the name, is partly by convention and law (thesei and nomoi) insofar as it is a product of the thinking activity of the name-giver. But this formal element is also by nature if the name-giver institutes it as an imitation of a nature, i.e. of an eternal paradigm (16.29-18.25).

A consequence of this theory is that some natural names are more natural than others. A name that points accurately to something eternal and unchanging is more natural than a name that points to something permissible. Perishable things, having a good deal of the arbitrary in them, are in themselves more conventional than natural, and so likewise are their names (18.21). Because Proclus is interested in natural names, and because in keeping with the tradition after Plotinus he identifies the Greek gods with eternal and unchanging terms within the Neoplatonic immaterial hierarchy, in his commentary he follows Socrates and discusses almost exclusively the names of the gods.

Proclus thinks that a natural name has two distinct functions, depending on how it is used and who is using it: (1) For the name-giver it is revelatory (ekphantorikon) and instructive (didaskalikon) and (2) for the dialectician it is discriminating (dialkritikon). Through the “power that is adapted to the objects that it signifies (sumphua dunamin kai tois semainomenois sunermosmenein)” (16.22-23) the name is (1) revelatory of an intelligible essence, and so the name-giver can use it to instruct us about the intelligible. What this instruction gives rise to, however, is the ability to (2) discriminate one thing from another (16.5-27). Therefore the dialectician can take the name that the name-giver has made, and use it to discriminate one essence from another. Note that implicit in this twofold function is the structure of procession and return. As the maker of the name, the name-giver accomplishes the procession of the intelligible into the discursive through his rational activity (dianoia). As the user of the name, the dialectician is able to discriminate one intelligible from another, and so elevates his discursive reason up to the intelligible (16.28-17.23).

A.2 The divine name as an analogue of the god

A natural name can reveal the essence of the intelligible because it is an image of the intelligible. Proclus says that the soul has an “image making power (eikastikē dunamin)” (18.29) through which it can “liken itself to its superiors—gods, angels and daemons.” Through this same power, however, it can also make what proceeds from it like itself and like those things superior to it (19.2-5). This image-making power produces names:

Wishing to set up likenesses (homoiotētas) of the real beings, likenesses which are in a certain sense immaterial and which are born only from the rational essence (tēs logosousousias), using the help of the ‘linguistic imagination’ (lektikē phantasia), it produced the essence of names (tēn tōn onomatōn parēgagenous oustan) (19.8-12).

Proclus compares these names to the images of the gods, the statues that are consecrated by the ‘telestic’ art, and so assimilated to the divine natures (19.13-19).

How are natural names images of the intelligible, according to Proclus? This becomes clear in his discussion of Socrates’ example in the Cratylus of the weaver’s shuttle. The carpenter who makes various sorts of shuttles, for various types of fabric, looks to one and the same paradigm, the formula or logos of shuttle that he possesses in his soul (23.2-6). The material shuttle is therefore an image of the logos possessed by its maker. But the shuttle is also an image of higher things, and so the logos that governs its construction, can be used itself as an image in turn:

The shuttle is an image of the gods’ power of discriminating universal and particular things. For it imposes a representation of the activity of that power on its threads and bears the sign of the order of the discriminating gods (dialkritikōn theōn). Whence the theologians adopt shuttles to signify those gods, they neither speak of a form of shuttle nor use the name only by convention and symbolically (24.16-24).
There is no Form of Shuttle that dwells on the level of the “discriminating gods,” as if there were some divine oblong made of intelligible wood containing a spool of intelligible yarn. Rather, the employment of the word “shuttle” to teach us about the gods is not arbitrary, according to Proclus, because the shuttle’s activity of discriminating the warp and weft of the yarn is itself an image of the divine power of discrimination.

Proclus says that a name used in such a way is used “by analogy.” The term analogia refers to his general conception of how each order of the universe after the henads makes itself into an image of its cause. Each thing exists on every level, e.g. henadic, intelligible, intellectual, psychic, or material, and takes on successive ways of being the same fundamental character that originates in the henad. So when he says that the name ‘shuttle’ is used analogously, he means that what a material shuttle is to yarn, so is the power of the discriminating gods to what holds the place of yarn for them, i.e. “universal and particular things.” In a similar way, he says, when Plato in the Phaedrus speaks of horses and a charioteer in the soul, he doesn’t think that the soul’s powers are the Form of Horse (24.29-25.1). Rather, what horses are to the body, i.e. probably ‘driving’ powers, so are those powers within the soul to the soul itself.

Divine names are signs and traces (sunthēmata kai ichnē) of the divine Intellect (Nous). They are not the only such signs and traces, but they are those particularly adapted to thinking and communication (29.28-30.10). Proclus states that there are signs and traces also of all three elements of the triadic structure of Nous as a whole: its huparxis, dunamis, and nous. The divine huparxis is before the articulation of Nous into intellectual Forms, and so its trace extends all the way down, even beyond those things that possess reason or life, and is what “moves everything to the longing for the Good and presents being with this desire which cannot be quenched” (30.24-25). Proclus’ conception of analogy is displayed nicely here:

These characteristics of the divine light exist in a unified way in the gods themselves, reveal the gods in the genera greater than ours and reach us in a particular and shapen mode (merisēs de kai morphētikēs). This is why the gods advise us to contemplate ‘the extended shape of light’ (Or. Chalda).

Second comes the divine dunamis as the principle of fertility and procession, whose traces therefore are “uttered, though inarticulate” (31.18-28). Proclus has in mind the actions and symbols of theurgy which fall short of naming the gods.

Third come the traces of the divine nous, as the divine names: The third type of property that has come from the intellectual (tōn noerōn) level of being to all things and proceeds all the way to us is the divine names, through which we call upon the gods and by which they are praised. They have been revealed by the gods themselves, cause reversion back to them and, to the extent that there is something luminous in them, lead to human understanding. For through these names we are able both to indicate something to each other concerning the gods and to converse with ourselves (31.28-32.5).

Just as with the divine huparxis and dunamis, the divine names exist in different manners at different levels of the hierarchy. For the gods naming and understanding are unified; for intermediate beings there is both distinction and unification of these two activities, “but in the case of our souls they are divided, and the thought (noēsis) is one thing, the name another; the latter has the nature of image, the former of paradigm (33.9-11).” At the lowest level, that of articulated speech, the name takes on a sound which is merely its matter, and which differs from language to language. However, even though at this level the Egyptians or the Chaldaeans would use a different sound to signify the name of the god that the Greeks call “Briareos,” for example, they are all making use of the same name. This because this name was revealed to each of them by the gods and so indicates the same divine essence (32.5-18).

Therefore Proclus thinks that a natural name is revelatory; because although the spoken name refers proximately to a discursive logos, it refers ultimately to the intelligible of which this logos is the analogue. This theory, however, is of a piece with his general theory of the analogy.

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7 24.26: kat’ analogian, 25.1: tēi analogiai chrōmenos.
8 The henads in Proclus are the ‘ones’ that come after the primal One, the first principle of the universe, and which are in some way coordinate with it while also subordinate to it. They are the origin of particular characters in lower things.
of things. So, for example, in his commentary on Plato’s *Parmenides* he says,

> For when, having in mind simply the notion of equality, they [the multitude] call this particular thing equal in the primary sense, and apply this designation to it, they may think they are naming it, but they are really being diverted to the primary equality, for that alone is equal, while the particular thing here is both equal and unequal [italics mine].

Therefore, it is as analogues of the intelligibles that the divine names are revelatory and can be used by the dialectician to discriminate one intelligible from another.

### A.3 The lawgiver

In the *Cratylus* (388e) Socrates states that the true name-giver (*onomatourgos*) is a lawgiver (*nomothetēs*). Proclus’ explanation of this is that because eternal things are unchanging, their names are laid down by universal law (18.9-22). Superior to the lawgiver, however, is the dialectician. A name is an instrument, and Proclus follows Aristotle in holding that the user of an instrument is superior to its producer. Aristotle says that this is because the producer knows its material better but the user knows its form better. According to Proclus, Plato knows that there is a principle higher than Form, and so his dialectician as a user of names knows not just its form, but the good which it as an instrument aims at (26.4-18).

The ‘religious’ aspect of Proclus’ philosophy is seen most strongly in the identification of the gods of the Greek pantheon with various parts of the Platonic immaterial hierarchy, and this applies as well to the gods who have most to do with the origin of their own names. So Proclus identifies the primal dialectician with Kronos and the primal lawgiver with the first Zeus. In Proclus’ system these are the first and third elements of the Intellectual (*noēros*) moment of *Nous* as a whole. As the first element, Kronos or the pure Intellectual Monad looks to the intelligible which precedes it. This is the good to which he looks and which makes him able to govern the naming activity of Zeus, the Demiurgic Intellect. The distinction here is that of an upward and a downward-directed activity. In Proclus’ way of thinking, there is a division of labour. As a demiurge of names, Zeus is primarily productive, and a principle of procession, division, or unfolding. The principles that he unfolds, however, are known by Kronos for their own sake, not for the sake of production (27.11-28.21).

