



ENRICO PEROLI

## THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOOD. GOD AND THE WORLD IN PLATONISM

*The role played by Platonism in the course of the philosophical tradition up to the beginning of the modern age is closely linked to the way in which it understood divine causality and, consequently, the relationship between God and the world. Such a relationship, in fact, is interpreted neither through the architecture of efficient causality, nor on the basis of the categories of Aristotelian metaphysics of substance that have marked the onto-theology of the Scholastic tradition. Unlike the latter, in fact, the world is not viewed as «another» ontological realm separate from the divine Principle. Rather, the world is just the «other» mode of being of the Absolute: it is the Absolute in the mode of manifestation. Starting from Plotin's treatise on divine providence, the article reconstructs this fundamental theme of the Platonic tradition and tries to show its philosophical meaning, thus explaining the role it has played in the course of the Western tradition.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

«It is the task of philosophy to investigate and see if there is any defence to be found to the charges against the gods in the sky; and we must also try to explain about the whole universe, since this kind of charge is directed against it too».<sup>1</sup> This programmatic statement, which seems to assign to philosophical reflection the task of developing a kind of «theodicy»,<sup>2</sup> appears at the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Enn.*, 4.24.30.24-28. All Translations of Plotinus are taken from Armstrong's Loeb edition of the *Enneads*, with some slight changes: PLOTINUS. *Enneads*. Text and Translations with Notes by A. H. ARMSTRONG, 7 vols., Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1966-1988. References to the Greek Text follow P. HENRY and H.-R. SCHWYZER: *Plotini Opera*, 3 vols., Clarendon, Oxford 1964-1982.

<sup>2</sup> As for the term «theodicy» used in reference to Plotinus, cf. P. A. SCHULZ, *Plotins Theodizee nach ihren systematischen Grundlagen. Ein Beitrag zur Würdigung des Denkens*, Brendel, Jena 1914 and W. THEILER, *Plotin zwischen Platon und Stoa*, in *Les Sources de Plotin*, Vandoeuvres, Genève 1960, pp. 83 ff. There has also been talk of a «Kosmodizee» (cf. H.R. SCHLETTE, *Das Eine und das Andere. Studien*



beginning of the discussion devoted by Plotinus to the theme of astral influences in IV 4 30-45. One of the motives leading Plotinus in his astrological polemic is in fact the rejection of those views that impute to the «visible gods» the origin of the evils that man experiences in the world. This is a thesis that Plotinus deals with several times in his writings<sup>3</sup> and which he tackles with particular force in the course of the critical discussion he holds with the Gnostics, who place «the charges against the gods in the sky» within a broader negative judgement on the meaning of the world as a whole. It is in the context of this issue that fits the long work that, towards the end of his life, Plotinus writes on the theme of providence (III 2-3), in which he takes up in an organic and systematic way the task he had given to philosophy in the passage from IV 4 that I have quoted above. For, Plotinus begins his work by explaining that his main purpose is to rebut the claim that our cosmos is not arranged in the best possible way. This claim is put in the mouths of Epicureans and Gnostics; the former «say that providence does not exist at all, the other that the universe has been made by an evil maker» (3.2.1.7-10). Against this claim, Plotinus asserts, at the very beginning of his discussion, that «universal providence» (ἡ τοῦ παντὸς πρόνοια) exists and that this «universal providence» has brought about the best physical cosmos. According to this meaning, the term *pronoia* needs to be applied to *Nous*, since the divine Intellect is the cause of the sensible world and of its rational order (3.2.1.24-26).

Immediately after that, however, Plotinus explains that this cosmic order does not reflect any rational design made by its cause. Plotinus makes clear that the term *pronoia*, when applied to *Nous* as the cause of the cosmos, designates only the fact that «the universe comes from Intellect and Intellect is prior in nature», or, as Plotinus puts it in his own definition of *pronoia*, «providence for the All [for the physical cosmos] is its being according to Intellect» (3.2.1.22-23). On the other side, Plotinus denies that ἡ τοῦ παντὸς πρόνοια could be understood in the sense that the good and rational order of the physical world is the result of «a fore-seeing and a calculation of God (προόρασίν τινα καὶ λογισμὸν θεοῦ) about how this All might come into existence and how things might be as good as possible» (3.2.1.18-19). This view is common in Plotinus, who generally claims that true and intelligible principles act on the physical cosmos without being engaged in reasoning, deliberating, planning and fore-seeing. In order to explain how divine causality determines and guarantees an optimal world order, Plotinus develops a new and alternative theory about God's creative activity. And he maintains that his new theory can deliver a more coherent and defensible story about «universal providence» than the traditional Platonic theories that appeal to a demiurgic account of the making of the world in order to support the same claims.

The purpose of my paper is to discuss some aspects of Plotinus' dissenting story about

---

zur *Problematik der Negativen in der Metaphysik Plotins*, Hueber, München 1966, pp. 165-166) or a «Logodizee» (cf. E. FRÜCHTEL, *Weltentwurf und Logos. Zur Metaphysik Plotins*, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1970, p. 66). The expression was also taken up by D. O'BRIEN, *Théodicée plotinienne, théodicée gnostique*, Brill, Leiden 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., for example, 1.8.5, 26-34; 15. 23-28 and the commentary by D. O'MEARA, *Plotin. Traité* 51, Cerf, Paris 1999, pp. 14-15; 118-119; 2.3.1.6-10; 17-19.

divine causality and providence, by making three points. First, I will discuss Plotinus' criticism of the view that the cosmos is the product of God's causality based on reasoning, planning and deliberating. Second, I will deal with Plotinus' own theory on providence and divine causality, and, third, I will highlight what I believe to be the philosophical meaning and relevance of Plotinian theory. Before doing so, I will start with some introductory remarks about the historical background of Plotinus' theory. It can help us to come to a better understanding of Plotinus' theory, its origin and motivation.

