

Proclus on θεός

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When we examine the ways in which the Greeks wrote and spoke about the gods, we find a curious juxtaposition of clarity and ambiguity. They seem at once sure and unsure of what can and cannot be qualified as θεός, a paradox that has led historians of Greek religion to radical conclusions regarding the nature of Greek polytheism. Robert Parker, for one, writes that “godness” (as he suggests we might translate the term θεός),

is a predicate that no definition can circumscribe. The attempt to confer logical coherence on polytheism is a hopeless enterprise. But the incoherence made it all the more flexible a tool for coping with the diversity of experience.¹

In a similar vein, H. S. Versnel argues that θεός designates a so-called ‘polythetic’ class of objects, or a class whose members share a number of common characteristics, none of which is essential for membership of class.² He also writes that, for the Greeks,

a god need not *always* be god, some gods are *not complete* gods, other gods are *supercomplete* gods, hence some gods are *more* god than others, etcetera. In other words the term *theos*, that we translate as “god” (but especially here translating is a precarious if not impossible venture) accommodates a scale of gradually shifting meanings, the extremes being hardly recognizable as belonging to one class.³

These recent affirmations of the complexity and ambiguity of Greek polytheism, however, were not only prefigured by the work of certain twentieth-century scholars,⁴ but also by the Greeks themselves. Proclus, following in the footsteps of his Neoplatonic predecessors, believed that theology was a science that could determine not only the internal order but also the external limits

1 Parker 2011: 98.

2 Versnel 2011: 261.

3 *Ibid.* 262.

4 *Ibid.* 212–231.

of the class of things called θεός. He also believed, however, that one could determine these limits without suppressing the natural fluidity of the term θεός that lies at the heart of Greek polytheism. In what follows, after first offering some examples of the clarity and ambiguity of the Greeks regarding the limits of the gods, I will examine how Proclus, in his analysis of the term θεός, sought out clarity while also maintaining a certain degree of ambiguity.

CLARITY AND AMBIGUITY

“To insist on what seems to us such a commonplace truism, the difference Man and God” was for Gilbert Murray “one of the greatest works of Hellenic spirit”.⁵ Indeed, from the earliest times we find the Greeks drawing a firm line between gods and men. When Diomedes charges Apollo, he is warned to “not be minded to think on a par with the gods; since in no way of like sort is the race of immortal gods and that of men who walk upon the earth”.⁶ Pindar too sings that

There is one race of men, another of gods; but from one mother
we both draw our breath. Yet the allotment of a wholly
different power separates us, for the one race is nothing,
whereas the bronze heaven remains a secure abode forever.⁷

Both poets, however, are not as unequivocal as they may seem. Apollo declares that the boundaries between men and gods are inviolable only after they have been patently violated by Diomedes’ spear. Pindar, as well, immediately qualifies his initial statement:

Nevertheless, we do somewhat resemble the immortals,
either in greatness of mind or bodily nature,
although we do not know by day or in the night
to what goal destiny has marked for us to run.⁸

While one might argue that these are simple exercises in poetic license, such juxtapositions of clarity and ambiguity regarding the limits of the divine were hardly confined to verse. We find them everywhere,

5 Murray 1955: 146.

6 *Iliad*, 5.440–2 (trans. Murray and Wyatt).

7 Pindar, *Nem.* 6.1–4 (trans. Race).

8 Pindar, *Nem.* 6.4–8 (trans. Race).

and most clearly in the day-to-day practice of Greek polytheism.

One example of this is that there were some gods who were understood by worshippers to act both like gods and like mortal men in their everyday dealings with us. Hermes is an excellent example of this ambiguity, but the case of Asclepius is perhaps even more telling. We possess the descriptions of various “cures (ιάματα)” affected by the god Asclepius at the Great Asklepeion of Epidaurus during the late fourth-century BCE.⁹ Some of these descriptions remind us of the miracle cures attributed to modern day healing-shrines such as Lourdes or Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré. They appear to be the work of an omnipotent deity who circumvents the laws of nature at will and to whom one must come as a suppliant. There is, for example, this description of a woman who,

being still with child after five years’ pregnancy, came as a suppliant to the god and slept in the Abaton; and as the cure came about out of this sleep most quickly and miraculously, she gave birth to the baby, and as soon as it was born the newborn child washed itself at the fountain and walked about with his mother. Having obtained these things, she wrote on the dedicatory tablet: “admirable is not the size of the tablet [on which the cure is published], but the divine [power]”.¹⁰

This description echoes a widely-shared conception of Asclepius as “the god that possesses all powers”.¹¹

The descriptions of other “cures” from the same time and place, however, evoke a very different image of Asclepius. There is no talk of supernatural miracles here. The god seems to be understood as functioning along the lines of a mortal doctor. He treats his patients using drugs, surgery and other tools from the standard medical practitioner’s kit, can only be in one place at one time,¹² and *if* his treatment is successful,

9 They are to be found at *JG* IV 12, 121–124. I here follow the argument of Versnel 2011: 400–22. Versnel (pp. 309–378) also offers an excellent case study of Hermes and his tendency to act like a mortal.

