INTENTIONAL OBJECTS IN LATER NEOPLATONISM

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The Neoplatonists, it is argued, are 'realists': for them, the objects of intellect exist prior to and independently of intellect; these objects possess a higher degree of reality than intellect.[1] However, within this general framework, as I would like to show in this paper, later Neoplatonists regarded such objects as not such as to be thinkable directly by *human* intellect (discursive reason), holding that they are thought by means of certain concepts, or 'reasons' (λόγοι), present in the human soul, which express or represent them in some way. These concepts are commensurate with the nature of discursive thinking, corresponding to a mode of being specific to this kind of thinking. Yet they put discursive reason in contact with the objects of intellection which transcend it, referring to them in a manner which we will need to examine. If the concepts, or λόγοι, whereby discursive reason thinks objects of intellection prior to it can somehow be described as 'intentional objects', then perhaps we can say that some intentionality fits into the realist framework of Neoplatonist metaphysics.[2] In this paper, I will refer, not to Plotinus, but to a later stage of Neoplatonism, to post-Iamblichean Neoplatonists such as Dexippus, Syrianus, Proclus, Ammonius, Simplicius and Philoponus. There is a good chance that a significant part of the theories I will be presenting goes back to Iamblichus. However the poverty of our documentation for Iamblichus makes it difficult to determine this precisely.

I

In speaking of the goal (or σκοπός) of Aristotle's *Categories*, Iamblichus, as we know, rejected the opinions of those who felt that the *Categories* is about either verbal expressions (φωναί), or things (πράγματα), or concepts (νοήματα). In his view, Aristotle's work is about all three,

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[1] Cf. R. Sorabji, in this volume, 105–114.
[2] See below at n. 19.

or rather, more precisely, it treats of verbal expressions signifying things by means of concepts (περὶ φωνῶν σημαινουσῶν πράγματα διὰ μέσων νοημάτων).[3] Dexippus, probably following Iamblichus, also tells us that concepts are 'about' things and 'from' things (περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν πραγμάτων).[4] Concepts thus derive in some way from things and refer to, or are 'about', these things. If we describe concepts as acts of discursive reason, and if, as Dexippus suggests, we think of discursive reasoning as an inner speech manifesting itself outwardly in verbal expressions,[5] then this inner speech is *about* things, which it signifies through verbal expressions.

One might assume that the 'things' referred to here are sensible particulars such as are known by reason through sense-perception. However the term πρᾶγμα (translated here as 'thing') can also be applied to independently existing purely intelligible objects,[6] what I will call 'transcendent objects',[7] such that the triad thing/concept/verbal expression also obtains in their case. A good example of this is provided in a passage in Ammonius, where three levels of being, above the natural world, are distinguished, in descending order: the divine, the intellectual (τὸ νοερόν) and the psychic (τὸ ψυχικόν). From the divine come πράγματα from which derive in turn concepts, νοήματα, which give rise through soul to φωναί signifying the πράγματα.[8] Here πράγματα, as transcendent objects, are signified by verbal expressions through the mediation of concepts which themselves derive from such objects and are externalized in verbal expressions.

The triad thing/concept/verbal expression, applied where the 'thing' is a transcendent object and where the concept assumes a mediational role, may surprise in the context of Neoplatonist epistemology. For if it can be readily seen that some mediation is required

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[3] Philoponus, *In cat.*, 9,12–15 (= Larsen [1972], vol. 2, n. 6); cf. Lloyd [1990], 50, n. 13 for further references.

[4] Dexippus, *In cat.*, 9,23–24. For a general survey of the theory of concepts (νοήματα) in the Platonic tradition cf. Gerson [1999] and, for later Neoplatonism, Steel [1997], Tempelis [1997].

[5] Dexippus, *In cat.*, 10,5–6 (this goes back of course to Plato, *Tht.* 189e6–190a2; *Sph.* 263e3–5).

[6] Hadot [1980], 318–319.

[7] In this paper I will not attempt to examine the many levels and kinds of transcendent objects distinguished in later Neoplatonism, being essentially concerned with the general problem of how discursive reasoning comes into relation with objects beyond it.

[8] Ammonius, *In de interpr.*, 24,22–32.

where the thing is a sensible particular known through sense-perception and separate from the thinking activity, yet if the thing is a pure intelligible object, then we would expect that it would be one with the thinking activity, concept and thing becoming one and the same reality. What need is there then of concepts as mediators, if they are concepts of pure intelligible objects?