## II. DIVINE CAUSALITY

First of all, the Plotinian theory about providence and divine causality is rather different from the one presented in Plato's *Timaeus*. According to *Timaeus*, our world is constituted and arranged in the best possible way by a divine craftsman or demiurge. Plato represents the demiurge as guided by his own planning or calculation (λογισμός; 30b, 34a-b) in order to bring about a well-ordered cosmos. Indeed, it seems that the demiurge's causal power is labeled *pronoia* (*Tim.* 30b-c) to reflect precisely the claim that benevolent divine planning is explanatory of various features of the physical world (44c, 45a-b).

Plotinus, however, does not accept that the divine thought responsible for cosmic order could possess any of these Platonic features; instead, he proposes a metaphorical reading of the demiurgic model of causation set out in Plato's *Timaeus*;<sup>4</sup> he regards Plato's words as a metaphor suggesting that our sensible world is ordered as if it were produced by the rational plan of a provident craftsman; but, according to Plotinus, this is not what happens in reality. One of the reasons why Plotinus departs from a literal reading of Plato's demiurgic causation is to be found in his polemic against the Gnostics and their use of Platonic texts. Plotinus rejects the Gnostic account of cosmogony as a misinterpretation of Plato's demiurge. In fact, according to Plotinus, such an account emphasizes the arbitrary and anthropomorphic aspects of demiurge's activity.<sup>5</sup>

As many scholars already remarked, the direct confrontation with Gnosticism played an important role in Plotinus' attempt to develop a non-demiurgic account of the making of the world. However, as Dominic O'Meara already pointed out some years ago, in developing his own theory Plotinus was not inspired only by his polemics with Gnosticism.<sup>6</sup> Some important aspects

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf., for example, *Enn.*, 3.2.14.1-6; 5.8.7.36-44; 6.7.1.28-32; 6.8.7.1-4; see R. CHIARADONNA, *Plotinus' Metaphorical Reading of the Timaeus: Soul, Mathematics, Providence*, in P. D'HOINE-G. VAN RIEL (eds.), *Fate, Providence and Moral Responsibility in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought. Studies in Honour of Carlos Steel*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2014, pp. 203-205.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 2.9.6 and J. M. NARBONNE, *Plotinus in Dialogue with the Gnostics*, Brill, Leiden 2011, pp. 118-121.

<sup>6</sup> See D.J. O'MEARA, *Gnosticism and the Making of the World in Plotinus*, in: B. LAYTON (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. 1: *The School of Valentinus*, Brill, Leiden 1981, pp. 365-378.

of the Plotinian view can be found in treatises which predate the explicit polemic with Gnosticism (contained in the so-called anti-Gnostic ‘Großschrift’, consisting in treatises 30, 31 and 32): in treatises number 4 and 5, for example, Plotinus accepts the Aristotelian position that nature, unlike craftsman, does not deliberate when producing things and for this reason it achieves a perfection far surpassing what is attainable by ‘craftsmanly process’;<sup>7</sup> moreover, Plotinus rejects any anthropomorphic view of the demiurge and uses some arguments that had already emphasized by Epicureans, for example in Cicero’s *De natura deorum*, at 1.18-20.<sup>8</sup> In his treatises Plotinus shows a familiarity with the debate in the philosophical schools concerning demiurgic accounts of the constitution of the world. Plotinus’ theory of divine causality and providence must be interpreted in the light of this debate; it represents an attempt to formulate, from a Platonic point of view, an answer to the problems that came up in this debate – and which are traditionally associated with the interpretation of Plato’s *Timaeus*.

Within this frame, Plotinus’ theory of divine causality and providence can be plausibly understood as motivated by his desire to resolve tensions within the Platonic tradition. One approach which Plotinus could find in a variety of forms in his Platonic predecessors was to distinguish between the highest God and a lower principle, to which the functions of the demiurge were attributed. This approach clearly frees the highest God from implications in the demiurgic processes, but it does not eliminate them. They are merely attributed to another cosmological principle. Therefore, Middle-Platonist authors widely resorted to the demiurgic image in describing the production of the world and argued that the natural order reflects the reasonings of the demiurge and his «administrative care» of the world, in Alcinous’ words (*Did.* 12, p. 167, 13-14 Hermann). Plotinus dissents from earlier Platonists on this point. He rejects the traditional Platonist conception of the demiurge based on Plato’s *Timaeus*, and argues that this conception is incompatible with some important commitments that he deems all Platonists should share. Plotinus maintains that, if the fundamental principles of Platonic philosophy are taken properly into account, then it is necessary to offer an alternative theory of divine providence, which excludes any demiurgic account of the constitution of the world.