Naming begins with the intellectual order of *Nous*, but names seem to reach up to the lower limit of the intelligible order, to the Orphic “Phanes.” In other words, Zeus is able to assign names by which the lower gods are able to refer to their superiors. Not all the gods are nameable, however. The things above Phanes can be signified only by ineffable symbols and known only by analogy (32.18-29; 65.8-66.20).

The gods make use of these names that are divine in the primary sense. Human beings, however, do not make use of the names which the gods call themselves. Instead, they make use of the divine names which have descended to their level, but which still signify the divine essences through the principle of analogy. This means that there are analogues on the human level of Zeus and Kronos, the lawgiver/namegiver and the dialectician. These are the oracles and poets, on the one hand, and the philosophers on the other.

Divine names seem to reach human beings in one of two ways, according to Proclus. These names are established in the first way by the gods, or by intermediate powers such as angels or daemons, and in the second way they are established by human beings:

Therefore, some names are products of the gods and have come all the way down to Soul, others are produced from the particular souls which are able to fashion them through intellect and knowledge (*dia nou kai epistēmēs*), and others are instituted through the intermediary genera. For certain men who have become involved with daemons and angels were taught by them names that are better fit to their objects than those which men generally put. We must recognize their differences which have been given from their creative causes, and refer all names to the one Demiurge, the intellectual God [i.e. Zeus] (20.10-18).

The names that we have from the gods or intermediary beings are clearly divinely inspired. But ultimately all divine names begin from Zeus, even those that human beings have made “through intellect and knowledge.” Therefore these too are divinely inspired, and Proclus must consider the exercise of the human intellect to be a sort of divine inspiration.

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10 In *Parm.*, 852.25-29.
12 There are subordinate versions of Zeus lower in the hierarchy. See the diagram in B. Duvick’s translation of the In *Crat.* at 173-175.
13 This is the third intelligible triad, *nous noētos*, or the *autozōion*. It is where the first Forms, the *megista genē* from Plato’s *Sophist*, are to be found.
14 For angels, daemons and heroes see 75.9-77.18.
Such, then, are the primal names which have been revealed by the gods and through the median genera have reached our rational (logikēn) essence. But now let us consider the names of the second and third orders which particular souls introduced, [1] at times acting under inspiration (enthousiazousai) concerning the gods, [2] at times operating by [human] knowledge (kat' epistēmēn), once they either [1] associated (koinōsamenai) their own intellectual thought (noēsin) with the divine light and were perfected from that source, or [2] entrusted the creation of names to their rational power (tē logikēi dunamei) (33.28-34.7).15

After the primal names that are revealed by the gods, Proclus sets up a dichotomy within names that human beings introduce. A human being making use only of discursive logos, of epistēmē, is not divinely inspired, and so can at best give rise to the names by which the artisans call the instruments of their crafts (34.7-9). But a human being who associates his own nous with the divine light is “acting under inspiration,” and so is able to institute names which do truly signify the divine essences.16

We should examine this difference between the two types of inspired names. Proclus wants to maintain a distinction between divine names such that their efficacy depends on how close the name-giver is to the god signified by the name:

And it is no wonder if some names are more effective, and others are less so, since the daemonic and the angelic names are more effective than those that have become known to us, and in general those that are closer to the things named are more perfect than those ranked further away (32.12-16).

It is not clear whether by “those that have become known to us” in this passage Proclus means all divine names that men possess, even those revealed by gods and daemons, or only those that men institute when acting under inspiration. But in either case, it is pretty clear that within the divine names that are possessed by men Proclus wants to rank them as more or less efficacious depending on their origin.

15 I have added numbers in brackets to make the dichotomy more obvious.
16 Later in the commentary Proclus gives a complete classification of the sorts of names. After dividing off the names of perishable things, he states that the names of eternal things were established: 1) by gods, 2) by daemons, 3) by men according to knowledge (kat' epistēmē), and 4) by men without making use of knowledge (aneu epistēmē) (72.20-24). Proclus seems to have varied his language here, because whereas 34.3-7 he distinguishes between human nous and epistēmē, here he distinguishes between epistēmē and its absence. However, I think he has the same distinction in mind.

It is not easy to specify exactly what Proclus means by divine names that have been revealed by the gods or daemons as opposed to those that human beings come up with under the divine noetic inspiration. In the first category he would probably include the oracular voices that literally speak to men, i.e. “all of the hieratic practices and ... the initiations, the mysteries, and the appearances of the gods which human tradition admits are received from above while asleep or awake.”17 Proclus says that these come about, not because the gods themselves have material bodies and organs of speech, but because they can shape the air through their divine will and produce sound (36.15-37.21).

In this category as well I am inclined to include the Chaldaean Oracles and Orphic poems. Proclus speaks about them as if they were literally the sayings of the gods. He says things like: “but the theurgists and the utterances from the gods themselves (hai para tōn theōn autōn phēmai) teach us more distinctly (20.26-27),” and then quotes the Chaldaean Oracles. More explicit is the following:

Many gods and daemons have designed to reveal the nature of the gods, and so have passed down the names that belong to them. And so, when the gods revealed both the intelligible and intellectual orders to the theurgists during the reign of Marcus,18 they passed down names of the divine orders, names which announce their property and by means of which, when they called upon the gods in their proper services, they obtained ready hearing from them (72.8-15).

This is why Proclus gives great authority to the Oracles. The manners in which the gods are addressed and referred to in the Oracles are particularly effective, because they have been received from the gods themselves.

I think that the second category of divine names, those produced by human beings “acting under inspiration (enthousiazousai) concerning the gods...when they] associated (koinōsamenai) their own intellectual thought (noēsin) with the divine light and were perfected from that source (34.3-6),” corresponds to the inspired poetry that Proclus describes in the 6th essay of his Commentary on the Republic. There he describes three types of poetry, corresponding to three types of life in the soul. The first is an inspired poetry, according to the life in which the soul “surpasses its own nous (anadramousa men ton beautēs noun), awakens the ineffable sign (suntēma) of the simple existence of the gods, joins like to like, and

17 In Remp. I.110.22-26.
18 i.e. Marcus Aurelius, emperor during the life of Julien the Theurge, who purportedly recorded the Chaldaean Oracles. See discussions in des Places and Majerčík regarding their likely authorship.
its own light to the light from above (τόι ἐκεῖ ἄφησε ν). The second life is the soul’s own middle life of discursive reason, “according to which it has descended from the divinely inspired life (τῆς ἐνθέου...ζῶσε) and turned back towards its own life, positing intellect and scientific knowledge (nou de kaι epistēmēn) as the principle of its activity, and unfolds its multiplicity of logos.” producing what O. Kuismia calls “epistemic poetry.”

The third and lowest type of life is that of opinion, imagination and sensation, to which mimetic poetry corresponds. Here again we see a distinction between the human soul acting in concert with the divine light and seeking to conform to it and the soul acting according to its own cognitive resources.

It is this inspired sort of Poetry that we find in certain of the poets, such as Homer and Hesiod, and so it is here that we find the second category of divine names. “When he acts under divine inspiration (enthousiazōn) and is possessed by the Muses, then he relates the secret conceptions about the gods themselves (τα μουσικα περί αυτών τόν θεόν...νοεματα). At that time he is acting according to the primary and inspired (enthēon) sort of poetry.” To be sure, says Proclus, Homer writes poetry of all four types (subdividing the third type), but the inspired mode predominates. In the In Cratylum Proclus says clearly that Homer and the poets are inspired guides to divine names (29.6-20; 34.9-12).

However, it seems to me that the distinction Proclus wants to make between these two categories of divine names does not hold up when it comes to the status of divine names in this embodied life. While it may be the case that a name introduced by a god or daemon has in itself a closer relationship to its object than one introduced by a man who associates his own nous with the divine light present to him, once the higher name has descended from the truly intellectual level and taken on an existence appropriate to discursive reason, and especially once it is spoken or written, according to Proclus’ general doctrine of analogy there should be no distinction between them. He says as much in the In Cratylum:

To the extent that he knows himself and all the other divine genera together, partakes of them all, and is distinguished by his own particular substance, each of the gods supplies subsistence to the divine names, which are incomprehensible and ineffable to us, inasmuch as all of the intellectual and divine entities exist in us in a manner appropriate to soul (ψυχήκοσ). Yet, if names exist in the soul not in a mode corresponding to the intellect, but like an image (εἰκονικός) and in subdivision, the soul will become all the dizzier by thinking purely about gods, but it is only through images (εἰκονικός) that it can grasp its notions about the essence and nomenclature of god (78.13-22).

This is merely an application to the divine names of Proclus general principle that things are grasped not according to their own nature, but according to the power which is receptive of them. In his discussion of Homer in the In Rempublicam he explains how the simple and unchangeable gods can be represented as changeable:

For the simplicity of the gods appears to those who view it as manifold, without any alteration or deceptive presentation on the part of the gods. Rather, that nature itself distinguishes the characters of the gods according to the measures of the participants. For while the god that is participated is one, nous participates in it in one way, the intellectual soul (ψυχή...νοεια) in another, imagination in another, and sense-perception in still another. The first participates it partlessly, the second as unfolded, the third with a shape (morphēkōs) and the last in a passive manner (pathētikōs). While the participated [god] is uniform (monoeides) in its existence, it becomes multiform through participation. Remaining unchanged and established stably in itself, it appears (phantazonomen) in many and various ways to its participants because of their weakness.