What requires the mediational function of concepts in the case of transcendent objects is the claim that such objects are not such as to be thinkable directly by discursive reason. Returning to Iamblichus, we might recall his principle of the commensurateness of the subject and object of knowledge (a principle itself going back to the venerable Greek postulate that like is known by like). In Iamblichus, this principle means that things are known in a way corresponding to the mode of being of the knowing subject. Thus a knowing subject knows things superior to it in an inferior way (χειρόνως), corresponding to its nature; it knows inferior things in a superior way (κρειττόνως) related to what it is; and it knows things of equal ontological rank to it, as of the same order (συστοίχως) as it.[9] However, transcendent objects are not ontologically coordinate with the nature of discursive reasoning, but are superior.[10] They must then be thought, not as what they are, but in an inferior mode corresponding to the mode of being of discursive reasoning. That is why they are thought *through* concepts which derive from them.

The difference between the mode of being of transcendent objects and that of discursive reason might be formulated as follows. On the one hand, discursive thinking involves operations corresponding to those described in Aristotle's *Organon*, operations in which predicates are brought in relation to subjects, definitions are formulated, premises are joined to constitute arguments, conclusions are drawn and furnish premises for further arguments. One might refer also to the combination of concepts (σύνθεσις . . . νοημάτων) referred to in Aristotle's *De anima* (430a26–27) and most especially to the operations of combining and dividing whereby Plato characterizes dialectic. At any rate, discursive thought achieves knowledge of something through a movement of transition through a succession of distinguished aspects which are brought together and held in a synthetic

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[9] Ammonius, *In de interpr.*, 135,14–32 (cf. Larsen [1972], vol. 2, n. 147). Cf. Lloyd [1990], 154–155 (with further references to Proclus and Boethius).

[10] Proclus, *In Parm.*, 949,11–19.

unity. Definition circumscribes a thing through genus and species; the thing is distinguished from its essence; essential attributes are demonstrated.[11] Transcendent objects, on the other hand, in particular primary intelligible essences, or Forms, are simple and indivisible: there is no distinction in them, for example, between the thing and its essence.[12] As non-composite Forms, there is no definition of them, a principle Syrianus cites from Aristotle.[13] They are properly thought, not through definition and demonstration, combination and division, analysis and synthesis, but in an unmediated union with intellect, separate from and above discursive reasoning.[14] Proclus stresses the resulting gap between transcendent objects and human discursive reason: transcendent objects are not in us; they are not 'coordinate' (σύστοιχα, Iamblichus' term) with our discursive reasoning, for which they are consequently unknown, ἄγνωστα.[15]

If unknown to discursive reason as they are, without mediation, transcendent objects are known to discursive reason as expressed in a mode coordinate with discursive reason, as *concepts* which do lend themselves to discursive operations. Such concepts are described variously by Syrianus and Proclus as 'common notions' (κοιναὶ ἔννοιαι), 'general accounts' (καθόλου λόγοι), 'axioms' (ἀξιώματα), from which, as if from first principles (ἄρχαι), reasoning constructs arguments, demonstrations, and thus a synthetic whole representing discursively and in composition non-discursive, non-composite transcendent objects.[16] Thus metaphysics ('theology' in the Aristotelian sense, the science of divine substance) does not, as a discursive science, deal directly with transcendent objects, but articulates concepts. The primary concept of metaphysics, according to Proclus, is that formulated in the second part of Plato's *Parmenides* (137c4–5) as the proposition: "The one, if it is one, is not many".[17] From this and from other such concepts, metaphysics derives a chain of demonstrations which reflects

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[11] Cf. Syrianus, *In met.*, 4,33–5,2; Simplicius, *In cat.*, 42,10–27. On discursive thought in general cf. Blumenthal [1971], ch. 2.

[12] Syrianus, *In met.*, 4,35–37.

[13] Syrianus, *In met.*, 115,21–25 (Aristotle, *Met.* H, 3, 1043b25–32); 80,10–13.

[14] Syrianus, *In met.*, 4,29–5,2.

[15] Cf. reference above n. 10 and Proclus, *In Parm.*, 948,12–38 (discussed by Steel [1997], 307 in its polemical relation to Plotinus).

[16] Cf. Syrianus, *In met.*, 18,9–22 and O'Meara [1986], 12–13 for more references and discussion.

