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Religious Recognition

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In Search of the Good

The Role of Recognition in Proclus and Maximus the Confessor

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Abstract: The concept of recognition is increasing in importance in political and social philosophy as a means of explaining and dealing conceptually with the problems of multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the phenomena which this concept signifies, namely human capacities for intersubjectivity, belong to human beings even before the development of the modern concept. This article explores how the content of the concept of recognition plays a role in two Platonic philosophies of Late Antiquity, those of the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus and the Christian philosopher, monk and theologian Maximus the Confessor. It is shown that their versions of a metaphysics of the Good provides the foundation for a moral and ethical vision of human life which makes recognitive judgements – which make acts of recognition possible – a necessity for human action. Although proper recognition pertains to the rational recognition of the First Cause as the true end of all human action, nevertheless Proclus and Maximus make recognitive judgements not only possible but a necessary function of even the lower, irrational faculties of soul. In this way, they explain how human beings have an innate capacity at all levels of cognition for recognizing things and other people as goods to be pursued or avoided.

Keywords: Platonism, metaphysics, philosophical psychology, intersubjectivity

Interest in ‘recognition’ as a political and social concept has grown in the years since it was first promoted by theorists like Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor. For its advocates among political and social theorists, the concept offers a means by which to explain how modern multicultural societies can support a diversity of cultural statuses and identities. The concept is thought to be able to fulfil this role because it signifies a cognitive and evaluative capacity for the intersubjectivity inherent in all human beings.¹ If this is the case, then we would expect that recognition would play a role in other spheres of intersubjectivity, outside of the political and societal spheres, as well as in eras earlier than our contemporary one. It is the aim of this essay to make precisely these assumptions and to explore the possibility of recognition within a religious context in some philosophical and theological writings of an earlier time, namely Late Antiquity, through the works of Proclus the Neoplatonist (412-485 CE) and the Christian theologian and monk Maximus the Confessor (580-662 CE).

In contemporary literature on recognition as a concept of political and social philosophy, recognition is described as a normative act which results in the social construction of individual self-identity. As it applies to human identity, recognition can refer both to identification of someone and to the ‘acknowledgement of and honouring of the status of others’, both of which require an act of

¹ For Axel Honneth, for instance, this is the rule which is proved by exceptions like neurological development disorders such as autism; see Honneth, *Reification*, 42-44.

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judgement to be made by the recognizer.² The first definition is rather straightforward, but the second perhaps requires a little more explanation. In order for that bestowal to be constitutive (however partially) of the identity of its recipient, the recipient must be in a position for that bestowal to matter. In other words, the recipient must regard such a bestowal as desirable in some way, or even necessary for his or her own well-being. Furthermore, in order for this relation between persons to obtain, there must be some normative framework or structure in which they both participate, even if they do so in very different ways; which is to say, that there must be a set of values which inform the recognizer's valuation and which is significant also for the recipient. Recognition need not involve any deliberate or overt action or expression towards the recognizee: recognition, properly speaking, is the taking of a stance or assumption of a comportment towards the recognizee which is in line with the valuation made concerning the latter.³ In this way, the act of recognition is an act of social identity construction, dependent upon the individual's engagement with members of a particular community to which the individual belongs. It is this second kind of recognition that I am interested in and it is my contention that the cognitive function which it represents is present in some way in the philosophies of Proclus and Maximus the Confessor.⁴

More specifically, I am concerned about how Proclus and Maximus explain the possibility of the evaluative judgement which grounds the act of recognition, and especially as it pertains to non-rational modes of cognition. I think, and will show, that it has something to do with the normative, metaphysical frameworks which they have constructed in their thought. In contemporary theories of recognition (which try to avoid metaphysical constructions), such frameworks are constituted by the set (or sets) of customs and mores that are maintained consciously or unconsciously by the community into which an individual is born. Yet, the individual is first introduced to this framework through engagement with the family into which he is born, prior to the development of his rational cognitive abilities. Thus, any complete theory of recognition must be able to explain how the individual is able to enter into this moral structure – able to comprehend the significance of values – prior to being able to reflect rationally upon the meaning and value of one's relationships. Axel Honneth, for instance, argues that the individual first learns to recognize the moral framework through loving attachment to family members as an infant⁵. Accordingly, in his view, the individual learns to recognize and seek recognition within a moral framework from the earliest moments of life. My main goal then, is to show that something like this – even though we cannot expect a precise analogue – is operative in the works of Proclus and Maximus.

² Avishai Margalit via Ikäheimo, "On the Genus and Species of Recognition," 447-462. A third meaning is mentioned here ("recognition as admitting one's mistakes") but it is not relevant to this paper's argument. I am here consciously omitting the possibility of acts of recognition between groups, since Proclus and Maximus focus in their writings on the relationships of individuals to each other and to the world.

³ Laitinen, "Interpersonal Recognition", makes this distinction between recognition proper and acts which may express that recognition. As an example, consider a person who previously harboured racist opinions, asserting the essential inferiority of races other than his own. His attitude or comportment towards people of those races will be consonant with the intensity with which he holds his racist valuations, and at the very least his attitude will be one of disrespect. Now, perhaps through repeated dealings with someone who happens to identify as a member of one of those disparaged races, he comes to realize that his racist opinions were mistaken. He now recognizes that this person with whom he has been dealing (and by extension others as well) is worthy of equal respect as a person, regardless of his race. Nevertheless, his new-found recognition need not be expressed through any overt speech acts or gestures, but will, at the very least, be perceptible by the change in his attitude to others. There is always the chance for misrecognition of various kinds and to various degrees in this process, but that is a separate issue which would have to be addressed in another article.

⁴ Abbreviations are used for citations for the primary texts of Proclus and Maximus. For Proclus: *Pr.Remp.* = *In Platonis Rempublicam Commentaria*; *Pr.Alc.* = *Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato*; *Pr.Inst.* = Proclus, *Elements of Theology*; *Pr.Tim.* = *In Platonis Timaeum Commentaria*; *Pr.Euc.* = Proclus, *In primum Euclidis elementorum*; *Pr.Ecl.* = *Eclogae*; *Pr.De.Dec. Dub* = *Dix problèmes concernant la providence*; *Pr.Prov.* = *Providence*; *Pr.De.Mal.Sub.* = *De l'Existence du Mal*; *Pr.Parm.* = Proclus, *In Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria*. For Maximus: *Max.Conf.Char.* = *Capita de Charitate (Opera Omnia in Migne vol. 90)*; *Max.Conf.Ep.* = *Epistolae (Opera Omnia in Migne vol. 91)*; *Max.Conf.Thal.* = *Quaestiones ad Thalassium (vols. 1 & 2)*; *Max.Conf.Amb.* = *On Difficulties*.