In other words, making a distinction between the efficacy of divine names that are revealed by the gods or daemons in some sort of direct manner and those that are hit upon by the inspiration that comes when we associate our nous with the divine light is not licit for Proclus, as much as he might be forced by Greek thinking on the matter to try to make it. Rather than the provenance of the name, it is the reception of the name that determines the name’s mode of existence, and hence its status and efficacy. And the

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22 We should note that Proclus seems rather casual about whether or not he uses the term nous to refer to the higher or lower activity of human thinking. In this In Rempublicam text he lumps nous and epistēmē together, whereas in the In Cratylum passage he follows his more normal practice of distinguishing nous from epistēmē. As I have noted above, at 72.20-24 he simply distinguishes between names introduced by men either with epistēmē or without.

23 In Remp. I.192.9-12.

24 I follow Tarrant in reading ‘names’ (onomata) for ‘intellections’ (noēmata). But even if noēmata is the correct reading, it doesn’t change the sense, because the point is about intellectual names.

25 In Remp. I.111.16-27.
reception of a divine name by human beings is according to the human mode:

The essential Intellect \((\text{nous} \; \text{ouxiōdēs})\) contains as a whole, all together and in actuality the true understanding of reality. The intellect of the philosopher, however, since it is not essential but an illumination of

\(\text{Intelligible} \; (\text{ellamptis} \; \text{nous})\) and, as it were, an image of Intellect, thinks on the particular level \((\text{meristōs})\) and comprehends the truth only intermittently \((\text{pote})\) \((28.22-26)\).

Human beings comprehend the divine through the an illumination of the non-discursivity of \(\text{nous}\) that they possess, which is the presence to the soul of the intelligible as a sort of source or springboard for the soul’s essentially discursive activity.

Another way to think about it is the following. How in practice would the gods, angels and daemons reveal the divine names to men? There seem to be two possibilities. On the one hand, the name could be revealed to someone or something who is merely a mouthpiece: the name could be received by an oracle speaking as if in a trance, or by someone who sees a god in a dream or a waking vision, or it could be announced through a voice caused by the divine will moving the air. In all of these cases the name would be received by the senses and imagination. As such, the name should have no efficacy for human beings unless it were taken up by someone who associates their \(\text{nous}\) with the \(\text{Nous}\) that is the source of the name itself. On the other hand, the gods could reveal their names precisely through the medium of a Homer when he associates his own \(\text{nous}\) with the divine light from \(\text{Nous}\) that illuminates his soul. In each sort of occurrence we are dealing with the same divine name, because that towards which the name points is the same. All that changes from case to case is the mode of existence of the name, whether it be for the senses or imagination, or for human discursive reason illuminated by \(\text{nous}\). So whether the path of transmission is through the first or the second sort of path, through an oracle or a poet, when the name is comprehended by the soul making use of its \(\text{nous}\) it should be the same name.

Whether or not Proclus realised this explicitly, this understanding of the provenance of divine names helps to understand Proclus’ assertion of the superiority of the dialectician to the lawgiver/namegiver \((26.20-28.21)\). In short, the namegiver associates his soul with the divine light in order to show forth the nature of the divine to the lower orders. The dialectician, on the other hand, also associates his soul with the divine light, but he does so explicitly for the purpose of comprehending the divine itself. In other words, the dialectician is in possession of a superior comprehension of the divine than an oracle who is merely a mouthpiece, and he has the same access to the divine as the poet. The dialectician differs from the poet, however, because his activity is one of discernment rather than announcing. This is how “the divine Plato” can judge Homer.

A.4 The dialectician: etymologies

In the \text{Cratylus} Proclus thinks we have an example of the dialectician making use of the divine names that the poets have laid down. He uses them as instruments to discern the nature of the gods \((16.4-18.4)\). Therefore Proclus takes in earnest the etymologies of the gods’ names that, it is fairly certain, Plato intended to be read as fanciful. Proclus’ reading seems on the surface to contradict the injunction at the end of \text{Cratylus}, that “if it’s really the case that one can learn about things through names and that one can also learn about them through themselves \((493a)\),” the safer path is to learn about them through themselves.

However, as we have already seen, Proclus thinks that the dialectician is able to judge the content of a name by making use of his own \text{nous}. Therefore, while in one sense Proclus treats the names in \text{Cratylus} as guides to the natures of the gods, contrary to Plato’s intent, in actual fact Proclus does think that the dialectician learns about the gods through themselves. In order to understand what Proclus is up to, we have to remember that in his account the name is primarily the Form that is understood, not its material expression in letters and sounds. This Form is an image of the divine nature that it signifies and can therefore serve as a pole towards which the noetic attention of the dialectician turns in order to think about the god. But the dialectician does more than simply contemplate the name; he explains it by producing and explaining its etymologies. In so doing, he begins from his noetic grasp of the Form of the name signifying the god, and he then unfolds that unity into the division of discursive reason and language. In other words, the dialectician uses the divine name as a tool for the discernment of the divine nature in two ways: as the sign of the noetic source towards which he turns and as the occasion and springboard for his discursive thought about that noetic source. In other words, the divine name is that which remains \((\text{mane})\), while his thought begins from it and returns back towards it, in its discursive procession \((\text{proodos})\) and return \((\text{epistrophe})\). So Proclus does hold that the dialectician learns about the gods through themselves, because the divine name, as the analogue of the god on the border of the noetic and discursive level, is the god for human beings.
We can see this conception of the divine names in Proclus’ practice in this commentary. Socrates gives relatively brief explanations of the etymologies of the divine names. Proclus expands upon these explanations greatly, using Socrates’ etymologies as the springboard for a long discursus about the nature of each god. In each case the name is that from which the discursus begins. And in each case the discursus is a sort of elaboration of what Proclus knows about that god. The source of the discursus and that back towards which it all points is his noetic grasp of the nature of that god, which the name is a sign of. For example, if Apollo is the god who instills unity and leads us back to the One, Proclus’ explanation of the god’s name is an enunciation of how he thinks unity is manifest to the Cosmos beginning from the ‘hypercosmic gods’, who lies just below the ‘intellectual hebdomad’ of Nous, and running through all orders to the sublunary world.

How this works can be seen by examining a few of Socrates’/Proclus’ etymologies. We will look at their treatments of the names of Zeus, of Poseidon, and of Apollo.

Zeus
In Plato we have the following:

That’s because the name ‘Zeus’ is exactly like a phrase that we divide into two parts, ‘Zêna’ and ‘Dia’, some of us using one of them and some the other. But these two names, reunited into one, express the nature of the god — which is just what we said a name should do. Certainly, no one is more the cause of life (zên), whether for us or for anything else, than the ruler and king of all things. Thus ‘Zêna’ and ‘Dia’ together correctly name the god that is always the cause of life (di’ hon zên) for all creatures. But, as I say, his name, which is really one, is divided in two, ‘Dia’ and ‘Zêna’.26

Pretending for a moment that Socrates means this to be taken in earnest, it seems plausible to say that he would already have know that Zeus is the cause of life for things in order to produce this etymology. The true meaning is sort of hidden in the name, so to speak, and it takes a knowing dialectician to tease out its content. Someone who had never heard of Zeus before certainly would not be able to come up with ‘di hon zên’ from ‘Zêna’ and ‘Dia’.

When Proclus, in turn, explains Socrates’ explanation of Zeus, it turns out that in order to understand this divine name the dialectician must know such things as: 1) Phanes and the ‘Titanic gods precede Zeus and are the source of what he manifests; 2) Zeus is the primary demiurge, from the Timaeus, who fills lower things from the gods above him while remaining separate and transcendent over them; 3) our soul receives the undivided power of the gods in a divided way, etc. The following passage is illuminating:

It is therefore proper that his name is two-fold: while Dia reveals the cause “through which” (di’ hon) [everything is created] — and this is his paternal Goodness — Zêna indicates his generation of living things (zôogonia). The Demiurge has uniformly anticipated the first Causes of these functions in the universe. The first name is a symbol of the Kronian and maternal series, the second of the life-generating Rhea and maternal series. Also, because he has taken Kronus as a whole into himself, Zeus is creator of the triple essence — undivided, intermediary, and divided — while by the Rhea in himself he gives forth three-fold life — intellectual, psychic and corporeal... He is Lord and King of all things and is transcendent over the three Demiurges... The fact, then, that the name of Zeus is determined in two shows that images dividedly admit the unitary causes of their paradigms, and that this name exhibits a kinship to him who has pre-established the intellectual dyad in himself. For he institutes a double order of existence — the celestial and the supercelestial... (52.4-27)

From Proclus’ explanation, it seems no-one short of an accomplished Neoplatonic philosopher already familiar with the hierarchy of gods could possibly understand the divine name of Zeus.