[17] Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* II, 12 (66,1–8).

in its argumentative development the structure of transcendent reality. To have some idea of how this actually works, we need only turn to Proclus' *Elements of Theology*.[18]

Thus far we can conclude that the intelligible objects (πράγματα) of discursive thought are prior and superior to this kind of thought. Discursive thought does not think these objects directly, but thinks them in a mode coordinate with its nature, as concepts (νοήματα) which represent, refer to, stand in some way for these objects as well as deriving from them. Such concepts have been described by A. C. Lloyd as 'internal objects' in which, he suggested, intentionality is present.[19] The question which I would like now to pursue concerns the way in which such 'internal objects' or concepts mediate between transcendent objects and discursive thought, how they represent transcendent objects in discursive thinking.

II

A first approach to this question might have recourse to the following genetic account. The human rational soul is no *tabula rasa* at birth: it contains within its nature certain 'essential rational principles' (οὐσιώδεις λόγοι) which, as images of transcendent objects, constitute a kind of pre-discursive innate knowledge of such objects.[20] This innate knowledge is obscured and hindered by soul's embodied condition and requires only to be reactivated, recollected through the discursive articulation of concepts which project such rational principles. The later Neoplatonic commentaries on Aristotle's *De anima* refer in this connection to Aristotle's first grade of actuality, which Aristotle compares with the possession, for example in sleep, of a science not yet activated.[21] The Neoplatonists identify this possession of unactivated science with intellect as ἕξις, as dispositional. As rational souls we are born to the body as dispositional intellects that await activation. We are like sleeping geometers, hidden in the

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[18] Cf. O'Meara [2000].

[19] Lloyd [1990], 156–158. Lloyd's suggestion reappears for example in Rappe [1996], 255.

[20] Cf. Steel [1997], 295–299 and Syrianus, *In met.*, 27,33–37; Proclus, *In Parm.*, 950,3–5.

[21] Cf. Steel [1997], 299.

thickets of embodiment, awaiting (if I may be permitted this fantasy!) our prince charming, a good teacher, to arouse to activity, through discursive thinking, the knowledge innate in us.[22]

This genetic account provides perhaps some ontological link between transcendent objects, the nature of rational soul and the concepts of discursive reasoning, but it hardly suffices to show how transcendent objects are thought *through* discursive concepts. An element of the genetic account might seem, however, to merit further development, namely the suggestion that concepts are 'images', in some way, of transcendent objects. Thus discursive thought might be taken to think transcendent objects by contemplating the images of them that are constituted by its projection in concepts of the innate 'essential principles' of soul. The opening chapter of Aristotle's *De interpretatione* (16a7–8) certainly encouraged its Neoplatonist commentators to think of concepts as likenesses (ὁμοιώματα) of things (πράγματα), and in the Neoplatonist commentary on the *De anima* attributed to Philoponus we read descriptions of thought as an interior vision, a vision of λόγοι which are images of transcendent objects and paradigms of sensible particulars. Thus discursive thought 'sees' transcendent objects in the mode of images (εἰκονικῶς), as it sees sensible particulars in the mode of paradigms (παραδειγματικῶς).[23]

This way of describing the relation between concepts and the transcendent objects of which they are concepts can be found again as applied to a form of discursive thinking subordinate to metaphysics, namely mathematics, which also deals with principles innate in the soul projected as concepts in quantity (arithmetic) and extension (geometry), as if on a screen, permitting us to visualize mentally, to imagine, what without such projection is difficult to grasp.[24]

The account of discursive thought as spectator of an interior display of concepts articulating innate principles in soul and thereby acting as images of transcendent objects presents obvious difficulties: In what way are concepts 'images' of transcendent objects? How are they recognized as such? Without going further in listing such

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[22] Philoponus, *In de an.* [Moerbeke's Latin version], 33,80–94; 38,81–39,21; cf. Tempelis [1997], 317–318.

[23] Philoponus, *In de an.*, 129,29–32; *In de an.* [Latin version], 83,37–48. On the problem of the authorship of the commentaries on Aristotle's *De an.* attributed to Philoponus and Simplicius, cf. Blumenthal [1996], 61–71.