⁵ Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*. Honneth elaborates on the original pre-disposition for recognition in individuals in his *Reification*.

This project is not anachronistic. Theorists of recognition themselves make the claim that the phenomenon of recognition is a necessary requirement for the development of self-identity. In taking this claim seriously, I will argue that the phenomenon named by ‘recognition’ can be detected in both non-Christian and Christian Platonic philosophies of Late Antiquity, even if an explicit theory of recognition is not in evidence (as we should not expect it to be). I argue that we will find it in the metaphysics of the Good and the psychology which is developed in harmony with it in the Platonism of Late Antiquity. Furthermore, I will argue that these philosophies offer an explanation for how the actions of individuals require engagement in recognitive judgements at all levels of cognition, even prior to forming a capacity for rational reflection.

With this in mind, I suggest that Proclus and Maximus offer a good occasion for comparison and demonstration of philosophical continuity for two reasons:

1. Both Proclus and Maximus are connected philosophically directly through the works of the pseudonymous Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. 5th – 6th century). This figure was influenced directly and deeply by Proclus and, in turn, exerted a deep influence on Maximus. Thus, although they develop their thinking in significantly different ways, there is a deep philosophical connection between the two.⁶
2. Both Proclus and Maximus have left us extensive and sophisticated treatments of the relevant topics in their numerous writings. This allows us to attain a certain degree of certainty about what positions they took on many philosophical questions.

In general, despite the chronological and cultural gaps between Proclus and Maximus, and despite the vast social changes which took place during that interval, there remain sufficient philosophical points of contact between the two philosophers to make a comparison worthwhile. Through this comparison I intend to demonstrate two main points which are intrinsically connected by the dependence of human existence and well-being upon the Good. The first is that, according to Proclus and Maximus, the Good (whether Proclus’s One Itself or the Christian God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) produces an objective cosmos which is also already a moral one, and this provides an ontological and moral structure which enables recognitive judgements to be made by human beings. Secondly, I will show that in this vision of reality human beings have innate capacities for recognitive judgements by means of the faculties of soul, not only at the level of rational reflection but already at the level of sense-perception, giving it a prime role in the perfection of self and the attainment of one’s true identity. In this way, we will see that both Proclus and Maximus took account of the role played by engagement with others in the development of self-identity, even though both thought that the true self was ultimately beyond social construction as it is understood today.

The Metaphysics of the Good

In the 3rd century CE, Plotinus constructed a Platonic vision of reality which combined the One of Plato’s *Parmenides* and the Good of Plato’s *Republic* (sans reference to the *form* of the Good) as its principle and cause. At the same time, he established this ultimate principle as prior to Being, source of the Forms and essences of all things, and thus prior to all possibility of knowledge and conception. At the same time, the One and Good permeates the whole of reality to an extent that exceeds the range of Being and Form. Since the Good is prior to Being, it penetrates the entire cosmos at every point, from the highest level, Being Itself, to the lowest in matter where Being is no longer operative. Although the details of this vision were constantly contested by his Platonic successors, they never abandoned the basic ontological hierarchy (One – Intellect/Being – Soul) that Plotinus established. This state of affairs continued right until the end of the 7th century, when the Platonic schools in Athens and Alexandria largely disappeared from the historical record.

⁶ Maximus, of course, was highly influenced by Christian predecessors other than Dionysius, chief among them figures such as Evagrius, Gregory Nazianzen, Leontius of Byzantium, and Origen. For the relationship of his thought to that of his predecessors the best references are still Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, and Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*.

Proclus on the Good Beyond Being

It is clear that Proclus adopts this basic Plotinian foundation in his own philosophy. In his *Elements of Theology*, he describes the activities characteristic of the first principle in their relation to the totality of things which proceed from it.⁷ As the One, it is the cause of the unity of all things and, as such, it is the foundation of their existence. As the Good, it is the providential principle which both extends to things their share of unity and preserves things in that unity by being the ultimate goal of their own natural activities. Yet, these are not separate activities performed by the first principle. Through its activity, whatever exists receives a share of the primal unity and goodness, so that insofar as a thing exists it is both one and good, according to its capacity for receiving unity and goodness. The One and Good extends its influence beyond the reach of Being, so that it is present to individual beings which participate in it even before their own form (in the causal rather than the temporal sense); in fact, it is present as the necessary condition for there to be any form at all.⁸ This presence of the One is manifest in the desire for the Good which is possessed by every being and which thus gives a basis for all action, intentional and otherwise. And everything which exists is ordered according to its proximity to or remoteness from the One and Good, which is to say according to its greater or lesser degree of participation in unity and goodness. Thus, the whole of the realm of existing things, summed up in the hierarchy of Being-Life-Intellect is permeated by and grounded in unity and goodness.⁹

Through these formulations and others, Proclus establishes the One and Good as the principle of a moral cosmos where each kind of being in that cosmos has an innate value which is both immutable in itself and yet relative to the values of other kinds. Simultaneously – at least for those which participate in intellect in one way or another – each kind of being has its own perspective on reality which differs in relation to those of other kinds. Thus, intellects ‘see’ the world in a different way than human souls, which in turn see the world in a different way than souls of wild or domesticated animals. These relative values and perspectives differ not only on the level of kinds of being but also on the level of the individual members within each kind. The cosmos, then, admits of a variety of perspectives on the unitary cause of everything and of a variety of modes of being united to each other in a moral hierarchy according to their relative degrees of unity.