Poseidon
The situation is similar with the name ‘Poseidon’ (Poseidônos). Socrates tells us that Poseidon can be etymologised as ‘foot impediment’ (posidesmon) because you must stop walking when you reach the sea; or as ‘knowing many things’ (polla eidoûtos); or as ‘the shaker’ (ho seiôn). Proclus explains these three etymologies almost as briefly as Plato, but once again makes use of Neoplatonic metaphysics. Poseidon is a ‘foot impediment’ because he has the role of ‘guarding the souls coming into generation whose revolution of the Same has been impeded, if indeed the sea is analogous to generation (86.9-11).” He knows many things because of his place after Zeus in the Demiurgic Triad as the first moment in the Intellectual order of Nous. And his role as the shaker comes from his activity with regard to the material Nature that lies below him (86.6-19).

Apollo
The name ‘Apollo’ (Apollôn) in particular illustrates how Proclus thinks this all works. Socrates gives a four-fold etymology of Apollo as 1) ‘cleansing’ (apolouûn), 2) ‘simplifying’ (haplourn), 3) ‘eternal lord of

26 Plato, Cratylus 396a-b.
above, Proclus gives an even more elaborate explanation of how each of these four names correspond to Apollo's four roles as god of

1) Medicine, 2) Prophecy (because simplicity and truth are the same), 3) Archery, and 4) Music (because of harmonious movement).27

For Apollo Proclus gives us one of his most elaborate explanations of Socrates' etymologies. He explains that "according to (one's) first and spontaneous intuition (of it), the name 'Apollo' signifies one who is the cause of unity and who leads multiplicity up to the One (96.26-29)." He then says that this single nature is manifest in a multitude of powers, four of which were chosen by Socrates. They were enumerated in a particular order because:

all the activities of this God exist in all the orders of existing things; while beginning from the highest and proceeding all the way to the lowest, some activities seem more or less to prevail on some levels, others on others. For example, the medical activity of the God prevails more in the realm beneath the moon... For these things which are subject to random movement need to return from what is contrary to nature to what is in accordance with nature... The prophetic activity, in contrast, prevails in heaven. For there especially the revelatory power of the God shines through as it reveals intelligible goods to the celestial entities... The activity of archery, in turn, prevails on the level of the independent (apolutai) gods. For there instilling essence into things as a whole, he activates his own motions, which they liken to projectiles in every sense... His musical activity is more prevalent at the leading and principal order (hégimónikon kai archikon). For it is this God who harmonizes even the whole cosmos into a single unity (97.18-98.12).

He then proceeds to explain how each of these cosmic functions is an instillation of unity, a manifestation of the God's primary character (99.4-18). So Socrates' fairly random collection of meanings for the name 'Apollo' becomes, in Proclus' hands, an orderly procession of the unifying power of Apollo from the level of the hegemonic gods down to the sublunar world.28 After the relatively lengthy passage I have quoted above, Proclus gives an even more elaborate explanation of how each of these four aspects of the god is appropriate to its level (98.16-102.9).

From these three examples we can make an important observation about Proclus' practice with regard to divine names. Although he does not make this distinction explicitly himself, I think we need to distinguish between the dianoetic procession of the name in the soul of the dialectician and the linguistic procession to which, strictly speaking, etymology belongs. The divine name as it is grasped by the dialectician is an unspoken and unified noetic grasp of a divine nature. Grounded in this is the rational discursus that takes place in his soul, by which he unfolds what he knows about that god and refers all that he unfolds back to that god. The spoken or written name of the god and the practise of etymology is only an image of this. The enunciated name, whether written or spoken, has a unity that is an image of the unified noesis of the god. The unfolding of the name through the production of etymologies is an image of the discursive unfolding that takes place within the dialectician's soul.

If we fail to notice this we will misconceive Proclus' understanding of etymology. We will think that one begins with the name as a creature of letters and syllables, which one then manipulates in order to make new words and sentences: so one makes ἀπόλλων into ἀειβάλλων and only then does one see Apollo as the Eternal Darter. But it must work the other way around. Proclus' explanation of the linguistic expression "Apollo," is only possible because of his understanding of Apollo's nature and how his role as god of archery is related to this nature. That is what allows him to come up with the new linguistic version of the name as ἀειβάλλων.

To anticipate our application of this argument to the Abrahamic religions, we should realise that we are in the same situation with regard to something like Augustine's interpretation of Genesis. He has already to know about the fall of the rebel angels in order to interpret God's separation of light from darkness in Genesis as signifying this. It would be impossible to proceed in the other direction, beginning from the biblical passage alone and then extracting from it the rebellion in heaven.

A.5 Conclusions about Proclus' theory of divine names

Proclus' theory of divine names is part of his more general theory of the soul's discursive reason (dianoia) and its relation to its own nous. Proclus thinks that the Soul as a whole is a divided image of Nous. Its essence (ousia) is a fullness or company (pleroma) of logoi, which are images of the Forms (eidos) in Nous. Soul's discursive thinking activity is called a "projection", or 'throwing forth' (probole) of these essential logoi, and is described metaphorically as an unfolding or unrolling of its essence. Less metaphorically, this discursive activity is the production of thoughts and

27 Plato, Cratylus 404c-406a.
28 For the hegemonic gods as preceding the independent gods, see Th. Plat. VI.xv-xvi.72.11-82.14.
arguments about the cognitive content that the soul finds already there when it turns back towards itself.²⁹

Proclus' theory of divine names has to do with the relation of the Soul's innate logoi to the discursive projection that is based on these. Proclus describes the possession of this content in various ways in his various works. In general, that from which the Soul begins its discursive activity is its participation in Nous. Higher souls possess their own nous as a participation, but human souls have only an illumination (ellämpsis) of Nous. In both cases we have here a situation of continuity and distinction. So when Proclus wants to emphasise the continuity of Nous and Soul, he will speak in such terms as remaining (mone), participation, or illumination. When he wants to emphasise their distinction from each other, he will speak of each principle on its own terms, speaking for example of the Soul's essence as fullness of logoi.

'Partial souls' (merikai psychai), Proclus' term for human souls, have only an illumination of a nous. This metaphor is particularly good at expressing continuity and distinction at the same time. The partial soul's nous, as an illumination, means that it has present to it the Forms in Nous without these Forms being parts of the soul itself.³⁰ This illumination of Nous is not itself discursive, but it is the ground of the partial soul's discursive activity. So, for example, Proclus speaks of the soul's immediate grasp of the first principles of the various discursive sciences which it projects without an elaborate excursus.³¹ I think it very likely that this is the border between the discursive and the non-discursive for Proclus. For example, when the individual turns inward and grasps the presence to it of the divine unity, it can then articulate, through a sort of minimal projection, the first principle of geometry that is the 'point'.³²

Proclus distinguishes between dialectic as the one, highest, unhypothetical science and all subordinate sciences. Dialectic is like the subordinate sciences in that they all make use of the techniques of synthesis and analysis, reasoning from premises to conclusions, and then from conclusions back to premises. Dialectic differs, however, in the premises from which it begins and to which it returns. The principles of dialectic are the highest noësis that the soul is capable of. So, while the soul's nous also furnishes the premises of the lower sciences, premises which those sciences do not surpass, dialectic examines the noetic source in itself in order that after its discursus it may surpass its own discursivity, insofar as it can. Proclus calls the soul's reasoning at this point a nous metabattikos—i.e. a nous that is discursive insofar as it moves from object to object, but one that is at the limit of discursivity because it grasps each thing that it sees 'all at once' (athroos).³³

With regard to our present study, I think the partial soul's grasp of the divine names is parallel to Proclus' theory of our grasp of the first principles of dialectic. Our possession of the illumination of nous gives us a grasp of the principles of the lower discursive sciences like geometry or physics which the soul most often uses to know what lies below it,³⁴ but our grasp of the divine names serves the opposite purpose. Beginning with the name, which is his conception of the divine nature, the dialectician produces a discursus whose aim is, at its end, a more full and conscious grasp of the hidden nature of the god. The written or spoken name and its etymologies, as I have mentioned above, are images of this. The etymologies begin from the name, and have as their aim a fuller understanding of the secret meaning of the name itself.

A.6 Six characteristics of the divine names

If all of this is the case, we can isolate six characteristics of the divine names according to Proclus' theory. These characteristics apply primarily to the name as the soul's grasp of its Form, and secondarily to the linguistic appearance of the name.

I. Divine names are a minimal or 'proto-' discursus

A divine name could be called a minimal or a 'proto-' discursus. It contains in germ the various discursive arguments which the soul can produce in thinking about a given divine thing. The name is the beginning

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³¹ In Eucl.178.9-179.22.


³⁴ Note that a science like mathematics, as an analogical image of what lies above the soul, can also be used to lead the soul upwards. In fact, this is Proclus' main intent in the Euclid commentary (see In Eucl.84.8-23).
point of the discursive procession (proodos), and the proximate aim of the corresponding return (epistrophē). So, for example, Proclus’ conception of Apollo, as the name of the cause of unity for things below the hegemonic gods, is what grounds his discursive arguments about the way in which unity is introduced to each of the various lower orders and what allows him to refer all of these sorts of unity to a single source. You could say that the name is the mediation between the discursive and the non-discursive grasp of the god, so that the name’s articulation in the soul, as well as its image in language, is the closest that one has in discursive reason to that which lies before discursive reason.