Such an alternative theory, however, had been already offered within the Peripatetic tradition, by Alexander of Aphrodisias. This Peripatetic background is plausibly another important aspect to be taken into account in order to understand Plotinus’ theory and its origin. In his work *On Providence*, preserved in two Arabic versions, Alexander accepts the existence of providence, which is exercised over the sublunary region from the heavens, but rejects Plato’s view on demiurgic causation. Alexander defends the existence of order in nature, claiming that rational structures and regularities exist in the sublunary region. This refers in particular to natural species, which exist in virtue of their hylomorphic forms; the eternal and regular character of these immanent, specific forms is connected to the cyclical motions of celestial bodies.<sup>9</sup> Alexander

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, 7. 7.1032 a 12-28; *Physics*, 2. 8.199 b 28 (quoted by PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, 4.8.8.15-16); *On the Heavens*, 2, 4.287b.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Enn.*, 5.9 [5].6.20-24; 4.8 [6]. 2.20-38; 4.8.8.11-16; 5.7 [18].3.7-12.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *On Providence* 33.1-8; 87.5-10 RULAND; *Quaest.* 1.25.41.4-19; 2.19.63.10-28 BRUNS.

however rejects the Platonic view that such rational structures should be seen as depending on a demiurgic and reasoning cause, that produces cosmic order contemplating an external paradigm, the Platonic transcendent Forms.

As Paul Thillet already remarked, Alexander's criticism of the demiurgic view of causality is, in some aspects, similar to that of Plotinus: although there is no clear textual parallel between them,<sup>10</sup> we know that Plotinus was familiar with Alexander's work.<sup>11</sup> Plotinus however, rejects a 'horizontal', cosmological account of natural teleology, based only on the theory of immanent specific forms. From his Platonic point of view, Plotinus maintains that the good and rational order of the sensible world and of the natural ends internal to that world derives from suprasensible principles and, in particular, from a divine *Nous* that contains in itself the Platonic Forms. This leaves Plotinus with the challenge to develop a new theory of the casual relationship between the divine *Nous* and the world that could represent a coherent and plausible alternative to the traditional Platonic model of a demiurgic account of the making of the world.

### III. PLOTINUS' CRITICISM

I turn to my first point: the reasons why Plotinus maintains that a demiurgic account of the making of the world is untenable. Here I cannot examine all of the Plotinian arguments; I will deal with what I consider to be the most important.

For that we need to return to the work *On Providence*. In the first chapter, Plotinus explains that 'universal providence' (ἡ τοῦ παντὸς πρόνοια), that we have to attribute to *Nous* as the cause of the world, cannot be understood as the *pronoia*, «which belongs to the individual and which is a calculation before action how something should happen, or not happen in the case of things which ought not to be done, or how we may have something, or not have it» (3.2.1.11-13). This kind of description accords with the usual meaning of the concept of *pro-noia*, that, in Greek, designates the thinking (*noein*) ahead (*pro*). In this sense, *pronoia* indicates that kind of pondering that aims to reach a goal, and thus thinks ahead (*pro*) about the course of events in order to plan and arrange the necessary means to achieve it. Understood as such, the term *pronoia* occurs in Aristotle in the ethical and legal meaning of 'pre-meditation' and it is connected with the

---

<sup>10</sup> See P. THILLET, *Alexandre d'Aphrodise. Traité de la Providence*, Verdier, Paris 2003, pp. 46-54; see also P. ADAMSON, *Plotinus on Astrology*, «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», XXXV, 2008, pp. 265-291, who has pointed out the parallels between Alexander's *On Providence* and Plotinus' discussion on astrology.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus*, 14.10-13; see C. D'ANCONA, *Plotin*, in R. GOULET (ed.), *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques*, CNRS Éditions, Paris 2012, vol. Va, pp. 973-975.

concepts of deliberation and intention.<sup>12</sup>

Plotinus makes clear that this kind of *pro-noia* cannot be applied to *Nous*; the divine Intellect cannot be regarded as a practical agent engaged in reasoning, deliberating, planning and fore-seeing. He argues that these modes of thought are incompatible with, first, the perfect actuality of *Nous*' thought, and, second, with the eternity of its nature. Let us deal with them in turn. First, Aristotle had argued that any form of reasoning and deliberation concerns only contingent things (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 6, 2.1139a12 ff.). The perfect actuality of *Nous*' thought, however, excludes that any form of contingency could be in it, since all the beings of which divine *Nous* can be aware are wholly and simultaneously present to it.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, divine *Nous* cannot act by deliberate choice. For the same reason, given the perfect actuality of *Nous*' thought, also «the future» is already present in it, as Plotinus says (6.7.1.48-50); so, there are for *Nous* no perspective states of affairs to be for-seen or pre-planned (6.7.1.38-40). Second, the eternal nature of divine *Nous* excludes that the world had a beginning.<sup>14</sup> As is well-known, according to Plato's *Timaeus*, the cosmos had a beginning, and there was a controversy among ancient Platonists as to whether this claim is to be interpreted literally or not.<sup>15</sup> According to Plotinus, a beginning of the world would imply a change on God's part, a turning of God from not-creating to creating the world, but this is incompatible with the immutability of his nature. In *Enneads* 2.9.8.4-5, Plotinus formulates it in the following manner: «People who assume a beginning of the world think that the cause of the making of the world was a being who turned from a thing to another and changed». This view, however, would imply another unacceptable consequence: if God is the Good, to suppose a changing in God would involve that the maker of our world was not good, according to the thesis attributed by Plotinus to the Gnostics.<sup>16</sup> For the same reason, as the creation has no beginning in time, therefore any new action in the world on God's part must be excluded. Should

---

<sup>12</sup> See ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 5, 8.1135b25-26; *Magna Moralia*, 1188b35-37. According to its ethical and juridical meaning, Aristotle also uses the term *pronoia* to distinguish between the most serious and least serious crimes: cf. *Politics*, 4, 16.1300b26; *Eudemian Ethics*, 2, 10.1266b38.