10 *IG* IV² 1, 121, sec. 1 (my trans.).

11 Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 42.4.

12 *IG* IV² 1, 122, sec. 23.

he receives the “doctors’ honorarium (ἰατρῶα)”,¹³ just like his mortal colleagues. He also accepts some fairly humble cases:

[The dedicator of this tablet] had no hair on his head, but a great beard. Being ugly and being ridiculed by others, he slept [in the temple]. The god, rubbing his head with a lotion, gave him hair.¹⁴

Asclepius therefore seems to have been understood by the supplicants/patients of Epidaurus to both heal miraculously like an omnipotent god and to practice medicine like a standard (albeit fairly skilled) mortal doctor.

Beyond gods acting like men, there was also the curious case of heroes and heroines. “Heroes”, one might say, “are biographically dead mortals, functionally minor gods”.¹⁵ They were often worshipped at their supposed tomb, yet from this tomb they heard and answered prayers in the same manner as a god, and thus received a similar cult. This, of course, led to a certain ambiguity over the distinction between these dead mortals and their immortal counterparts. Sometimes it was unclear whether something was a hero or a god, such as in the case of the famous Taraxippos or “Horse-scarer” at Olympia.¹⁶ At other times, it would be ‘forgotten’ that something was a hero rather than a god, such as we see in this Athenian dedication to the so-called “Hero doctor” from the late fourth-century:

Empedion son of Eumelos of Euonymon proposed: concerning the matters about which [the priest] of the Hero Doctor has made an approach [...] from the models stored [in the sanctuary], and the silver coin, there should be fashioned, as a dedication to the *god*, a wine-pourer, [as beautiful as possible?], for good fortune [...] The People should choose two men [from the Areopagites], and three from their own number, who [...] having melted down the models and anything else that there is in silver or gold, and having weighed the stored silver coin, will fashion for the *god* a dedication, as beautiful as they can, and will dedicate it.¹⁷

13 IG IV² 1, 121–22, sec. 5; 22; 25.

14 IG IV² 1, 121, sec. 19 (my trans.).

15 Parker 2011: 144.

16 On Taraxippos see Pausanias, *Des.* 6.20.15–19.

17 IG II³ 1, 1154, lines 15–35 (trans. S. Lambert). My italics.

There is also the question of heroes who have seemingly crossed the border from ἡμίθεος to θεός, or from mortal to immortal, such as the “hero-god (ἥρωας θεός)”¹⁸ Heracles. The border between heroes and gods was evidently porous,¹⁹ as, apparently, was that between heroes and average men. In the mid-third century, for example, a certain Artemidorus set up the following inscription in Thera: “The prophetess of the god at Delphi sent an oracle [...] proclaiming Artemidorus a [divine? new?] immortal hero”.²⁰ The heroization of contemporary figures was not unheard of. There is evidence to suggest that Sophocles, for example, was worshipped under the heroic name of “Deixon”, “the receiver”, for his role in welcoming the cult of Asclepius to Athens.²¹ Artemidorus, however, seems to have been particularly enterprising in his efforts to secure city-wide recognition for himself and the posthumous immortality that attended it.

Yet contemporary men not only became heroes. They could also become gods as well. When Demetrius Poliorcetes made his last visit to Athens in about 290 BCE, the Athenians welcomed him not with honours fit for a θεόξενος, a divine visitor, but *as* a θεόξενος. The acclaimed poet Hermocles of Cyzicus wrote the following hymn for the occasion, of which I quote only the beginning:

The greatest and most beloved gods
are here in our city;
for a timely opportunity brought Demeter
and Demetrius here simultaneously!
She comes to celebrate the sacred
mysteries of Korē,
while he is here beautiful, laughing, and full of mirth,
as befits a god.
This is an awesome sight: all his friends surround him,
and he himself is in their midst;

18 Pindar, *Nem.* 3.22.

19 The recognition of this porous border may perhaps lie behind Prodicus of Ceos’ theory (B 5 D.–K.; D 15 Laks–Most), later echoed by Euhemerus of Messene, that the contemporary gods were originally heroic figures.

20 *IG XII 3*, 1349/863.