2. Divine names serve as an aid to beginning philosophy
If a divine name is a sort of proto-discursus, it can serve as a springboard for discursive thinking. Proclus thinks that the beginning of philosophy is knowledge of the self. One must turn away from the senses and their orientation towards becoming, and inwards to the innate ideas that one possesses.35 Divine names allow this inward turn to be by allowing us to look in the right direction. They give us a pole, so to speak, around which our thought can circle, to use a Procline metaphor.

3. Divine names point beyond themselves
Divine names can serve as the springboard for discursive reason, but because they are images that point beyond themselves to their source they can also allow the soul to move from a merely discursive grasp of the gods to what lies before the discursive. Divine names are ‘vectors’ towards the intelligible, one might say.

4. Divine names are inherently polysemous
A divine name is inherently polysemous, and is so in two complementary ways. A single name can refer to many divine characteristics, because the god’s character is manifested in various ways in the various orders that stand between it and the human soul. So the single name ‘Apollo’ refers to the god of music, archery, prophecy, and medicine. The converse of this is that the single character of the god can be referred to in many ways. So ‘cleansing’ (apollon), ‘simplifying’ (kploun), ‘eternal lord of arrows’ (æi bolon enkratés) or ‘eternally projecting’ (aeiballon), and ‘moving together’ (homopolon) all refer to the god Apollo. Or ‘Zēna’ and ‘Dia’ are names both of which refer to the demiurgic Zeus.

In fact, the need for polysemy when non-discursive things are referred to by discursive thought and language seems to be necessary according to Proclus. In his commentary on Plato’s Parmenides, he gives three separate metaphors to explain participation: a reflection in a mirror, an impression in a wax block, and a painted copy. However, he says that “each of these descriptions is imperfect by itself and taken alone is incapable of presenting to our thoughts the whole truth about participation.”36 He says that these metaphors are for less advanced students, but nevertheless, Plato uses them all, which “suggests that none of these analogies is capable of capturing the real nature of the process of participation, though each expresses a different aspect of it.”37 He then proceeds to give a ‘scientific’ account of participation. This scientific account might be thought to be free of polysemy, but I think we should read Proclus statement that “we must be content if we can even indicate in language what it is like at all (all’ agapetón, ei kai logi dunaimetha déloun autēn)”38 as referring to all logos on Proclus’ account, whether or not he realised it.39

5. The efficacy of the divine names is afforded by their divine source
Whether it has been revealed by an oracle or a poet, the source of a divine name is the same Nous that illuminates the soul of the dialectician. A divine name can serve as a springboard for discursive reason and a vector or pointer towards the divine only because it is an analogue of the divine nature which it names. Another way to say this is that Proclus’ theory of discursive reason, with dialectic as its capstone, is entirely dependent on the presence to the soul of the intellectual Forms. These Forms are possessed as analogues or images because of the particular receptivity of the soul. Without these Forms, the soul would have nothing to think about.

6. Any divine name to be communicated must be spoken or written down
The function of the poet or oracle is to announce the divine names. In other words, if the revelation of the nature of the god is not to be a matter of private understanding for the poet/oracle alone, he must communicate the name. It is at this point that the noetic grasp of the poet/oracle is translated into a fully discursive analogue of the divine essence, because when it is enunciated, the name must be in a particular language. And while divine revelations can be merely spoken, generally the ones that are

35 In A/Lc. 4.19-7.8; In A/Lc. 11.1-18.10.
36 In Parm. 841.16-19.
37 In Parm. 842.7-9.
38 In Parm. 846.9-10.
39 For the entire discussion of these metaphors with regard to participation see In Parm. 839.16-848.17.
remembered long enough to become the subject of dialectical exegesis have been written down. Therefore the dialectician will most often deal with texts. He will find before him the divine names in the poets and oracles as the occasions for his own thinking about the gods. And if he is to share his intellectual insight, he must be a teacher and communicate it to his students, and/or write it down for the benefit of dialecticians who come after him. So Proclus’ divine sources are Homer, Orpheus, Pythagoras, the Chaldaean Oracles, and as we will see, the divine Plato, and he himself left a record of his dialectical activity in his commentaries on these sources.

B. Proclus’ entire practice of philosophy is to be understood through his theory of divine names

At this point we should step back and consider Proclus’ theory of divine names as it is articulated in his Cratylus commentary in the light of his more general philosophical practice. If we do this, two things become immediately apparent. The first is that Proclus’ account of how one interprets sacred texts in general should be the same as his account of the dialectician’s interpretation of divine names. Because the human possession of divine things depends on the human mode of reception, anything that is revealed to men by the gods will be received by them in the same manner, be it their names, the arts, or whole texts. Insofar as revelation tells human beings anything about the realities which lie above him, either through a divine name or a whole revealed text, an interpreter can only understand it by associating his knowing power with the source of revelation itself, or as Proclus says in the In Cratylum, by associating his nous with the divine light.

The second thing that should become apparent is that this theory reduces the interpretation of sacred scripture to the practice of philosophy. There is no true interpretation of sacred scripture that isn’t a discursus beginning from the illumination of noésis that humans possess, and oriented back towards that same noésis. However, this is really the same as Proclus’ account of dialectic. Dialectic is the unhypothetical science, it is first philosophy, it is the human activity of explicating the soul’s own essence, its illumination of nous, so that the soul can pass over into a noetic comprehension of what lies above it.

B.1 Proclus thinks that the Platonic Dialogues have the same provenance as the divine names

These two points come together when we reflect on the fact that Proclus’ main philosophical output consists of commentaries on Plato and the fact that he considers Plato’s dialogues to be divinely inspired. What it means for the dialogues to be revelation, it should be clear at this point, is not that they were written by a soul who had a different sort of access to the divine than most men. Rather, Plato had noetic insight into the intellectual, intelligible, and henadic orders that lie above us simply to a higher degree.40 Therefore, on Proclus’ account, Plato’s activity of philosophy is like the dialectician’s use of divine names. Plato makes use of his grasp of the realities which lie before us to produce discursive explanations, not only of Zeus, Apollo, and Poseidon, but also of Justice, Courage, Being, the One, and the Good. When he turns his attention to lower things, such as the physical world, and the soul and its powers of sensing and knowing, these discursive studies are all in the service of mounting back up to their causes.

In a famous and much-referred-to passage in the Platonic Theology, Proclus says that according to Plato there are four modes of exposition of divine things: the divinely inspired (enthæstikós), the dialectical (dialektilikós) or scientific (kat’ epistêmén), the symbolic (symbolikós) or mythological (muthikós), and the use of images (apo tón eikonón). Proclus divides these modes in two, stating that those who veil their speech use either the symbolic mode or images, and attributes these respectively to Orpheus and to the Pythagoreans. Of those who speak directly and plainly, the first are divinely inspired, and these are the Chaldaean Oracles. Finally, the use of scientific or dialectical speech is proper to Plato alone.41

40 For Plato’s divine status see e.g. Th. Plat. I.iv.5-6.21; I.iii.13.8-9; I.iii.14.5-6; In Parm. 617.1-618.14; De Mal. 1.9-14; and for the descent of divine souls see In Remp. II.118.08-119.02. One could object at this point that Plato does have a different sort of access because he is in fact a god, in terms of Proclus’ three-fold classification in the Elements of Theology prop.184 into divine, not-divine but exercising peripatetic intellection, and passing from intellection to unintellection. However, it is highly unlikely that Proclus thought Plato to be a soul in this first category. The requirement of perpetual intellection, for example, would rule out something as typically human as sleeping. Therefore, it is more likely that Plato is ‘divine’ in the sense of being a particularly strong partial soul who has come down into the world of genesis intentionally for the providential care of weaker souls.
41 Th. Plat. I.iv.17.9-23.11. Cf. In Parm. 645.7-647.18. Note that Proclus cannot be saying that Plato is the only person ever to be a dialectician, but that his practice of dialectic exceeds all others'.
This passage would seem initially to argue against drawing together philosophy and the interpretation of divine texts in Proclus. However, it instead confirms it. First of all, although Plato's philosophy is peculiar in being the best example of the scientific mode of theology, Proclus states that Plato makes use of all four modes, even improving the often disordered use of myth which he finds in the poets. More importantly, preceding his distinction of the modes, Proclus gives a characterisation of theology that applies to all four of them.

Theology is of such a character: it makes manifest the existence (hupaxis) itself of the gods, and it distinguishes their unknowable and unified light from the character of those who participate them, and it beholds it and announces it to those worthy of this blessed actuality, which provides all good things together. After having had a complete comprehension of [the character of] this highest form of knowledge (theorías), let us distinguish the manners in which Plato instructs us in an understanding of the secrets (ta musika) about the gods.43

In other words, these are merely four different modes of discourse for doing the same thing, announcing the hidden and unified light of the gods to men. Plato's dialectical mode of theology announces the divine to men just as the other four do, but it differs from them in that it also interprets the meaning of the divine utterances, and does so plainly and accurately.44 So while the enunciation of divine things may belong also to the oracle or poet, their explanation falls under the competencies of the philosophers.