<sup>13</sup> See *Enn.* 6.7.1.45-48; see P. HADOT, *Plotin. Traité 38 (VI, 7). Introduction, traduction, commentaire et notes*, Cerf, Paris 1989, pp.197-199. Cf. also 4.3.18.1-10; 3.9.1.35-37.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 2.9.8.3-8; 4.4.9.11-18; 5.1.6.19-27; see also 3.7.6.50-57, and W. BEIERWALTES, *Plotin. Über Ewigkeit und Zeit (Enneade III 7). Übersetzt, eingeleitet und kommentiert*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1981, pp. 211-213.

<sup>15</sup> On this debate cf. M. BALTES, *Die Weltentstehung des Platonischen Timaios nach den Antiken Interpreteten*, 2 vols., Brill, Leiden 1976-1978; R. SORABJI, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, Duckworth, London 1983, pp. 268-83, and C. S. O'BRIEN, *The Demiurge in Ancient Thought. Secondary Gods and Divine Mediators*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 28-35.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 2.9.4.12-32; 5.14-37. This aspect of Plotinus' criticism of the Gnostics has been aptly dealt with by C. PARMA, *Pronoia und Providentia. Der Vorsehungsbegriff Plotins und Augustins*, Brill, Leiden 1971, pp. 30-38.

God make 'new' things in the world, such a *novum* could be explained only by the fact that God has to remedy preexisting deficiencies in the cosmos, or that he wants to improve his creation. But neither of these alternatives is acceptable: in the first alternative, God would then be regarded as imperfect, in the second we would be unable to explain the reason why this improvable cosmos had not been previously improved, since there had been a beneficent cause of good already present to it.<sup>17</sup> In the first chapter of his work *On Providence*, at 3.2.1.15-26, Plotinus refers to the thesis that the physical cosmos had no beginning in time, but is rather the eternal product of *Nous*' activity, as sufficient to establish the claim that the sensible world is not the result of divine reasoning and planning: since the cosmos has always existed, there is no time before it existed when it could have been planned out in advance.

The fundamental objection towards a demiurgic account of the making of the world is however another one; it clearly appears in a passage of the great anti-Gnostic work, in the seventh chapter of the *Ennead* 5.8. Plotinus starts by briefly presenting the Platonic conception according to which the sensible world derives from a suprasensible principle; he then asks himself whether this causality of the intelligible is to be intended according to a deliberative and demiurgic model:

«This All, if we agree that its being and its being what it is come to it from another, are we to think that its maker conceived earth in his own mind, with its necessary place in the center, and then water and its place upon earth, and then the other things in their order up to heaven, then all living things, each with the sort of shapes which they have now, and their particular internal organs and outward parts, and then when he had them all arranged in his mind proceeded to his work? – Planning of this sort is quite impossible» (5.8.7.1-9).

Immediately thereafter, Plotinus explains that, from the point of view of our discursive reason, this kind of interpretation can be regarded as something spontaneous and, so to speak, natural: we observe that the sensible world and the species within it are optimally constituted, therefore we deem the cosmos as something planned by a divine Intellect, which reasoned about the things here and arranged them in the best possible way. According to Plotinus, however, in

---

<sup>17</sup> In 6.7.3.1-10 Plotinus explains that the passages in the *Timaeus*, esp. 27d-28a, in which Plato speaks of deliberation and reasoning in God must be understood as a 'hypothesis' due to the form of discourse, to the assumption that things «had come into being». According to Plotinus, however, Plato made it clear that it was only a way of speaking by adding that things «always come to being»: «Deliberation and reasoning are due to [Plato's] assumption: for he assumed that things had come into being. And this is why there is deliberation and reasoning; but by saying "always coming into being" he also abolishes the idea that God reasons. For it is not possible to reason in what is always; for to do so would belong to someone who had forgotten how it was before. And then if things were better afterwards, they would not have been beautiful before; but if they were beautiful, they keep the same. But they are beautiful because they are with their cause». The same argument is in 5.8.12.16-26.

this way we take human rationality as a paradigm for divine activity. This would imply that God is in the position of acting as a practical agent, who must have resorted to deliberation and that God's creative activity is determined by a reason that is external to him. In this way we would eliminate the absoluteness of the divine principle, namely its very nature as principle. Plotinus rejects such an account and at the end of the chapter, at 5.8.7.36-40, states:

«To return to our main theme: you can explain the reason why (αἰτίαν) the earth is in the middle and round, and why (διὰ τί) the ecliptic slants as it does [...] but it is not the case that because the things must be so arranged this is why they had been so planned, but that it [the intelligible] is as it is, is why things are well arranged».

In the last few lines of this chapter, 5.8.7.45-46, Plotinus refers to Aristotle's *Physics* (I, 5.188a27-30) in order to highlight that the divine principle is such inasmuch as it is the union between *archê* and *telos*:

«In this sense, it is well said [by Aristotle] that we should not enquire into the reason why (αἰτίας) of a principle and of a principle like this, the perfect one, which is the same as the goal».