21 For testimonia, see Connolly 1998. Connolly is sceptical of the evidence, but Parker 2011: 155, n. 45, is not.

it is as if his friends were stars,
 while he was the sun.
 Hail, child of Poseidon, most powerful
 of gods, and of Aphrodite!
 The other gods are either far away,
 or deaf,
 or do not exist, or they pay us no attention.
 But you we see here,
 not made of wood or stone, but real.
 To you, then, we pray:
 first, that you create peace, beloved one;
 for this is within your power.²²

This extraordinary deification of a man by the city of philosophers left many scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appalled. It was, for Murray, the quintessence of the ‘failure of nerve’ that characterised the Hellenistic age.²³ The cult of rulers was, however, neither a symptom nor a cause of the decline of traditional Greek values.²⁴ Hellenistic cities likely offered a divine cult to their kings for the simple reason that these men now exercised a power over the cities that was hitherto reserved for the (immortal) gods alone. Did the average Greek citizen, however, truly believe in the divinity of these kings, or was it all simply theatrics and base flattery? The answer to this question is undoubtedly very complex and “likely to have varied according to time, place, and individual”.²⁵ What matters for our purposes is that θεός (whether said with a wink or not) was used of mortal men.

The juxtaposition of clarity and ambiguity concerning the limits of divinity reflected in poetry and religious practice was also an essential part of Greek philosophical theology. What are often considered to be the Greeks’ earliest theological reflections are replete with such juxtapositions. Xenophanes, for example, sings of

22 Athenaeus 6.63 (253d) (trans. S. Douglas Olson).

23 Murray 1955: 146–9.

24 Parker 2011: 361.

25 Parker 2011: 363. Versnel 2011: 439–98 also offers a very interesting analysis of this phenomenon.

One god, among both gods and humans the greatest,
Neither in bodily frame similar to mortals nor in thought.²⁶

Are these the words of a polytheist, a monotheist, or a henotheist? There has been much scholarly debate over the question. What seems apparent is that Xenophanes is willing to use θεός in two different senses in the same verse. The term designates at once something that is entirely unlike mortal men, and some things that may or may not resemble them. There is therefore here again both clarity and ambiguity regarding the difference between men and gods.

Another striking example of the juxtaposition of clarity and ambiguity in a philosophical context is Carneades' theological debate with the Stoics. In response to the Stoic argument that the universal worship of the gods is a clear proof of their existence, Carneades evokes the ambiguity between 'greater' and 'lesser' gods in the form of a sorites paradox:

If gods exist, are the nymphs also goddesses? If the nymphs are, then are Pans and Satyrs also gods? Therefore, the nymphs also are not gods. Yet they possess temples vowed and dedicated to them by the nation. Therefore, the other gods who have temples dedicated to them are not gods either.²⁷

Carneades was of course (at least according to Cicero) not attempting promote atheism, but simply to deflate any Stoic pretensions to having a coherent rational theology. The Stoics, however, were hardly the last or even the most ambitious of the Greeks to offer a rational theology of polytheism. This honour falls to the later Neoplatonists.

²⁶ Xenophanes, B 23 D.-K. (D 16 L.-M. trans. L.-M.).

²⁷ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 3.43 (trans. H. Rackham). This theological debate between Carneades and the Stoics has been well studied. See, most recently, Price 1984: 80.

THEOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

In his seminal article, entitled “*Les débuts de la théologie comme science (III^e–VI^e siècle)*”, Henri Dominique Saffrey did no less than rewrite the history of what is commonly called ‘theology as a science’, which he himself defines as “*une conception de la théologie où l’on se sert des instruments de la philosophie pour répondre à des questions soulevées par l’explication de l’Écriture Sainte et par l’actualité du moment*”.²⁸ Prior to Saffrey’s study, this phenomenon was generally viewed as belonging to the thirteenth century and the emergence of Aristotle in the Latin West. Saffrey, however, argued that it was in fact far more ancient and that one could trace its development “*depuis [les] débuts [de la théologie chrétienne] jusqu’à ce tournant que constitue l’apparition des œuvres du Pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite*”.²⁹

The works of the Pseudo-Dionysius mark a turning point for Saffrey insofar as they represent the convergence of two great currents of thought. At the end of the fifth century CE, Christian theology had matured to the point where it was able to integrate the keystone of later Neoplatonic theology, namely, the idea that theology could be treated as a science. This idea, which, according to Saffrey, emerged in the fourth century with Iamblichus, consists in at once investing Plato’s texts with the authority of divine revelation, in the search for a systematic agreement between Plato’s theology and theologies from other traditions (such as the Orphic poems and *Chaldean Oracles*), and, most importantly, in the application of Platonic dialectic to the gods in order to determine their order and the distribution of divine properties amongst them.