Proclus, in turn, treats the Platonic dialogues in the same way his dialectician treats the divine names. Even though in general Plato's dialectical mode of speaking is plainer than Orpheus or even the Chaldaean Oracles, Proclus still finds in a Platonic dialogue a cache of insight into the divine whose hidden meaning needs to be unfolded and explained, just as the hidden meaning of a divine name needs to be unfolded. And while a single name like Apollo can support four etymological explanations, and a few pages of Proclus' discourses on those etymologies, a dialogue like the Timaeus, considered by Proclus primarily to make use of images, can support many hundreds of pages explaining its meaning. Even the Parmenides, considered by him to be primarily dialectical, receives a similar lengthy treatment.

Proclus' technique of commenting on a dialogue passage by passage can be seen to turn each lemma into a sort of oracular pronouncement standing in need of discursive unpacking. He will often spend pages explaining a single line, phrase, or word. In the same way that no-one who begins with the written name of Apollo could comprehend its meaning unless he also had prior insight into the god's nature, no one reading Plato's dialogues could find what Proclus finds in them unless he had the sort of insight into the divine truths that Proclus had. In a telling passage, Proclus seems to be conscious of the fact that his technique is to explain what each passage can be taken to point to, understood in the very broadest sense. He says in his Parmenides commentary that even if Plato himself didn't lay out the sort of elaborate analogies Proclus has just explained, it is still good practice for us to interpret his dialogue by means of them, "for it is a good exercise for a well-endowed soul which is capable of moving from images (eikonon) to their paradigms and delights in observing these all-pervading analogies (analogias)."45 Proclus is speaking here of such things as the characters and their actions, analogised to one or another of the various cosmic and supra-cosmic orders. But in practice, Proclus treats the more 'argumentative' parts of Plato's dialogues as needing very much the same sort of elaborate expansion as he does the 'images'.

The Cratylus commentary is a nice symbol of how this all works. On the one hand, according to Proclus, the dialogue is an inspired source of the proper etymologies of the divine names, i.e. it is a record of Plato's discursive understanding of his noetic grasp of the characters of the gods. But then Proclus adds a secondary layer of discursus, in which he explains his own grasp of the same divine characters, in order to explain Plato's insight in greater detail. So both dialogue and commentary depend on the same sort of noetic grasp of the divine.

We should mention briefly Proclus' two major works that are not commentaries: the Elements of Theology and the Platonic Theology. The latter, although a systematic work, is made up of exegeses of Plato's dialogues. The Elements, on the other hand, is completely different. It is a more geometrico deduction of the super-sensible hierarchy from the One. However, if one wished to press my argument to its limit, one could think of the entire work as an unfolding of Proclus' noetic grasp of the name "One."

42 Proclus gives examples of each mode. 1) inspired: Phaedrus; 2) dialectical: Sophist, Parmenides; 3) making use of myth: Gorgias, Symposium, Protagoras; 4) making use of images: Timaeus, Statesman.
43 Th. Plat. L.v.17.9-18.
44 Th. Plat. L.v.20.19-25.
45 In Parm. 675.29-676.2.
B.2 Comparison with etymology of divine names explains why Proclus reads the dialogues in the manner that he does

When we see what Proclus is doing we can understand more readily why he reads Plato's dialogues in the way that he does. A modern reader who naively picks up a Procline commentary expecting something like Cornford's explanation of the Timaeus will be surprised. Proclus' sober, insightful explanations of Plato's arguments (and there are some) will seem to him to be surrounded by baroque and bizarre late-antique theological speculations. But the value in reading Proclus does not come from ignoring all the more odd bits, in which case his Cratylus commentary would be almost entirely worthless. The value lies in seeing what he is really up to. And in that light, the Cratylus commentary is not an odd-man out or a particularly 'religious' work of Proclus. Rather, it is just more obvious in its hermeneutic presuppositions than are the rest of Proclus' works.

B.3 Plato's dialogues have same five characteristics as the divine names

If this is the case, we should be able to apply the six characteristics of divine names according to Proclus' philosophy to his way of reading Plato's dialogues as a whole. And in fact we can:

1. Each dialogue and each part of a dialogue is a proto-discursus that can serve as the point of departure and point of return for a more elaborate discursus.
2. They can serve as springboards for philosophy. By serving as poles for our rational attention they turn us away from the senses back towards our innate ideas.
3. As images of the divine, the dialogues point beyond themselves. They are vectors towards the intelligible.
4. They are inherently polysemous. A single passage can be read as referring to many different aspects of the universe, and a single aspect of the universe can be referred to by many differing passages.
5. Their divine source is what dictates their efficacy. The dialogues are the expression of the nous of the divine Plato, which is why they furnish true images of the gods, susceptible to the further interpretation of someone like a Proclus.
6. The dialogues stand at the beginning of a long tradition of writing, i.e. the Platonic tradition is one of the transmission and interpretation of texts.

B.4 Four characteristics of Proclus' philosophical practice

The sixth characteristic of divine names and of Plato's dialogues brings up a sort of corollary to my argument so far. Although in principle the dialectician can have insight into the divine without communicating it to others, he most often uses the insights that his predecessor have communicated in their writing as the occasion of his own discursive investigation of the divine. For this reason, Proclus' philosophy is overwhelmingly textual. He is primarily a commentator, interpreting divine insights that have been written down, and writing down his own insights into the same divine sources. Therefore we can point out four characteristics of Proclus' textually-oriented philosophical practice:

1. Philosophy begins through the reading of texts
Proclus thinks that philosophy begins by reading texts, in particular by reading Plato's Alcibiades I, and then following the ordered Platonic curriculum after that. The reason for this is that Plato's dialogues are a sure image of the divine. Even if philosophy is nourished by conversation and has as its terminus a noesis that leaves texts behind, its first beginning for most men is through reading texts. Further, even in the light of certain transcendent experiences of the sort that Porphyry reports Plotinus had, it is unlikely that in this life the philosopher can do away with the reading of texts. Plato's dialogues are the divine texts par excellence, but Proclus recognises other similarly inspired works, such as for example the works of Iamblichus.

2. Reading of texts is done through exegesis/commentary
Texts are to be read in an active manner. The aim is to use the text as an instrument to activate one's own noetic grasp of the whole of things, and this is doneproximately by producing various discurses about the inherently polysemic content of what one is reading. Like the production of etymologies that unfold the concentrated content of a divine name, the

46 Cf. R.M. van den Berg's very dry remark near the end of his explanation of the commentary, in Proclus' Commentary on the Cratylus in Context (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 198: "Finally, has Proclus much to offer to the modern students of the Cratylus? Less than one might perhaps hope."

production of commentaries unfolds the concentrated content of a dialogue.

3. Divine texts will contain truths which are obscure, and every part of them will have meaning.

If a text as a whole is divinely inspired, then it should not contain any superfluous content. Every word, every gesture or detail, however small, should in its own way be an image of its divine source and should be susceptible of interpretation. This is why Proclus will produce such wonderful bizarre explanations of things like Parmenides’ smile and Zeno’s laugh, or explain a simple phrase in Plato like noêsis meta logou by distinguishing six different levels of noêsis, from intelligible intellec tion (noêsis hé noête) down to the imagination, specifying which one of these levels Plato meant to include by the term logos. 49

4. Some texts are worth reading, for the philosopher, and others less so, because some authors are divinely inspired and others are not.

If we remember that ‘divine inspiration’ means that the author wrote the text in the light of his noetic grasp of the divine, and that this is really Proclus’ understanding of philosophy in general, it should not come as a surprise to find that some texts are worth reading because they are sure guides to truth, while others are less so. What it comes down to is how good a philosopher the author is. So, for example, the ‘daemonic Aristotle’ is worth reading, but because he himself had less insight than the ‘divine Plato’ his texts are likely to be misleading in places. They are less accurately an image of the divine truth than are Plato’s. So according to this way of reading texts, the interpreter should come up with a canon of texts that are worth reading, based on the access to truth possessed by their authors.

C. Conclusions about Ancient and Medieval interpretation of divine texts

I have argued that for Proclus philosophy employed in the interpretation of sacred texts retains its character as philosophy. In essence my argument is methodological. Although Proclus distinguishes dialectic as the highest philosophy from the subordinate sciences, he thinks that in principle they are engaged in the same sort of thinking, namely a discursive reason that is grounded in the soul’s nous. Dialectic is just a more fully grounded and complete form of philosophy than are the others. The divine noetic source, moreover, is what in Proclines terms makes the discursive activity of philosophy in general possible. This is why in Proclus’ account the dialectician draws on the same noetic comprehension of the divine that the oracle or poet draws on. So philosophy employed in the interpretation of sacred texts, for Proclus, retains its character as philosophy. One could say that it would be the opposite—a philosophy severed from the divine—that would cease to be philosophical.

What can this conclusion from Proclus’ philosophy tell us about the use of Greek philosophy within the Abrahamic religious traditions? I will make only a few very brief comments about two representative Christian figures, Augustine and Aquinas, and leave it to those more educated in Judaism and Islam to draw their own conclusions.