This perspectival aspect of Proclus’s cosmos is seen best from his description of the value and perspective characteristic of the human beings within it. Human beings straddle the divide between the intelligible and bodily aspects of reality, a condition which Proclus represents precisely in the proposition, “Every soul is all things, things perceptible by sense paradigmatically and intelligible things in the manner of an icon”.¹⁰ They belong to the intelligible aspect through the immortal, eternal, incorporeal and rational soul which is, properly speaking, the self; it is the source of individual identity and of the particularity of the body which it uses as

⁷ The transcendence of the One and Good over all things is presented at *Pr.Inst.*8.1-16.8 (propositions 7-13).

⁸ The One and Good’s transcendence over Being in particular is explained at 100.28-102.12 (proposition 115). That the range of the One’s unlimited power extends beyond the reach of Being, which is essentially limit as the totality of Forms, is explained at *Inst.*54.23-56.16 (proposition 57), which states that higher causes give rise to greater number of consequents. In a corollary to that same proposition, Proclus points out that the greater extent of the productive power of the One results in that principle being responsible for even the privation of Form, a production with which Being has nothing to do. Furthermore, he emphasizes this apparent paradox in his treatise *De Malorum Subsistentia* (Proclus, *De l’Existence du Mal*), dedicated to the question of the existence of evil. Just as matter is the opposite of Form, evil is the opposite of Good, and if Good is prior to Form, then evil is posterior to matter on the opposite end of the scale of Being, and so is less real than even matter – whereas matter can be said to desire Being by virtue of its receptivity of form, evil lacks even this desire and capacity. Accordingly, evil has no existence of its own but can only exist by parasitizing the existence of real beings. At *Pr.Parm.*1094-5, Proclus argues that, whereas there is no Being without Unity, there can be Unity without Being, so that both the One (as transcending Being in limitless power) and not-being (meaning matter as lacking form and power) subsist without Being, which just means without form or limitation. This relationship is mirrored in the human soul where the One as it is present there is called, among other things, the “centre of the whole essence” of the soul (*tēs holēs ousias kentrou*) at *Pr.Ecl.*211.4-15. It unites the soul’s faculties and unites the soul itself to the One, thus giving unity to the soul’s essence, which it derives from its participation in Being (with its corresponding principles Life and Intellect). In this sense, the One is the ultimate cause of the soul’s existence, while Being is a more proximate cause.

⁹ *Pr.Inst.*20.1-31 (proposition 20).

¹⁰ *Pr.Inst.*170.4-5 (proposition 195).

an instrument.¹¹ But, humans also belong to the bodily aspect through the body which the soul uses. The rational soul is connected to body through an irrational soul with which it forms a unified whole and which acts as the animating form of the body.¹² Now, although both intelligible things and bodies are good through the presence of the Good within them, they are good to different degrees, intelligible things having a greater share of goodness and unity than bodies. Since the rational soul is an intelligible being and is the ruling part of the human being, it finds its proper good in association with superior intelligible principles. From this point of view, taking some bodily good (e.g. wealth or pleasure) as the ultimate end of human action is a vice and, therefore, is evil.¹³ This, in general, is the particular human mode of participation in the immutable order of being that is the cosmos. Thus, although the cosmos presents an immutable order of things, human beings only come to know this order in a way which is consonant with human experience, as a moral cosmos in which they may either succeed or fail to cultivate virtue through right action and contemplation.

Maximus the Confessor on the Good and Being

Maximus posits a similar construction to what we find in Proclus, but with differences which arise through his adaptation of the Platonic vision to the demands of Christian revelation. Maximus's accounts of the hierarchy of good are not nearly as precise as Proclus's. Nevertheless, it is clear that in his doctrine of *logoi* Maximus does think that the perfections which are contained in individual *logoi* and thus possessed by beings are ordered higher to lower, in terms of proximity to and remoteness from God's mode of being.¹⁴ He describes this abstractly in a version of Porphyry's tree, explaining how perfections are ordered by genera and species, the latter contained in the former – this same ordering principle operates in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of Being-Life-Intellect. Nevertheless, Maximus does posit Goodness as a perfection close to God's unity since it is through his Goodness that God creates, or gives being, to the world and everything in it.¹⁵ Whether, then, Goodness is prior to Being or just concomitant with it, it is clear that nothing which God creates is without some share of goodness.¹⁶ This puts Maximus firmly in the same Plotinian mode of metaphysical thought as Proclus.

According to Maximus, each being's share of goodness, what gives it its concrete identity with itself and difference from everything else, is a *logos* implanted in it at the time of its creation.¹⁷ These *logoi* exist in the Word of God in a unitary, wholly undivided manner and only become differentiated in the created beings which they inform. Unlike in the Proclean system, there are no mediating entities between God and created beings: God is the sole ground of the essence and existence of all things. Similarly, although for Maximus, as for Proclus, humans are liminal beings straddling the border between the intelligible and bodily aspects of reality, Maximus differs from Proclus in how he understands the manner of this liminality. Whereas Proclus posits soul and body as two separate entities temporarily joined together during a single terrestrial lifetime (where multiple such lifetimes are possible), Maximus regards soul and body as two natures inseparably and eternally united during the creation of the single hypostasis of a particular human being. Yet, in Maximus's view, soul is still the ruling aspect of the individual, and it is through the rational faculties of soul that the individual seeks his proper good in union with God, which is to say in deification (*theōsis*), by turning away from bodily towards intelligible goods. Again, this is the ultimate good which is proper to human beings and consonant with the human mode of experiencing the cosmos as the 'image of God'.

¹¹ Pr.*Inst.*162.13-164.19 (propositions 186-188).

¹² Pr.*Parm.*819-20. This irrational soul mediates between rational soul and body through its cognitive faculties – imagination and the senses – and through its appetitive faculties – the honour seeking faculty (*thumos*) and appetite (*epithumia*); see Pr.*Remp.*1.223.1-227.27.

¹³ That evil is the soul's failure to remain focused on its intelligible origin is summed up nicely at Pr.*De.Mal.Sub.*57.21-60.56.

¹⁴ Max.*Conf.Amb.*41, 1312A-1313B.

¹⁵ Max.*Conf.Amb.*35, 1288D-1289A; *ibid.*, 7, 1080AC.

¹⁶ That Maximus would think that there could be such a hierarchy of attributes within God's unity is highly unlikely. It is probably better to conceive of a hierarchy of attributes as something which is only conceivable in the thought of created beings.