[24] Syrianus, *In met.*, 91,31–92,1; Philoponus, *In de an.*, 58,11–17; O'Meara [1989], 132–134.

difficulties, we might already note that the spectator account of discursive thought does not in any case adequately cover the more detailed descriptions of discursive thought provided by later Neoplatonists. I would like to mention some elements of these descriptions which are not accommodated by the spectator interpretation of discursive thought.

(i) The later Neoplatonists distinguish between the primary concepts of discursive thought and the concepts derived from these through reasoning, in particular through demonstration.[25] The inspiration of this distinction seems to be, on the one hand, the geometrical procedure of developing demonstrations on the basis of axioms, common notions and definitions, and, on the other hand, the Aristotelian distinction between premises known prior to demonstration and premises known through demonstration. The primary concepts are 'about' intelligible objects (περὶ τῶν νοητῶν): they are a knowledge of transcendent objects which is prior to the discursive elaboration of such concepts in demonstration. The spectator account of discursive thought might be felt to apply to this pre-demonstrative grasp of primary concepts (but see below, [ii]), yet it does not cover the subsequent demonstrative knowledge developed in discursive thought and which is an important part of it.

(ii) Is the pre-demonstrative grasp of primary concepts a kind of interior vision of images of transcendent objects? Certainly we can find references to a 'seeing' of these concepts, which are described as manifesting (ἐκφαντικά) the divine.[26] However, let us consider briefly the absolutely primary concept identified by Proclus, formulated, as I believe, in the fourth proposition of the *Elements of Theology*: "All that is unified is other than the One itself". How is this proposition known to discursive reason? What is its pre-demonstrative evidence? To reach the fourth proposition, Proclus develops a series of arguments by elimination which appeal to such premisses as "The whole is greater than the part" and "Nothing comes from nothing".[27]

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[25] Cf. above at n. 17; Proclus, *In Parm.*, 1092,19–30.

[26] Syrianus, *In met.*, 19,5–8; Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* I, 10 (46,14–15); Philoponus, *In de an.* [Latin version], 24,68–70.

[27] The identification of proposition 4 of Proclus' *Elements of Theology* as corresponding to what he considers to be the very first concept of metaphysics (above, at n. 17) and a study of the argument leading back through propositions 1 to 3 to this primary proposition can be found in O'Meara [2000].

Proclus' approach here might be explained by reference to something like the Aristotelian distinction between an absolute order of demonstrative knowledge and an order relative to our prior knowledge and research. If the very first concept, in the absolute order, is known pre-demonstratively and originates the whole body of demonstrative knowledge, it is known *by us* at a subsequent stage, as a result of a procedure of conceptual analysis invoking universally accepted axioms. If this way of explaining how primary concepts are known by us is correct, then we are at some distance from the spectator model of pre-demonstrative knowledge. Primary concepts are known through a regressive analysis of propositions of great generality. These primary concepts, formulated as propositions, are propositions about transcendent objects: the very first concept is an affirmation of the ontological priority of the One in relation to all plurality. From such propositions discursive reason develops further demonstratively known propositions about transcendent objects.

(iii) The active, operational character of discursive thought shows that concepts are acts, motions of thought, not separate entities on display, as it were, for thought to inspect.[28] This operational character of discursive thought is even more manifest in its elaboration or construction of demonstrations based on primary concepts, producing conclusions which themselves yield materials for further demonstrations. Thus discursive thought is productive: it builds a system of propositions projected through its logical operations from primary concepts themselves reached through regressive conceptual analysis. In the ideal, absolute order, this system, as it is produced, will correspond to the real order of transcendent objects, as they progress

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[28] The dynamic operational aspect of discursive thought is well brought out by Lernould [1987]. Cf. Philoponus, *In de an.*, 126,21–23 on concepts as acts of thought, an indication of interest as regards the issue of determining the precise ontological status of discursive concepts. Although an adequate discussion of this issue would require a much fuller, separate treatment, perhaps the following suggestions may be of use. Syrianus (*In met.*, 12,29–13,3) distinguishes between the ontological status of concepts abstracted from sense-perception, concepts he assigns to the categories of quantity and quality, and that of the innate rational principles in soul (οὐσιώδεις λόγοι), which come under the category of substance. Discursive concepts of transcendent objects are projections of these rational principles (cf. Proclus, *In Parm.*, 895,32–896,5; Steel [1997], 295–297): they are acts or movements of the substances that are the rational principles in soul, and are not *affections*, παθήματα, of the soul (cf. also Dexippus, *In cat.*, 10,21–23), contrary to what might be read from Aristotle's *De interp.* (1,16a3–9) and corresponding to what is taken to be his position in the *De an.* (cf. Ammonius, *In de interp.*, 5,29–7,14).