In the Confessions book XII, 50 written a dozen or so years before Proclus’ birth, Augustine states a rule for the interpretation of scripture which anticipates Proclus’ theory. 51 He says that any interpretation of scripture that is true is a good one. He explains that we should interpret scripture, which is the Truth, by means of the Truth that illuminates our mind. In other words, Augustine too thinks that the source of revelation and of interpretation are the same, because both Truths are descended from the same single Truth that is the Word of God. And because this same one Truth illuminating the mind is also the ground of philosophy, it can’t be the case for Augustine that philosophy employed in the interpretation of sacred scripture is an activity in principle any different than philosophy otherwise. 52 The most one could say, as with Proclus’ attitude towards Plato’s dialogues, is that for Augustine sacred scripture is a sure material for the exegete to work with, because it is guaranteed to be the discursive expression of divine truth.

It is unsurprising that Augustine’s illuminationist theory of reason is in agreement with Proclus’ theory as we have seen it here. But one might think that Aquinas’ more Aristotelian epistemology would rule out the sort of parallel with Proclus that is fairly obvious in Augustine. However, I

49 In Parm. 1022.23-1023.8.
40 See In Tim. 1.246.5-247.21.

50 See especially chapters 25-32.
51 Proclus went to Athens to study philosophy the year after Augustine died, so there is no possibility that he influenced Augustine’s thought at any stage. Conversely, there is no evidence that Proclus was familiar with Augustine. It is generally thought that Augustine’s Neoplatonic source was Plotinus, mediated through Porphyry and Marius Victorinus.
52 See Augustine’s analysis of memory in Confessions book X, where all that he knows is in his memory as in a vast storehouse, to which God also is present.
think in Aquinas we have a similar situation. It can be found, surprisingly, in his distinction between sacred doctrine and the philosophical sciences. Essentially Aquinas says that sacra doctrina is like the other philosophical sciences with regard to its method, but it differs from them in that it begins from revealed premises. I would like to suggest that these revealed premises are the appearance of the noetic in the discursive, and once they are written down they can be comprehended by an Aquinas just as well as by a Moses or St. Paul. Therefore, far from disagreeing with Proclus, Aquinas’ also thinks that the theologian engaged in sacra doctrina has a discursive science whose authority is afforded to it by its divine starting points, parallel to the case with Proclus’ dialectician.

Is this theologian a philosopher? In Procline terms, he is. Aquinas’ distinction between sacred doctrine and the other philosophical sciences maps onto Proclus’ distinction between dialectic, the one unhypothetical science which begins from noetic premises, and all lower sciences, which begin from hypotheses. Proclus and Aquinas differ in their conception of the how subordinate sciences receive their premises from dialectic, and they have a different account of the possession of noetic principles by the dialectician/theologian. For Proclus the dialectician seems to have immediate access to the same source that the oracle or poet draws on through the functioning of his discursive reason, whereas for Aquinas God is the source of revelation and he vouchesafes it to whom he wishes. However, their positions end up very nearly the same, when one realises that for Proclus, although in principle all men have the same sort of access to the divine as the divine Plato, in practice there are probably as few true dialecticians as Aquinas thinks there are men to whom God has revealed his intelligible Truth. Further, Aquinas is in a way in complete agreement with Proclus regarding the manner in which the discursive intellect possesses noetic truth, even invoking (unknowingly) Proclus’ principle that things are known according to the mode of the knower rather than in their own manner of existing when he explains how the human intellect, through faith, knows the simple truths of God in a complex manner. Nonetheless, Aquinas will call one man a dialectician, and name the others by the subordinate sciences they are engaged in, but call the whole activity philosophy. Aquinas will call one man a sacred doctor, and name those engaged in subordinate sciences philosophers. But both Proclus and Aquinas do not think that the dialectician/sacred doctor is engaged in a reasoning activity that is different in kind from his lesser fellows. Rather, the dialectician/sacred doctor is the best philosopher, whose superiority lies in the certainty of his premises and so of his conclusions.

Part Two: The textual nature of contemporary philosophy

At this point we must deal with one final sort of objection. One might think that I have not demonstrated the philosophical character of the interpretation of sacred texts in either Late Antique Platonism or in the Abrahamic traditions that made use of it. Rather, I have demonstrated that they do not have a philosophy at all, and that what they thought of as philosophy is really theology. One who made such an objection would likely think that any system of thought that posits divine things is not philosophical, and might even go so far as to call it irrational in comparison with the cold, sober light of philosophy.

I would like to point out, however, that such an objection would be a substantive objection, not a methodological one. The existence or non-existence of the super-sensible is a philosophical question, and it would be a bit dogmatic to write off those who think they have philosophical reasons for positing and discussing the super-sensible as non-philosophers, rather than considering them to be philosophers with whom one disagrees. This procedure would most likely result in each professor of philosophy considering himself to be the only one.

Proclus’ intention is to produce a coherent and rigorous philosophical edifice, and he thinks he has very good philosophical arguments for the existence of a robust super-sensible hierarchy. He thinks that these arguments establish the existence of gods and divinely inspired texts, and it is out of this philosophical system that he considers the Platonic texts to be divinely inspired. Likewise for Augustine and Aquinas, it is their overall philosophical position that leads them to think that there can be such a thing as a divinely inspired text, gives them reasons to think that the Bible is one, and governs their interpretation of that text.

For Proclus, Augustine, and Aquinas philosophy is an overwhelmingly textual enterprise, because they think that divine truths have been written down by poets, oracles, prophets, and particularly gifted dialecticians. However, if we state this in more neutral language, the philosophical orientation towards texts and the preference of certain texts over others

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53 See S.T. 1a,q1, especially article 8.
54 S.T. 1a,qq1,q2.
seems to be a part of philosophical practice even up to the present day. Philosophers seem to have a particular tendency to form canons — to distinguish between those texts that are worthwhile reading and those that are not, often characterising the former as ‘philosophical’ and latter as ‘non-philosophical’ texts.

A philosopher does not have to think that some texts are depositories of divine truth in order to have a tendency to make a canon. It is enough that he think that by reading some sorts of books and not others he can come closer to the true, the likely, the plausible, or even the ‘worthwhile thinking about’. For example, even though almost no-one thinks his project was successful, most professional philosophers today have either read Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason or think they should have read it. My point is that contemporary philosophers are generally engaged in an activity of thinking done within a tradition of the interpretation of texts that they think are helpful, chosen from out of the overall conception of reality that they think is the most plausible.

This tendency of contemporary philosophers stands out more clearly when it is compared with the practice of literature or history specialists, for example, who seem to compete with each other to discover more and more obscure archival material. Philosophers are much more diachronic than their fellow humanists and they tend to make much sharper distinctions between ‘philosophical’ texts and ‘non-philosophical’ texts. This is why, for example, historians of early Christian texts are quite interested in the ‘non-canonical’ gospels, but specialists in Late Antique philosophy pretty much completely ignore the Gnostics.

My point here is to say that most philosophers form canons of worthwhile texts which reflect what they themselves consider to be true, or likely, or plausible, and Proclus’ philosophical practice was no different. It only seems different because what he considered true includes a lot of metaphysical furniture that most contemporary philosophers would reject, and like most ancient Greeks he is a lot more casual with the word ‘divine’ than we are.

D. Parallels with Derrida

At this point, having suggested that Proclus’ philosophical practice is not as foreign to contemporaries as my readers probably still think it is, I would like to make a brief invocation of parallels between Proclus’ philosophical practice and the philosophical practice of Derrida. I want to turn to Derrida, not only because he himself engaged with Neoplatonism and because the connections between Neoplatonism and Deconstruction have recently been put forward in a stimulating and persuasive manner. I want to look at him as a sort of limit case, as a ‘philosopher’ who constructs a sort of loose canon of ‘sacred’ texts from a position which could be thought of as the inverse of the affirmation of Platonic Truth. What we find is that Derrida’s practice of textual interpretation exhibits striking similarities to Proclus’ philosophical practice.

D.1 Theory of language: How many of Derrida’s ways of treating words/texts line up with Proclus’?

In order to proceed, I will apply the six characteristics of Proclus’ treatment of divine names and of texts and the four characteristics of his philosophical practice to Derrida’s treatment of ‘words’. We should recall right away that the Greek onoma is both ‘name’ and ‘noun’ like the French ‘nom’, and so the treatment of names can be taken in both languages in the wider sense to include ‘words’ in general. Further, I will speak about words and texts at the same time.

1. Words/texts are proto-discursus

For Derrida a word or a text is a sort of proto-discursus. The word or text is more than what is evident on the surface, and so is able to be opened up and unfolded. Like a divine name or Platonic dialogue, each word or text can support a deconstructive excursus which draws out what is implicit in it. And as in Neoplatonism, that excursus is grounded in the original word or text, as springing from it and being oriented back towards it.