¹⁷ Max.*Conf.Amb.*7, 1077C-1080B; also, *ibid.*, 35, 1288D-1289A.

We have here, then, in both Proclus and Maximus, conceptions of the world as a totality of beings produced by a first cause which not only gives being and existence to them, but also simultaneously a value in relation to itself and to the other beings in the cosmos. This conception provides the intelligible foundation of an ethics and morality which are concerned not only with the relationships of human beings to other human beings, but also of human beings to other things or beings in the cosmos. Thus, human perfection requires that the individual human being take a recognitive stance in relation to both the intelligible and sensible beings with whom it shares the world – not just to other human beings – as well as to the author of that world. How, then, does this recognitive stance work in the lives of human beings?

Recognizing the Moral Order: Ideal and Defective Perceptions

In order to see in greater detail how recognition plays a role in human life, it is first necessary to consider the liminality of human existence. This mode of existence, particular only to human beings, involves two different kinds of activity aimed at two different kinds of goods which seem not to be easily reconcilable: the contemplative, directed to internal goods and the practical, having external goods as their telos. Among the higher beings, whether we consider God or super-rational intellects, these two kinds of activity are enacted simultaneously and without cessation.¹⁸ Truly, with these entities knowing is producing. Human beings, on the other hand, cannot engage simultaneously in these two kinds of activity: engaging in deliberate contemplation does not result in any kind of outward action and, in fact, excludes the possibility of doing so, and vice versa. Yet, the proper perfection of both kinds of activity is necessary. Human beings must, on one hand pursue and attain knowledge of the causes of things (especially of the ultimate cause); on the other side they must cultivate their virtues by assuming the proper comportment towards the multifarious material, bodily and social goods which may be pursued or avoided accordingly, in as much as they contribute to the individual's perfection. However, these two kinds of activity can be brought into a certain unity, insofar as the individual learns to ground his or her practical action in the knowledge attained through contemplation.¹⁹ Thus, for both Proclus and Maximus, in order to attain the ultimate end of human existence – that is, union with God – each individual must learn how to recognize what constitutes his true good and how to pursue it through both contemplative acts and the practical actions which are themselves to be grounded by the knowledge obtained through contemplation.

But how is the true human good to be recognized? Both of our philosophers are sensitive to the fact that individuals begin their lives in a social environment already thick with its own ideas about what constitutes a good or even *the* good. Still, one's immersion in such an environment is not by itself sufficient to account for how one comes to recognize these goods as goods, let alone something as the good. Proclus and Maximus account for this recognition in somewhat different ways in their views on the construction and function of the soul, views which I will briefly outline here. Specifically, I will show how both are aware of the need for human beings to be able to recognize the good even prior to the disciplined use of rational reflection.

¹⁸ Proclus states this explicitly and unequivocally in many places, but perhaps most succinctly at *Pr.Inst.*152.8-18 (proposition 174). The question is somewhat more complicated with Maximus. As an Orthodox Christian, he accepts the notion of a *creatio ex nihilo*, which introduces the necessity for the introduction of 'willing' into God's creative activity which is absent from Proclus' conception of the divine nature. Nevertheless, according to Maximus, this will to create is an eternal determination derived from God's self-knowledge, just as are the *logoi* by which God creates all things, and so is not a separate activity which God would have chosen to perform at some particular time. After the world has been brought into being, God's Providence and Judgement preserve, produce and guide all existing beings unceasingly. See, Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 64-77 and Renczes, *Agir de Dieu*, 134-142. Maximus clearly says that God is a creator always in act (*ho men aei kat' energeian esti Demiourgos*) at *Amb.*7.1081A.

¹⁹ Chlup, *Proclus*, 247-254, explains how Proclus conceives of this unity of contemplation and practical action in terms of practical action providing occasions for the projection of the soul's innate knowledge which may then be contemplated and applied to the development of virtue (Chlup cites, importantly in this respect, *Pr.De.Dec.Dub.*37.9-20). Practical action is clearly intended to be exercised for the benefit of the soul's contemplative life. Maximus presents a similar account of the unity of the two kinds of activity in which, nevertheless, the practical is subordinate to the contemplative. See Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 333-343.

Proclus on the Moral Order and Human Response

In Proclus's thinking, the ability to recognize the good even prior to achieving the practiced discipline of rational reflection is crucial to the ability to develop that discipline. This is because, except in very rare cases, rational or philosophical reflection is not an act in which people spontaneously and correctly engage, obscured as it has been by the eternal soul's descent to body.²⁰ According to Proclus, the majority of human beings live their lives somewhere between absolute imperfection and absolute perfection of their cognitive and appetitive lives.²¹ The absolutely perfect are those in whom reason dominates passion, and this is achieved through long practice in the discipline of reason, conceived as progress from being (*einai*) to being well (*eu einai*). Conversely, the absolutely imperfect are those in whom passion wholly dominates reason and who fail to achieve perfection in any way, experiencing total incapacity for rational reflection and asymptotic decline towards non-existence.²² The intermediate condition admits of every imaginable degree of more and less perfect, and the vast majority of people are far enough down the scale of perfection that their skill in rational reflection is either minimal or even, for all intents and purposes, non-existent. Thus, help is needed to get on the path to perfection, and this help is offered by the teacher. The teacher is not simply a conveyor of information or a technical expert. The teacher is a mirror in which the intelligible nature of the good is reflected: it is in and through the teacher's care for the student that the student comes to recognize that there is a higher good.²³ This is what Proclus has in mind when, in his commentary on Plato's *Alcibiades I*, he remarks a number of times that Alcibiades has become aware of Socrates' power (*dunamis*) and science (*epistēmē*).²⁴ His very use of the verb *sunaiathanomai* to express this awareness indicates that this awareness is not a product of Alcibiades' rational powers but that of some lower irrational power.²⁵

²⁰ Pr.Alc.224.1-226.7. Helmig, *Concept Formation*, 274-8, gives an excellent account of the role of pre-embodiment 'forgetting' in making the soul's innate content obscure. Without this forgetting, souls would automatically from the moment of birth be in full possession of perfect knowledge, which is obviously not the case in reality.