in the derivation of reality. Thus, the conceptual constructions of metaphysics will derive from the most fundamental and universal propositions, developing ever more differentiated and complex conclusions just as transcendent objects derive from an absolute universal principle of unity in ever increasing degrees of multiplication and particularization.[29] The correspondence between the ideal order of metaphysical discursive thought and the real order of transcendent objects allows us to see the suggestion that discursive concepts are images of transcendent objects in a new light: it is not the case that discursive thought *looks* at these concepts as if they were images, but rather that in developing these concepts, discursive thought *produces* what are in a sense images of transcendent objects. A passage from Philoponus' commentary on the *De anima* might serve to illustrate this:

> When Aristotle says that intellect is in potentiality what the intelligibles are, and becomes in actuality what they are when it understands, he does not mean that our intellect should be said to be those things in substance ... It does not, when it understands God, become God, or when it understands heaven and earth, become any of these things. But since the accounts of all things are in the soul, the accounts of the better things which are superior to it in the form of representations, the accounts of less good things which are posterior to it as exemplars, when it actually produces the accounts which are in it, it actually becomes what they are either, as I said, in a representative or in an exemplary way, as we say that the image of Socrates becomes what Socrates is, or that the accounts in the art of building become what the house is.[30]

As Proclus indicates, metaphysical science, in its productivity, imitates divine demiurgy: it *produces* images (ὁμοιώματα), i.e. concepts, of transcendent objects (πράγματα).[31]

To this account of discursive thought we should add perhaps the point that the construction of a perfect metaphysical system of propositions and demonstrations is not an end in itself for the later Neoplatonist. Already at a subordinate level of discursive thought, where mathematical science is constructed, the purpose is, as Syrianus indicates, the exercise of the soul (μέθοδος ... γυμνάζουσα) preparatory

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[29] Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* I, 10 (45,20–46,20).

[30] Philoponus, *In de an.* [Latin version], 83,37–49 (Charleton transl.).

[31] Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* I, 29 (124,12–20).

to its access to higher knowledge,[32] an idea we can link to the function of mathematics in the ascent to 'dialectic' described in the image of the line of Plato's *Republic* (509c–511e). Having progressed through mathematics to the metaphysical level, discursive thought still finds itself engaged in a form of preparatory exercise. For even if Proclus, for example, considered the second part of Plato's *Parmenides* to be a perfect metaphysical system, what could be achieved perhaps by the repeated practice of arguments such as we find in the *Elements of Theology*, it is nevertheless itself a preparatory exercise, as Plato himself seems to suggest in the *Parmenides* (135d–136a), a kind of metaphysical therapy of the discursive soul leading it to a higher, more direct non-discursive knowledge of transcendent objects.[33] The anagogical function of metaphysical conceptual constructions, leading soul beyond concepts to transcendent objects, had already been stressed by Syrianus and is repeated in the Neoplatonic commentary on the *De anima* attributed to Simplicius.[34]

III

The materials presented above argue, I suggest, for some sort of intentionality within Neoplatonic realism. If the objects of discursive thought are prior to it and independent of it, it thinks them all the same in a way corresponding to its nature, as concepts. These concepts, in their differentiation, multiplicity, operational productivity, correspond to the dynamic character of discursive thought, while constituting, so to speak, an inner speech about, an image of, the objects that transcend it. This makes these concepts, on some accounts at least, intentional objects. There may perhaps be difficulties for later Neoplatonists in measuring up to the 'no magic' requirement stipulated for a theory of intentionality by Peter Simons,[35] at least as regards their realm of transcendent objects. But Simons might nevertheless allow us[36] to choose our magic, the world we live in, and Neoplatonist intentional objects themselves, as I hope to have shown, are not conjured up by incantations and wand-waving, but

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[32] Syrianus, *In met.*, 180,6–9.
[33] On this cf. O'Meara [2000].
[34] Syrianus, *In met.*, 27,36–37; (pseudo-)Simplicius, *In de an.*, 42,1–11.
[35] See pp. 1–20 in this volume.
[36] As in the discussion that followed his paper.

result from a reasoned theory of metaphysical and mathematical thinking.[37]

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