So, the creative activity of God cannot be motivated by any reason, cause or *telos* whatsoever which is outside the nature of the divine principle. For this reason, according to a view of divine causality that will be systematically adopted by the following Neoplatonic tradition, the divine principles create only from themselves, that is «by their very being» (αὐτῶ τῶ εἶναι), *per esse suum tantum*, in the words of the *Liber de causis*.<sup>18</sup>

I will return to this conception of the divine causality in a moment. First, I would like to give an account how Plotinus' criticisms relate to the earlier Platonic tradition, esp. as set out in the eighth chapter of *Ennead* 6.7. In the earlier chapters, Plotinus described his own views about the causal relationship between the divine Intellect and the world. In the eighth chapter, at 6.7.8.3-4, Plotinus introduces a question that hypothesizes another possible way of conceiving the demiurgic activity of the Divine Intellect: «Wouldn't it be possible to suppose that God discovered the thought of horse in order that a horse (or some other animal) might come into being here below?». This question indirectly raises the problem of the relationship between Divine Intellect and Plato's theory of Forms. This is one of the fundamental problems in Plotinus' thought, which had already been extensively discussed by the Middle-Platonists. Plotinus accepts the common Middle-Platonist doctrine that the intelligible cosmos is not outside the demiurgic *Nous*, but is internal to it, and that the Forms are therefore «the thoughts of God». According to Plotinus, however, the Forms cannot be regarded as the thoughts that God conceived in

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. SYRIANUS, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 163.27-34 KROLL; PROCLUS, *Elements of Theology*, 18.20.3-22; 120.106.7-8 DODDS; *Liber de causis*, 19, 181.25-26 BARDENHEWER = 19.101-102 PATTIN. See C. D'ANCONA, *Plotinus and later Platonic philosophers on the causality of the First Principle*, in LLOYD P. GERSON (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp. 356-385.



his own mind in order to create the sensible world: «It is not possible – this is Plotinus’ answer – for God to think the horse in order to make it [...] but the horse existed before its generation and was not thought of that it might be generated» (6.7.8.6-9). According to Plotinus, the Middle-Platonist doctrine would lead to the same conclusion that we examined in the anti-Gnostic treatise. For, if divine Intellect conceived the Forms in order to have a model on the basis of which to make the sensible things, then we should conclude that the Form of horse, for example, was thought for the sake of the sensible horse. In this case, however, what is superior and first, namely the Form, would depend – to some extent – on what is inferior, that is to say on the sensible object.

#### IV. NEOPLATONIC THEORY

The topics I hitherto addressed are also dealt with by Plotinus in *Ennead* 6.7. In the first part of this treatise, moreover, Plotinus introduces his own theory about the causal relationship between the divine Intellect and the world. The point of departure in *Ennead* 6.7 is once again Plato’s *Timaeus*. In the first chapter, Plotinus refers to a passage in the *Timaeus* on the creation of man by the demiurge (45b), which reads: «And of the organs the gods first contrived the eyes to give light, and the reason why they were inserted was as follows». The *aitia* that would have inspired the creative action of the demiurge is inherent in the fact that the eyes are the instruments through which a man can preserve himself in the sensible world (cf. *Tim.* 33a, 45d-e, 72e-74e).

This account of the *Timaeus* passage has a clear implication: the divine reason determined that animals are to have features such as eyes because it foresaw the circumstances of their sensible life and took in consideration which feature would be useful to animals in negotiating their physical surroundings. Once again, Plotinus rejects the idea that God created sense-organs or any other feature of sensible cosmos on the basis of *prohorasis* and *logismos*, and excludes that God’s creative activity can involve anything like means-ends reasoning about the sensible cosmos. The arguments offered by Plotinus are those I have previously discussed, and also in this case Plotinus makes clear that the *Timaeus* needs to be interpreted metaphorically.

As discussed by Pierre Hadot, the initial chapters of 6.7 are once again directed against the Gnostics and their use of Platonic texts.<sup>19</sup> Plotinus, however, does not refer to the Gnostics alone. From the second chapter on, Plotinus addresses Aristotle’s hylomorphic doctrines. This discussion is particularly significant for our theme, since it must be conceivably seen as part of Plotinus’ argumentative strategy. As I have already mentioned, criticism of the Platonic demiurgic

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. HADOT, *Plotin*, cit., pp. 26-30; see also R. T. WALLIS, *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1992, p. 464 («The first part of VI 7 forms an anti-Gnostic interpretation of the *Timaeus*») and K. CORRIGAN, *Platonism and Gnosticism: The Anonymus Commentary on the Parmenides: Middle or Neoplatonic?*, in J. D. TURNER-R. MAJERICK (eds.), *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures and Texts*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta 2000, pp. 141-177, 176-177.

understanding of causality is largely present in the Peripatetic tradition; Alexander of Aphrodisias had developed it in his work *On Providence*, with arguments partially similar to those of Plotinus. As with other subjects, Plotinus adopts some of Alexander's criticisms, but he believes that the right solutions can only be found beyond the Aristotelian perspective, within Platonism, or rather within that form of Platonism he himself develops.<sup>20</sup>