²¹ Pr.Remp.I.18-25. Proclus makes these distinctions in response to the question how an individual soul could be said to be in discord with itself, or how justice and injustice could coincide in a single soul. Yet, this is basically the framework by which he understands the relationships between Alcibiades and the vulgar lovers pursuing him and between Alcibiades and Socrates, in Plato's *Alcibiades I*. For Proclus, Alcibiades lives in an intermediate condition out of which Socrates attempts to draw him, towards perfection.

²² At Remp.I.22.22-30, Proclus makes clear that a condition of absolute imperfection, here in terms of complete injustice, is in fact impossible. Justice is established in the soul when all of its parts perform their proper functions, under the rule of the rational part. If the soul's rational functions are wholly dominated by passion then it is unable to perform its rational functions at all, and complete injustice is established in the soul. This results in a total incapacity to act, since the deliberation necessary for deciding which good to pursue has been entirely suppressed. This is, in effect, the death of the rational soul and is not possible. However enslaved a person may seem to irrational desires, there nevertheless remains some trace of justice and desire for the good in that person's rational soul – ergo some trace of rational activity – and this allows the person to act.

²³ Pr.Alc.224.1-226.7; *ibid.*, 228.7-20; *ibid.*, 235.1-236.1.

²⁴ Pr.Alc.166.2-9; *ibid.*, 231.2-5; *ibid.*, 306.8-10; *ibid.*, 313.8-9.

²⁵ Paulina Remes has shown that Plotinus uses *sunaisthēsis* and its cognates to signify a kind of pre-reflective bodily self-awareness (Remes, *Plotinus on Self*, 98-116). As such, it is an activity of perception which is directed only to objects internal to the individual, like pains and other bodily experiences. Plotinus makes no definite attribution of this function to any particular psychic faculty. Ilsetraut Hadot has come to similar conclusions regarding the use of this term by the later Neoplatonists primarily in their commentaries on Aristotle's *De Anima* (Hadot, "Aspects de la théorie de la perception"). She shows that Priscian and (Ps.?)Simplicius use it to refer to a pre-reflective self-consciousness in their interpretations of Aristotle's assertion that there is something in the soul which perceives that it perceives – again, the object of *sunaisthēsis* is internal to the subject. Yet, unlike Plotinus, they do definitely attribute this function to the common sense (*koine aisthēsis*). Both Plotinus and the commentators, then, differ from Proclus in that, in addition to using *sunaisthēsis* with reference to internal objects, he also uses it to indicate a kind of pre-reflective perception / consciousness / awareness directed to objects external to the subject. Like Plotinus, Proclus does not explicitly attribute *sunaisthēsis* to any particular psychic faculty. Nevertheless, on the strength alone of the attribution to common sense by Priscian and (Ps.?)Simplicius, who followed Proclus closely in many respects, seems to suggest that common sense would be the most likely candidate. There is a history of the term *sunaisthēsis* here which still remains obscure and is worth investigating.

It is through this awareness that there arises in Alcibiades the wonder which helps him to recognize Socrates as a true teacher.²⁶

The possibility of this recognition without reflection is grounded in Proclus's understanding of human nature. For Proclus, although the human being is a composite of soul and body, it is the soul – the better part of the composite – which rules the whole. The soul itself is a complex of two entities, namely the rational and irrational souls, and their characteristic powers, even though they constitute a unified whole when resident together in a human body.²⁷ Proclus usually refers to the unified whole soul in the form of the Platonic tripartite structure of powers of reason (*logos*), the honour-seeking faculty (*thumos*) and desire (*epithumia*); the first belongs to the rational soul and the other two together belong to the irrational. Both the rational and irrational souls are divided into pairs of cognitive (*gnōstikos*) and appetitive (*orektikē*) faculties associated with the different parts of these souls and ordered in a hierarchy from more unified to less, from more internal to more external in orientation. In each part the two sorts of powers co-implicate each other so that, for example, the faculty of discursive reasoning (*dianoia*) depends on its will (*boulēsis*) being directed to the good, and vice versa. Finally, all of these faculties or powers fall under the direction of the soul's *logos*, the totality of rational principles (*logoi*) which constitute the essence of the rational soul.²⁸

Within this structure it is primarily as a function of the appetitive powers that Proclus explains how human beings can be self-directed towards different goods as ends of action at different times; nevertheless, there is a clear cognitive requirement associated with this function. Proclus holds to the principle that it is a basic fact of the existence of all things, including the soul, that they desire the Good Itself through desire of the particular good which is proper to their own kind. Thus, like everything else, the soul is pre-disposed to seek its own good, which is to say that it is always already oriented towards the Good, even if its orientation might happen to be defective. Furthermore, since the soul is not only a vital entity, but also a cognitive one, it has to have some notion, however obscure, of what 'good' means in order to know, or at least be aware, whether the objects presented to it are good or not good, and thus worthy or not worthy of pursuit. Thus, as a very basic principle of existence, the human soul has a desire for, and capability of, recognizing the good.

Yet, in Proclus's view, human beings rarely pursue the good which is proper to them, instead pursuing illusory goods like wealth and pleasure which do not contribute to the soul's well-being. How is this possible if the soul is pre-disposed to seek and thus recognize the good? It is the very complexity of the soul's structure that makes defect possible. That complexity is the result of the rational soul's own amphibious nature and its necessary connection to a human body.²⁹ As an amphibious being the rational soul experiences a disjunction between its inwardly and outwardly oriented functions, so that the purposeful use of one excludes the purposeful use of the other.³⁰ In the Intellect which is causally prior to (and is the cause of) soul's cognitive essence and power, these two functions are in eternal simultaneous operation.³¹ In its connection to a human body, the rational soul produces and enters into union with the irrational soul which animates the body. The irrational soul has its own goods which it seeks to obtain – satisfaction of hunger and thirst, satisfaction of desire for honour, and so on – and which are inferior to the good proper to the rational soul, namely intellectual contemplation of its *logoi*.³² As a result of the disjunction between its own powers, and the intensity of the desires of the irrational soul, rational soul can be overcome by the lure of inferior goods, losing sight of its own higher good. In such a case, rational soul submits to the rule of the irrational soul, rather than subjecting the latter to its own rule. This is only possible because, as we saw

²⁶ MacIsaac, "The *Nous* of the Partial Soul", argues that in his commentary on the Alcibiades I, Proclus develops his understanding of Socrates's role as teacher through an analogy with the action of Intellect in which Socrates acts like Intellect in relation to Alcibiades who represents the rational soul.