2. Words/texts serve as an aid to beginning philosophy

For Proclus a sacred text turns us away from the sensible towards the intelligible which lies inside us. Moreover, what we find when we turn inside is not a tabula rasa, but “a tablet that as always been inscribed and is always writing itself and being written on by Nous.” There is a striking parallel in Derrida’s appropriation of Freud’s metaphor of the psychic writing pad. For Derrida there is no fresh beginning. Every act of reading is also an act of writing, and every such act discovers a trace left from


56 In Eucl. 16.9-10.

previous acts of writing. Therefore every act of reading is a sort of writing on one’s self, over what is already written. It is sort of a ‘self as palimpsest’. Therefore philosophy necessarily begins with reading, whether the text be a text, a word, or one’s self.

3. Words/texts point beyond themselves
In Derrida, words/texts point beyond themselves. Reading is always interpretation, it is always re-writing, picking up the traces of past writing and past interpretation. The words/texts point beyond themselves to the inexhaustible resources of language.

4. Words/texts are inherently polysemous
In Proclus names and texts are polysemous because their discursivity falls short of a transcendent, metaphysical fertility. They are inherently vectors towards what is more real. In Derrida words are polysemous, not because they point to a transcendent metaphysical ground, but because they point to a sort of history. There is always a residual in language that outstrips the intentionality of the reader/writer. A single word signifies an indeterminate multiplicity of things, and any given thing can be expressed in an indeterminate multiplicity of ways or utterances. In Proclus, no sacred text expresses on the surface just what it means. For Derrida this is the case of texts generally.

5. The efficacy of words/texts is afforded by their ‘divine’ source
Derrida doesn’t think that words or texts have a divine source. However, for him the efficacy of words or texts comes from the character of language itself, which stands as an analogue to the Neoplatonic divine.

6. Derrida is also a commentator
Finally, Proclus’ understanding of himself as primarily a commentator has its parallel in Derrida’s entire practice of deconstruction. That is, Derrida’s practice is a sort of serious play that frees up meaning from texts. His entire theory of thought is situated within reading and writing.

D.2 Derrida has a practice of philosophy strikingly similar to Proclus’
The parallels in their philosophical practice are even more striking than their similar conceptions of words and texts.

1. Derrida also begins with the reading of texts
For Proclus it is in principle possible to leave texts behind, but in practice the philosopher spends his life reading previous philosophical texts. For Derrida likewise thinking is about reading. Derrida’s work is inherently textual because for him the text is the place where things happen.

2. Derrida is also an exegete
Similarly, Derrida reads texts in an active manner. Proclus’ activity of commentary draws out what is implicit in the text before him. Similarily, Derrida’s practice of deconstruction is all about playing with ambiguity and juxtaposition, or inverting structures, etc. in order to draw out content which is merely implicit in what is before him. Both thinkers hold that the text contains much more than the surface meaning, and both thinkers have elaborate procedures for extracting that meaning.

3. For Derrida as well, texts contain meanings that are obscure, and every part of them has meaning
Both Proclus and Derrida hold that meaning can be extracted from each part of a text — in Derrida even from the spaces between the letters. And while neither would call their practice of interpretation arbitrary, they both have a tendency to extract at times quite incredible things from the most obscure details of their texts.

4. For Derrida as well, some texts are worth reading and others are less so, i.e. Derrida also has ‘divine’ texts, or a ‘loose’ canon
This point is perhaps the most tendentious. Which texts does Derrida have a tendency to subject to deconstruction, and which texts in doing so does he use as intertexts? More often than not he reads authors like Plato, Augustine, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Mallarmé, etc., in other words the ‘big’ authors. The reason for this is probably that these texts are more likely to yield fruitful deconstructions than texts which have sunk into obscurity. He doesn’t think of them as bringing us closer to eternal reality, as does Proclus. But there is a parallel here, in that in Derridean terms Augustine’s Confessions has left more of a trace than, for example, late antique funeral stelae inscriptions. Augustine has influenced our thinking, writing, and speaking, and so reading and deconstructing his texts is more fruitful for shaking loose and freeing up the meanings in language.
D.3 Supplement: What about Deconstructionists who don’t know the tradition very well?

It is a great irony that there exists a whole host of deconstructionists who know very little of the Western tradition which Derrida subjected to deconstruction. For these scholars, all too often Derrida becomes their ‘divinely inspired’ author, and his words their sacred texts. So, having little interest in or aptitude for reading Kant or Plato, students and professors in English or History department “theory” classes will very often parrot the ‘divine Derrida’. But like the exegete of Plato who has himself no noésis of the divine, reading Derrida and taking only his word for what is going on in the tradition is a fruitless enterprise. The nicest example of ‘the divine Derrida’ I know of is Passions, an essay which originally appeared in Derrida: A Critical Reader, where the editor solicited an essay from the man himself as the 13th contributor, stipulating that his essay was to be called “An oblique offering.” Derrida himself realised that we was being set up as the offering, and wrote his piece with the implication that he was playing a part in a Passion Play, as the Jesus figure.58

E. Conclusion: after Plato, all philosophy is the exegesis of ‘sacred’ texts

After Plato, philosophy as Socrates is portrayed engaging in it becomes very difficult. You can’t simply walk around the city examining people’s opinions anymore, because Plato wrote the dialogues and it is probably a good idea for you as a philosopher to read them. With that act of writing, a textual tradition begins in the West and it becomes incumbent on philosophers to read in order to think. Further, this reading is active, and is done within a changing canon of privileged texts which the philosopher or his school thinks are more worthwhile than others. Proclus and Augustine simply belong to that period in Western philosophy where the criterion by which texts were included in the canon is their proximity to the divine. My comparison with Derrida shows, I think, that the Continental school does not fall outside this tendency. I could just have easily compared Proclus’ reading of texts with Heidegger’s, for example, with similar results.

It may initially seem that the Analytic tradition in philosophy falls outside of this analysis, but I don’t think this is the case. Analytic philosophers have a small canon of authors whom they usually read (eg. Frege, Wittgenstein, Kripke, Quine), sharply distinguished from those whom they don’t (eg. Proclus, Derrida). But their textual canon seems rather to be a loose collection of ‘divine names’, usually uprooted from their original texts, which most Analytic philosophers acknowledge as the common vocabulary of their way of thinking: e.g. justified true belief, internalism, externalism, identity of indiscernibles, universals, necessary and sufficient conditions, naturalistic fallacy, altruism, egoism, state of affairs, proposition. The only accurate way to describe Analytic philosophy is to say that those who use this common vocabulary of ‘divine names’ are members of the school, and those who don’t are not.

To philosophers like myself who lie outside the Analytic school, its members seem to be just as clearly engaged in a sort of exegesis of terms which occur only within the school as were the Neoplatonists engaged in an exegesis of the terms peculiar to their school. This is not to make a judgement about the plausibility of either set of terms. It is just to point to a peculiar kinship. The approach that many Analytic philosophers take to the Platonic dialogues is instructive. It is extremely rare in this tradition to read a dialogue as a whole. Instead, those parts of a dialogue that can be adapted to an Analytic style of argumentation count as the ‘philosophical’ parts, and the other parts are thought to be something else. This sort of attribution of authorial split-personality disorder would likely have surprised Plato just as much as Proclus’ inventive allegorisations. More importantly, it seems to indicate that Analytic philosophers also share the general philosophical tendency to ‘do philosophy’ by interpreting words or texts, beginning from their own conceptions of what the world is like, and distinguishing sharply between those words or texts that are worthwhile interpreting and those that are not. My main point here is that there seems since Plato to be a practice of philosophy that has a broad methodological continuity, despite the wide variations in what philosophers have held to be plausible.

In summary, I have argued that in Proclus the practice of the interpretation of sacred texts relies on the same access to the truth that philosophy relies on, and consequently that what we might call ‘scriptural exegesis’ is a mode of philosophical practice. I have suggested that this is the case for Medieval Christianity, and implied that it is also the case for Medieval Judaism and Islam, insofar as philosophers within these scriptural traditions took over the position from Platonism that there is a single truth.

Finally, through a comparison with Derrida and a few remarks about Analytic philosophy, I have suggested that the only difference between the ancient pagan schools of philosophy, the various forms of philosophical theology in the three Abrahamic religions, and more contemporary schools of philosophy consists in metaphysical disagreements. Methodologically they all seem to me to be engaged in the same practice, namely the reading of a textual tradition in the light of their own reason.

My aim in this argument is to counsel a form of humility. Because it is, practically speaking, impossible for any one to read every text, especially those not yet written, or to consider every philosophical position, our philosophising should be wary of its tendency to make rigid canons. Even if one is a Platonist, and thinks that one has a conduit to the divine Truth, one’s comprehension of it and one’s expression of it will always be provisional and partial, due to the inexhaustibility of the source. In deconstructive terms, it is neither possible nor desirable to escape the Traces which previous Writing, in the broadest sense, has left on us. In Neoplatonic terms, philosophy is the activity by which we catch glimpses of the intelligible, and tell ourselves stories about it. The intelligible itself is not the systems we construct, articles we write, or conversations we have. Philosophy is a hermeneutic of the ‘word’ that is, in principle, infinitely extendable, and its practice is one that continually adds to the store of ‘sacred’ texts.

PART II:

MEDIEVAL RECEPTION OF HELLENIC THOUGHT