The discussion with Aristotle in chapters 2-7 is somewhat complex and can hence only be presented in outline here.<sup>21</sup> In the second chapter, at 6.7.2.12, after having qualified the nature of Intellect as 'cause', Plotinus introduces the typical Peripatetic distinction between *hoti* and *dioti* (cf. *Posterior Analytics* 2, 2.90a15, and *Metaphysics* VIII, 4.1044b14) and he refers to Aristotelian example of the eclipsis. According to Aristotle, we actually know a thing when we grasp its *dioti*, that is its essence or form, so that we can give a formal determination or a definition of it (cf. *Posterior Analytics* 2, 2.90a31). Plotinus wants to show that this Aristotelian doctrine needs to be combined with a Platonist account of reality. In the fourth chapter Plotinus presents the definition of man as 'rational animal' as a classical example for an Aristotelian definition through *genus* and *differentiae*. This example often occurs in Plotinus, in order to criticize Aristotle's logical doctrine, according to which the specific differences, which determinate and qualify a genus, must come from outside of it (see *Categories* 5.2.b20). In his work *On the Kinds of Being*, for instance, Plotinus maintains that a specific difference like 'rational', which makes the man a man, comes from the genus 'animal', and therefore it is an activity (*energeia*) coming from the substance.<sup>22</sup> In treatise 6.7, at 4.22-28, Plotinus remarks that the Peripatetic definition 'rational animal' does not show at all what man here below really is (that is his *dioti*, his essence or nature), but simply describes the factual structure of concrete beings composed by body and soul. In order to have an explanatory effectiveness, a definition should be able to show how in the essence or form of the thing all the features that contribute to its nature are contained, all the features that are «constituent parts» of a sensible substance, making it the kind of entity which it is,<sup>23</sup> or all the

---

<sup>20</sup> For Plotinus' use of this argumentative strategy in other contexts, see E. PEROLI, *Organisme et réflexion. Plotin et la nature de l'être vivant*, « Revue de Philosophie Ancienne », 2, 2013, pp. 179-209.

<sup>21</sup> For a further analysis of 6.7.2-7, A. SCHIAPARELLI, *Essence and Cause in Plotinus' Ennead VI.7 [38] 2: An Outline of Some Problems*, in D. CHARLES (ed.), *Definition in Greek Philosophy*, Clarendon, Oxford 2010, pp. 467-492; N. THALER, *Traces of Good in Plotinus's Philosophy of Nature: Ennead VI.7.1-14*, « Journal of the History of Philosophy », XLIX, 2011, pp. 161-80; R. CHIARADONNA, *Intelligibles as Causes in Plotinus' Metaphysics: Enn. 6.7 (38)*, in C. NATALI-C. VIANO (eds.), *Aitia II. Avec ou sans Aristote. Le débat sur les causes à l'âge hellénistique et impérial*, Peeters, Leuven 2014, pp. 185-213.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. 6.2.14.14-22; see A. CH. LLOYD, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*, Clarendon, Oxford 1990, pp. 90-94.

<sup>23</sup> See 3. 2.2.18-26; 4.4.16.4-9; 6.2.14.14-22.

‘completing qualities’, as Plotinus states using a *terminus technicus* of the Peripatetic tradition.<sup>24</sup> But, according to Plotinus, this is precisely what Aristotle’s understanding of definition cannot provide, since Aristotle’s doctrine of *ousia* cannot provide an adequate ground for the thesis of the priority of substance with respect to what depends on it.<sup>25</sup> In his criticism of Aristotle in 6.7 Plotinus thus aims to show that the only way of solving the problems of Peripatetic view of definition and essence points to a different meaning of Form as the source of the sensible things and of all what is a ‘constituent’ part of the nature of the things that participate of it. For this reason, as Plotinus shows in the second section of 6.7, we must go beyond Peripatetic hylomorphism and examine the nature of the divine Intellect.

What is more, the intelligible Forms can have such a structure only as objects of *Nous*’ thought, only because they are ‘the thoughts of God’, who knows himself in each of his objects of thought. For, as Aristotle had already argued, the divine *Nous* must be regarded as a fully actual self-thinking Intellect. But, if the Forms are the objects of divine thought, then Intellect thinks itself in each of its immanent Forms. Thus, in virtue of *Nous*’ thought, in each individual Form the whole intelligible world is present, that each Form contains according to its proper nature.<sup>26</sup> In this way, in each of its immanent Forms the divine Intellect sees all the other Forms, each time in a different way, that is, according to the perspective of each individual Form, and so it fully knows itself in each of its objects of thought:<sup>27</sup> «It thinks itself as whole with the whole of itself», in Plotinus’ own words (5.3.6.7).

For this reason, each Form, as object of *Nous*’ thought, is «complete» and «self-sufficient», as Plotinus states in 6.7.3. This means that it already contains in itself everything it communicates to the sensible things. As Plotinus states in the first chapter, «it is not permitted to suppose that anything which is of God is other than whole and all» (6.7.1.46). If in each individual Form the divine *Nous* thinks itself in a complete and comprehensive way («as whole with the whole of itself», as we have just seen), and if, therefore, each Form contains in itself the whole intelligible world, then there is nothing that could be added to the Forms when the sensible things are generated: therefore, all the features that characterize the sensible things are already contained in the intelligible Forms, even if according their intelligible nature; conversely, all that is present in the sensible things is nothing but an unfolding of what is ‘pre-contained’ in the intelligible, although this unfolding takes place at a lower level, that is, according to the mode of being that

---

<sup>24</sup> On this topic see E. PEROLI, *Dio, uomo e mondo. La tradizione etico-metafisica del Platonismo*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2003, pp. 84-86.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. 6.1.2.7-18; for further details and references on this topic see R. CHIARADONNA, *Sostanza, movimento, analogia: Plotino critico di Aristotele*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 2002, pp. 64-66 and 108-110.