²⁷ Pr.*Remp.*I.233.29-234.30.

²⁸ See most recently Riggs, "Authentic Selfhood"; also, Steel, "Breathing Thought" and Helmig, *Concept Formation*, 264-272.

²⁹ Pr.*Inst.*184.10-20. Although the rational soul is separable from body, it necessarily descends into body an infinite number of times.

³⁰ Pr.*Tim.*II.296.1-302.10 & 306.1-309.2. Steel, "Breathing Thought", demonstrates the importance of this aspect of human life with respect to human cognition.

³¹ Pr.*Inst.*152.8-18.

³² Pr.*Remp.*223.1-227.27.

earlier, all things have a share in the Good. In other words, the things which irrational soul seeks as goods are in fact good according to their own capacity for receiving goodness. However, their degree of goodness is not sufficient to help the rational soul to achieve and maintain its own well-being, on account of the rational soul's ontological superiority in relation to them. Every soul is more or less in this 'fallen' condition from birth, and the well-being of the individual must be sought in re-taking control over irrational desires and cultivating one's desire for self-knowledge.

Consequent to this, it would seem that, if Proclus is to be consistent in his thinking, he must think the soul has some sort of cognitive access to the good prior to the soul's intentional use of the reasoning powers. In fact, this is the case. The soul's intellectual essence, the totality of essential *logoi* which causes and guides the whole life of the soul, is present even in, and informs the functioning of, even the lowest powers of the irrational soul. Thus, to use Proclus's own example, the young Alcibiades knows when another boy has acted unjustly by violating the rules of a game even though Alcibiades has no rational knowledge of what justice is. Despite this lack of knowledge, he was able to perceive that justice is a good and that it was violated by a certain act performed by another. Alcibiades could not recall ever investigating the nature of justice himself, nor could he name anyone who might have taught him. Proclus argues that Alcibiades yet perceived the Just because the *logos* of justice in his soul made him aware, however dimly, of the injustice of the action. The soul's *logoi* 'breathe out' into the soul and inform its other functions: since the *logoi* constitute a totality of actual, innate knowledge, there must be some sort of active thinking taking place, even if it is performed 'hiddenly' (*kruphiōs*).³³ The same principle goes for the goodness in the various objects of human endeavour, as also for the goodness in other human beings. Thus, even before one has learned to make rational judgements, one is pre-disposed to (and necessarily does) make pre-rational judgements about the goodness of other things, actions and human beings.

The importance of recognitive acts to Proclus's understanding of human action is clear from the account just given. Whether or not an individual gives public recognition to another or to some object of interest, in Proclus's view every engagement with another requires a prior recognitive judgement concerning the goodness of that other, whether that judgement results in a proper recognition of its value or a case of misrecognition. In this way, recognition is a key component in the cultivation of the virtues and achievement of a virtuous disposition, and thus in the process of perfection of self and attainment of one's true identity. For Proclus, the ability to properly recognize people and things as conducive to attaining the good is facilitated by a teacher or guide, and so depends upon an intersubjective relationship as much as it does upon one's own self-examination.

Maximus on the Moral Order and Human Response

In his own theological and philosophical reflections, Maximus, like Proclus, regards the relationship of human beings to their world, in both its intelligible and bodily aspects as problematic and in need of deep investigation. The same basic opposition between true and illusory goods is in play, namely the original submission of human individuals to illusory bodily goods and the need for dissociation from them and pursuit of the true intelligible good. Yet, Maximus's attempt to solve this problem intellectually differs markedly from Proclus's while still bearing the marks of Neoplatonic influence. Most importantly for our current considerations, Maximus adapts a Platonic account of the soul's structure to accord with the Christian dogma which he believes to be the ultimate truth about the world. That is to say that Maximus

³³ Pr.Alc.191.5-192.12 (metaphor of 'breathing out') and Pr.Euc.45.22 ('hiddenly'). These passages are prominent in the account of the Proclus' epistemology in Steel, "Breathing Thought". This is the pre-reflective condition for the operation of the soul's faculties and is operative prior to the soul's recollection of its innate content. The tasks of learning and discovery, then, involve the progressive articulation – the clarification, so to speak – of the soul's *logoi* through the process of 'projection' (*probolē*), or the intentional contemplation and exposition of their content. Helmig, *Concept Formation*, 286-333, elaborates on these themes addressed by Steel, bringing to light to the historical background of Proclus' doctrine of *probolē* (which he advocates translating as 'putting forth') and extensively detailing the various forms of lower *logoi* (e.g. doxastic *logoi*) involved in the articulation of the soul's innate content. A more complete exposition of the role of the Good in the soul's cognitive life would have to take into account this whole complex epistemology.

adapts the Platonic account so that it intensifies the unity of the embodied human being and, in doing so, gives a more significant role to the lower powers of soul in the production of knowledge. In considering how Maximus addresses the problem of the amphibious nature of human being, we will be able to re-construct an account of pre-rational recognition out of Maximus's varied discourses.

For my purposes here, the most important difference for Maximus in relation to Proclus is his emphasis on the unity of soul and body in his rejection of soul's separability from body. Soul comes into being simultaneously with its body so that, although it is granted immortality thenceforth, its immortality does not extend into the past prior to its birth.³⁴ As a Chalcedonian Christian, Maximus accepts the church dogma that all things are created by God *ex nihilo*, including individual human beings, so that a soul cannot be prior in existence to the body which animates. He neither conceives of soul as an entity separable from body like the Platonists, nor as a corporeal being like the Stoics, nor as the inseparable form of the body as the Peripatetics do. In his account, soul and body are two distinct natures which are inseparably conjoined in a single hypostasis, which is just the individual created human being. By holding this view, he is able to preserve the parallelism with his Chalcedonian dyophysite (and dyophelitic) Christology, which states that Christ is two natures each with its corresponding 'will', divine and human, joined inseparably in a single hypostasis.³⁵ It is for this reason, it seems, that Maximus will accept the possibility that soul could have in its essence the eternal *logoi* of all things as the Proclean soul does.³⁶ Instead, Maximus's soul must acquire knowledge from outside of itself, either through the use of sense-perception and its corresponding bodily organs or through the higher experience of true knowledge in God. The soul's inseparability from its body also results in a greater unity than is possible for Proclus's soul. This is evidenced by not only the fact that the different parts of the soul are not separate entities but also by the more positive roles that Maximus assigns to the soul's lower parts. Maximus asserts that the lower parts are perfected not just through proper regulation of their activities, but by directing their activities solely and resolutely towards God.³⁷ These differences result in alternative conceptions of self-discovery and learning and of soul's culpability which affects how Maximus conceives of a pre-rational capability for discerning the good.

Just as Proclus does, Maximus believes that individuals are born into a life more or less alienated from God who is the ultimate good, an alienation which must be corrected. Similarly, this alienation is founded in human being's natural appetite for its proper good but, at the same time, a failure to recognize that good.³⁸ However, Maximus offers a rather different version of the origin of this failure. In his account, the alienation of human beings from God has its foundation in the original error of the ultimate ancestor of all human beings. Maximus interprets Adam's ejection from Eden as the result of "man's" willing ignorance of God as the true intelligible good and a willing submission to bodily, sensible goods.³⁹ This free choice invited punishment in the form of death and passibility through the experience of pleasure and pain which followed upon Adam's enjoyment of bodily goods, two conditions which had not been components of the original creation of human being. This basic alteration of human nature effected by Adam's 'mis-choice' was communicated to the succeeding generations of human beings. All who were and are born after him are born into a condition of more or less ignorance of God and the nature of his goodness, wallowing in self-love along and the other passions arising from conflicting inclinations and the social problems which follow upon them.⁴⁰ Both Adam's original mis-choice and those of his descendants are possible because when God created human being as an intelligent nature, he implanted in its capacity for willing (*gnōmikē epiteidēotēs*) the property of goodness; since this goodness is only a participation in God's goodness, it is

³⁴ Max.Conf.Amb.42, 1324CD.

³⁵ In this relationship between the divine and human natures, soul and body are now taken together to be the singular 'human nature'.

³⁶ The *logoi* referred to here are images of the intelligible Forms in the Proclean soul and not Maximus's individual *logoi* of created beings.

³⁷ Max.Conf.Ep.2, 397AB.

³⁸ See Max.Conf.Amb.7, 1069B & 1072BC, for created being's innate disposition to seek its cause.

³⁹ Maximus gives this interpretation in many passages and in many contexts, but it is particularly clear in Ep.2.

⁴⁰ Max.Conf.Ep.2, 396D-397B.

possible for human beings to fail to act in accordance with it.⁴¹ Thus, rather than being the result of discord between different parts of the soul, which are themselves different entities, alienation from God is the result entirely of a failure to act in accordance with the soul's innate goodness by becoming fascinated with things outside the body.⁴²

The goal of human life then is to turn away from these fascinations with external things and to return to God through the rational acquisition of knowledge of the created *logoi* in the world and the cultivation of the virtues in one's life. Maximus conceives this as a movement from being (*einai*) to being well (*eu einai*) to always being well (*aei eu einai*) culminating in the experience (*peira*) of God and deification given by God's grace.⁴³ Whereas Proclus takes the teacher as the means of entrance into the movement to being well and union with the One, Maximus sees Christ as the primary fulfilment of this role through his assumption of human nature and restoration of it to its original impassible and immortal condition.⁴⁴ Individuals already begin to participate in this restoration by undergoing the rite of baptism. Yet, at this stage, most people still have not acquired knowledge of God through rational reflection or succeeded in training their disposition to will on God alone as the one true Good. In order to adequately turn to God, thereby accepting and desiring baptism and to begin the assimilation with God, one must first be able to recognize that God is a good worth pursuing, and this must be possible prior to the perfection of rational reflection.

Just as for Proclus, for Maximus too the possibility of a pre-rational form of recognition of higher goods is dependent upon the structure of the human soul and its relation to the metaphysical hierarchy of goods. Yet, care is needed to avoid conflating the two different accounts of this phenomenon. On the one hand, in his most general account of human nature, Maximus adheres to a number of views consistent with the Platonism of Late Antiquity: 1) each human being is a composite of incorporeal soul and the body which it uses as an instrument; 2) that composite is ruled by the soul; 3) the ruling soul is tripartite, consisting of the reason (*logos*), the honour seeking power (*thumos*) and desire (*epithumia*); 4) within the soul, it is the proper role of reason to rule over the other parts; and 5) the soul is further divided into cognitive and appetitive powers; the soul's faculties have both internal and external objects.⁴⁵ Yet, when we get to the details of Maximus's the soul's various activities, we see that his account of the soul differs markedly from Proclus's.

Most significantly, for Maximus it is through sense-perception that the soul has access to the *logoi* in created beings, which *logoi* are the differentiated manifestations of the unitary and indivisible *Logos* which is God the Son and Christ himself and through which he created the world and continues to create in it. For Proclus the forms of things extracted from sense-data are inferior to the knowledge of the same things which the soul already contains. Instead, for him some kind of recognition is possible even at the level of perception only because the soul's innate *logoi* operate on and inform even this irrational form of cognition. Since, in Maximus's understanding of human nature, soul has no innate intellectual content, it cannot rely on intellectual illumination from within in the same way that the Proclean soul does. On one hand, Maximus strengthens the value of what is received from outside by way of the senses, so that real knowledge of the *logoi* of sensible things can be derived from the forms conveyed through sense perceptions. On the other hand, he binds the function of the higher psychic powers (*nous* and *logos*) more closely to sense-perception (including imagination⁴⁶) than Proclus does. When the soul functions as it should, the higher powers use the senses as their vehicles for generating knowledge and deliberating.⁴⁷ When it fails to do so then the higher powers become 'mixed' with the senses so that they no longer perform their own functions

⁴¹ Max.Conf.Char.III.25 & III.27.

⁴² There is a role played by the devil in this process, but it is irrelevant for the present discussion. See, eg., Max.Conf.Ep.2, 396D-397B.