<sup>26</sup> Cf., for example, 1.8.2.17-19; 3.8.8.40-48; 4.9.5.28-29; 5.8.4.11.22-24; 5.9.8.2-4; see E. K. EMILSSON, *Plotinus on Intellect*, Clarendon, Oxford 2007, 199-207.

<sup>27</sup> On this structure of the Intellect, see PEROLI, *Dio, uomo e mondo*, cit., pp. 51-104, and J. HALFWASSEN, *Geist und Selbbsbewusstsein: Studien zu Plotin und Numenios*, Franz Steiner, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 24-33.

is proper to the sensible.

This interpretation of intelligible causality is for Plotinus the answer to the initial question of treatise 6.7. The sensible eye sight was not ‘added’ to man at the time of his birth, nor it is due to the providential care of God, who would have given the man sight because of its usefulness: the sense-perception is rather the manifestation of what has always been inside the Form of man, in an immaterial and transcendental way (see 6.7.3.22-24: «Having senses, and senses of this kind, is contained in the Form by eternal necessity and the perfection of Intellect, which, if it is perfect, possesses the causes in itself»). At the end of this discussion, Plotinus brings up his famous distinction between the three men, and argues again that those features that characterize the human being «here below» are nothing but lower manifestations of the intelligible man:

«These sense-perceptions here are dim intellections, but the intellections there are clear sense-perceptions» (6.7.7.30-33).

The main tenets of the Plotinian theory of the intelligible causality played an important role in the subsequent tradition. There is a point, however, on which the later tradition will neither be willing to follow Plotinus, nor the Neoplatonic tradition. As we have seen, according to Plotinus, the sensible world must be conceived as a ‘manifestation’ or ‘unfolding’ of what has always been contained in the divine Intellect. According to Plotinus, however, there can be no act of will by the divine intellect at the basis of this manifestation or unfolding, there can be no intentions or concerns whatsoever regarding the sensible world and the ends internal to it. In chapter 8, at 13, Plotinus explains that living beings and all other sensible things were generated as an *epakolouthêsis*, as a necessary consequence of what is contained in the divine Intellect. This corresponds to Plotinus’ standard doctrine, according to which sensible things derive immediately from the intelligible world, as an image or a reflection of the Forms. The same rational order of the cosmos is nothing but a lower reflection of the intelligible order, without *Nous* having any concern or desire to produce it. Basil of Caesarea, in his *In Hexameron*, summarized Plotinus’ conception in this way:

«There are those who recognize that God is the cause of the world, but an involuntary cause (ἀίτιον ἀπροαίρετως), as the body is the cause of the shadow or the luminous body of light» (1.7.4).

If Plotinus’ theory of the causal relationship between divine *Nous* and the physical world is meant to constitute an account of divine providence, then Plotinus seems to tell an unclear story. Plotinus maintains: (1) that the sensible cosmos and the species within it are optimally constituted; (2) in contrast with any natural teleology, he claims that the rational structure of the world derives from a superior nature; in particular, he maintains that the good order of the cosmos as whole and the features of the sensible beings within it are fully determined by the contents of a divine Mind; (3) at the same time, however, he also maintains that this Mind cannot take into consideration the natural world or ends internal to this world. It is unclear how these three theses can be conciliated: *Nous* works out in detail structures, that will turn out to have utility here, without taking into consideration the conditions and the ends here with reference to which these structures have utility. As Noble and Powers pointed out, it is unclear

«how can Plotinus explain the fact that Nous possesses those very thoughts that ensure a well-ordered physical cosmos and well-adapted organisms, given that it cannot give any thought to the sensible cosmos and the conditions of embodied life».<sup>28</sup>

In my last point I would like to propose an argument to support Plotinus' view. I would like to designate this argument 'the sovereignty of Good', according to the title of a well-known book by Iris Murdoch.<sup>29</sup>

## V. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOOD

Let us briefly return to the first chapters of the Treatise 6.7. As we have seen, Plotinus explains that all the features of the living beings of our world derive from the divine Intellect and must be understood as an unfolding of the characters that are incorporeally contained in the corresponding Forms. Plotinus, however, explains that the Forms have those features, not because they are aimed at creating the sensible world and at guaranteeing well adapted organisms. Let us take the example of the ox, which Plotinus introduces in the tenth chapter: in the Form of ox are contained those features which, then, appear in the sensible ox as 'horns' and 'claws'. In our experience, we observe that horns and claws are needed by oxen to be able to defend themselves, hence we believe that the divine Intellect has conceived and designed the horns and claws for the sake of this function. According to Plotinus, however, this is not the case: the Form of ox, like any other Form, possesses those particular features because those features are what allows that Form to best represent the divine Intellect, according to the specific nature which is proper to that Form. Due to this reason, each Form, as it is identical to the divine Intellect, contains the reason of all its features in itself rather than outside of itself. In this sense, Plotinus is able to state that in the divine Intellect the Forms «are in possession of their causes in themselves and with themselves», so that we can also say that they «have no cause of their being, but are self-sufficient and independent of cause» (6.7.2.40-42).