⁴³ Max.Conf.Amb.7, 1084B; *ibid.*, 10, 1116BC; *idem*, Char.III.23-25; *et al.*

⁴⁴ This is not to exclude the role of individual Christian teachers which must include at the very least bishops, priests, abbas, ammas, and monks. However, in each case, such people are understood to be teaching through the inspiration of Christ, so that Christ in each case ultimately plays the role of teacher.

⁴⁵ Max.Conf.Ep.2, 397AB; *ibid.*, 31, 625AB; *idem*, Char.II.83.

⁴⁶ Max.Conf.Amb.10, 1116A.

⁴⁷ Max.Conf.Amb.21, 1248AC.

but become immersed in those of the senses. Such a person becomes like the unintelligent beasts (and this is what happened to Adam).⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the higher powers, along with their innate capacities for recognizing truth and goodness, are always present in the activity of the senses, no matter how perverted the relationship between the one and the other becomes. Combine this with the fact that the *logoi* which are conveyed to the soul through sense perception (in however partial a way) convey not only the objective essence of the things they belong to but also their relative goodness, and there is here a recipe for the capacity for moral judgement even at levels of cognition prior to that of rational reflection.

Although Maximus does not work it out so clearly in his writings as Proclus does, recognition at all levels of cognition is an important component of human action. The value of a thing must be recognized, whether correctly or not and whether as a result of rational reflection or not, before it can be pursued as object of desire and, thus, as an object of action. In this way, recognitive judgements, just as for Proclus, are integral to the achievement of a virtuous life, self-perfection and the attainment of true identity. Recognition plays a role not only in the ideal of self-perfection through living virtuously, following the example of Christ, but also in the development of a social identity, freedom from which the example of Christ offers.

Summary of Analysis and Conclusions

In this all-too-brief sketch of both the Proclean and Maximian versions of a metaphysics of the Good I have shown that the phenomenon named by the modern concept of ‘recognition’ can be found in the philosophies of these two figures. Yet, the implicit understanding of the phenomenon of recognition which we find in Proclus and Maximus differs from the explicit understanding of contemporary political and social philosophy in at least three important respects. First, there is a difference in intention. Proclus and Maximus are concerned with what we are calling recognition only insofar as it explains how individuals can perfect themselves through attainment of knowledge and cultivation of a virtuous life. Contemporary thinkers, both proponents and critics, have only been interested in recognition as a way to justify the inclusivity of multicultural societies. Second, for our two ancient thinkers, recognition is a function of human existence within a strictly-ordered ontological and teleological cosmos. Within this hierarchical framework, every human individual is compelled by nature to pursue, with more or less success, discovery and attainment of a true self which exists independent of any social interaction. Contemporary thinkers, on the contrary, for the most part try to avoid such metaphysical constructions in their accounts of recognition; for them, there is only self-identity as it is constructed through social engagement, and no such thing as a pre-existing true self. Finally, unlike contemporary theorists of recognition, Proclus and Maximus regard the social construction of self-identity ultimately to be a hindrance for the individual’s self-realization. Despite these differences, there still remains for Proclus and Maximus a social component even in the process of attaining the true self, albeit a much more restricted one, in the necessity for accepting the aid of a teacher in the process of self-discovery. In any case, despite the important differences, recognition is clearly an important part of the process of self-perfection.

In a cosmos where all things, including human beings, are ordered according to a value which is dependent upon their share of the unity and goodness of the First Cause, an ability for recognitive judgement constitutes a required component of all human action. For both Proclus and Maximus, this ability to evaluate others is not just a function of the soul’s rational faculties, but also a function of its lower, irrational faculties as well. In this way, every decision to pursue or avoid something or someone as an object of desire is a result of a recognitive evaluation, whether that is a product of reasoning or opinion or simply of the perception of a thing’s desirability through one or more senses. Thus, in this Platonic mode of thought, ‘recognition’ can be used to signify any decision to pursue or avoid an object of appetite, since each decision is a result of an evaluation based on some kind of cognitive content concerning the object, whether this evaluation is entirely correct or not.

⁴⁸ Max.Conf.Thal.Prol., 253C. All citations from this text are from Maximus the Confessor. *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, vols. I and II.

There is little reason to doubt that recognition understood in this way really does pertain to other intelligent beings – other human beings or angels or God – and not to inanimate objects only. Most obviously, for both Proclus and Maximus, God is the ultimate object of desire and the true good, and the acceptance of God as the goal of all human action is certainly an act of recognition proceeding from an evaluative judgement. With respect to recognition of other human beings, Proclus is quite clear: recognition is fully visible in the example of Alcibiades' awareness of Socrates' power and knowledge. Yet, this is seen in Maximus's thought as well: for example, in his *Centuries on Knowledge* and *Four Hundred Centuries on Love* where, in many of the chapters, he shows his readers how to recognize those who are truly progressing in knowledge and cultivation of virtue and divine love and those who are not. In any case, the fact can be easily inferred from Maximus's own doctrine of *logoi* insofar as human beings possess cognizable *logoi* just as every other created being does. The intertwining of being and goodness in their metaphysical constructions ensures that human beings cannot possess any purely detached knowledge of things in the world. All cognition, whether of the highest or lowest form, involves judgement concerning the value of the things cognized, and thus a particular stance towards them. A human individual's every active engagement with the world is a moral one.

For both philosophers, it is necessary to account for this kind of recognition precisely because the social world provides an imperfect context in which to grow and develop one's fullest actuality. In order that they may pursue the true human good, human beings have to be lifted out of the social moral context into which they are born. The social world in itself does not provide enough resources needed to make progress in knowledge and virtue, since it mistakes lower goods for higher. As such, a self-identity formed through the recognition conferred in accordance with the values of one's community would be an identity founded upon inferior values and so a false identity. For Proclus and Maximus, one's self-identity is already given by God in advance of contact with the social world and independently of its values. It is a stable identity that can only be attained through the soul's recognition of it as its own proper good. Thus, for these philosophers, a socially-constructed identity is something to be surpassed. For this, the capacity for recognizing the good even prior to learning how to philosophize is a necessity, if a soul is ever to get beyond the limitations imposed by society and proceed to union with God.

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