This argument can be explained in the following way. The intelligible Forms have a role as causes of the sensible things. At the beginning of his long work *On Providence*, Plotinus claims that the term *pronoia* refers to the fact that the contents and features of this world are causally

---

<sup>28</sup> C. NOBLE- I. N. M. POWERS, *Creation and divine providence in Plotinus*, in A. MARMODORO-B. D. PRINCE (eds.), *Causation and Creation in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 51-70.

<sup>29</sup> I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1970; at p. 128 Murdoch writes: «The good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. The only way to be good is to be good "for nothing". That "for nothing" is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility of the idea of Good itself». I would like to show that Plotinus wants to build this «sovereignty of Good » into creation itself.

determined by the Forms that *Nous* contemplates. The value of the Forms, however, does not depend on their use for causation and explanation.<sup>30</sup> The Forms are of intrinsic value as objects of spiritual vision of Intellect. For each individual Form is a manifestation of divine *Nous*, or is the same *Nous* expressed according to its own nature, or to the perspective which is proper to the single Form. Plotinus criticizes any demiurgic account of the making of the world because it eclipses the intrinsic value of the Form, to the extent that the Form is viewed only from the horizon of the particular whose existence it is invoked to explain. For this reason, Plotinus excludes that the world was planned by a divine Intellect and maintains that God's creative activity cannot involve anything like means-ends reasoning about the sensible cosmos. For in this case intelligible Forms would be only the model or the instrument planned by divine Intellect for the constitution of the physical reality, as if the intelligible world were a blueprint for creation drafted by God. It is for the same reason that Plotinus describes the productive activity of intelligible Principles in non-intentional terms and illustrates it through examples that want to exclude any intentions or concerns whatsoever regarding the sensible cosmos.<sup>31</sup>

Plotinus, however, does not want only to assert and to preserve the sovereignty of the Form; he wishes to build the intrinsic value of the Form into the very structure of divine causality. According to Plotinus, the sensible world is utterly dependent upon the intelligible world for its existence. The Form, however, does not derive its value from being a pattern on the basis of which other things are made. According to Plotinus, the opposite is true. The function of Form as cause depends on its intrinsic value. The eidetic causality is an *epakolouthêsis*, as we have seen in the previous section: it is a necessary consequence or a reflection of the nature of the Form, that is it is derived from its intrinsic value. For this reason, it is by being what it is in its intrinsic nature that the Form creates all that proceeds from it. Plotinus extends this model of eidetic causality to all divine principles: in the case of suprasensible causes, «to produce» coincides with «to be itself».<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the suprasensible principles have no need to 'do' something in order to be the cause of their effects. What is required is that they 'abide' (μένειν) in their nature. The verb 'abide' can appropriately describe the base of every 'procession' (πρόοδος), according to the typical formula of Neoplatonic causation.<sup>33</sup> For the *menein* is not a supplementary feature of divine principle, but the very nature of their causality: in order to create, they have only to abide what they are in their intrinsic value.

If my interpretation is correct, if Plotinus wishes to build the 'sovereignty of Good' into the structure of creation itself, then his theory of the divine causality transforms our way of looking at the world. Let us to return for the moment to the example of the ox. We say that the ox in the

---

<sup>30</sup> Cf. F. M. SCHROEDER, *Form und Transformation. A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 1992, pp. 3-23.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. NOBLE-POWERS, *Creation*, cit., p. 53, n. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. 3.2.1.38-45; 3.2.2.15-17; 5.8.7.24-31; 6.5.8.20-22.

<sup>33</sup> Cf., for example, *Enn.* 1.7.1.13-19 and 23-24; 5.3.10.16-17 and 12.33-8; 5.4.2.19-22; 6.4.7.22-9; 6.5.10.8-11.

sensible world has horns for defense. But, if the ox has horns only to defend itself against other animals, or vision only to keep it from bumping into things, then the attributes of horn and vision are regarded only in relation to these external purposes and to their functions. This way of looking at things is proper to our discursive reasoning, to which every form of *praxis* and *poiêsis* is connected. I can however consider and appreciate the living beings also in a different way. In the intelligible world, the Form of ox has horns and claws for the sake of perfection and completeness (6.7.10.1 ff.). If I focus on the particular in its relation to the Form, and if I understand that the role of the Form as cause is a reflection of its intrinsic value, then I may see that a living being has those attributes in order to be itself. This is precisely what Plotinus says of the Form.

This way of looking at the things irrespective of their functions and their uses could also be regarded as an aspect of what Plotinus considers as our freedom. For in his treatise *On Fate*, at 3.1.8.9-11, Plotinus maintains that we are free when we are outside the cosmic web of causation, which involves all the phenomenal realities. This kind of freedom is the very one of intellect, which is the sole human faculty that allows us to transcend our world without abandoning it. According to Plotinus, intellect always refers to intelligible Forms and therefore thanks to it we can open ourselves to the manifestation of the single beings in their intrinsic value. By doing so, we are able to stay outside of that heteronomous web of causation, in which the sensible things are considered only in relation of their uses, functions and purposes. Such a human freedom would not represent a way of flying from the world, but a different way of staying in it: a way of looking at the singular beings in their intrinsic value, that is from the point of view of the 'sovereignty of Good', or from the same point of view as God.

[enrico.peroli@unich.it](mailto:enrico.peroli@unich.it)

(Università degli Studi "G. D'Annunzio", Chieti-Pescara)