As an example of this new approach to theology, Saffrey quotes the following description, taken from Proclus’ *Platonic Theology*, of the difference between Plato and all the theologians who preceded him:

28 Saffrey 1996: 201.

29 *Ibid.*

But the mode [of doing theology] according to science (κατ' ἐπιστήμην) is peculiar to the philosophy of Plato, for the procession of the divine genera in order, their difference from one another, and both the common individualities of the ranks of the whole of reality and the distinguishing properties in each, Plato alone, as it seems to me, of all those known to us, attempted to both divide and order according to this mode.³⁰

The novelty of Plato's theology, according to Proclus, lies in its revelation of the order of the seemingly numberless gods which populate Greek polytheism by means of dialectic. Platonic dialectic, at least for Proclus, is both the supreme science and the paradigm of all lesser sciences, each of which applies the methods of dialectic (e.g. analysis, synthesis, definition, division, etc.) to the Forms "in the case of things known by their cause".³¹ To apply dialectic to the gods in order to discover the causal hierarchy that exists amongst them is therefore to do theology scientifically, and Proclus, following Iamblichus, does exactly that, for knowing this order is crucial. It alone opens the way for true prayer, which must approach each god in a manner appropriate to his or her position in the order of procession.³²

The Pseudo-Dionysius, who had carefully studied the writings of Proclus, would incorporate this 'scientific' approach to theology into his own works, and, thanks to their immense success, this approach would be absorbed into Christian thought in general. The idea of theology as a science was therefore first developed by Late Antique pagan thinkers, from Iamblichus to Damascius, and then taken up by Christians.

The new history of theology as a science offered by Saffrey rests upon his reading of the theology of the later Neoplatonists, the core of which remains sound. The later Neoplatonists did indeed search for the order of the gods by means of dialectic, and they believed that theology was a science. The greatest test of this

30 Proclus, *Theo. Plat.* I 4, 20.20–5; Saffrey 1996: 217. All translations of Proclus are my own unless otherwise indicated.

31 Proclus, *in Ti.* II.313.9–12. On this subject, see Lernould 1987: 515.

32 *In Ti.* I.211.10–11.

science was, however, not to establish the internal order of the class of things called θεός, but to discern the external limits of this class, i.e. to distinguish between what is a θεός and what is not.

WHAT IS A θεός?

When speaking of the Neoplatonic project of making theology a science, two works of Proclus are often cited by way of example, namely, the *Elements of Theology* and the *Platonic Theology*. In the former work, Proclus offers a clear definition of the class of objects called θεός: “Every god is a perfect henad in itself (ένάς άυτοτελής), and every perfect henad in itself is a god”.³³ According to this definition, only the henads, the participated, yet still supra-essential, manifestations of the First principle, are gods.

Were Proclus to have strictly adhered to this definition throughout his writings, he might have reduced the *Platonic Theology* by nearly two thirds. However, this voluminous work teaches of the gods belonging to no less than eleven divine διακόσμοι (out of a total fourteen, according to the fourteen conclusions of the second hypothesis of the *Parmenides*) proceeding from the henads. The term θεός must therefore, in some way, apply to beings posterior to the henads.

This is in fact exactly what we see in the *Elements*, where, after having restricted θεός to the henads, Proclus goes on to show how, despite this restriction, many other things beyond the henads may be called divine as well:

Every divine body is deified through the mediation of a divine soul, every divine soul through the mediation of a divine intellect, and every divine intellect by participation in a divine henad. And a henad is immediately god (αυτόθεν θεός), a [divine] intellect is divine to the utmost degree (θειότατον), a [divine] soul is divine (θεία), and a [divine] body is deiform (θεοειδές).³⁴

³³ Proclus, *Inst.* §114.

³⁴ *Ibid.* §129. This teaching is echoed in the *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (in *Ti.* 3.72.27–73.7) regarding the astral gods: “if it is necessary to say how the matter appears to me, it is that, first, the henad in each [astral god] and the ineffable participation in the source of the universal unitary sets is a god, secondly, there is

Yet divinity does not end with divine bodies. While discussing the four genera of celestial, aerial, aquatic, and terrestrial gods mentioned in the *Timaeus*,³⁵ Proclus states concerning the genus of celestial gods that

it is also necessary to consider the words under discussion in a manner appropriate to each order. For instance, “the genus of gods” has one sense when it covers the beings that are specifically called gods, while it has another sense when it covers the genera of beings superior to us which have been arranged in the heavens. After all, we say that there are celestial angels, daemons and heroes and all these things are called ‘gods’ because the specific property of deity (τὸ θεῖον ἰδίωμα) predominates over their individual specific characteristic (τῆς ἰδίας αὐτῶν ιδιότητος), and, generally speaking, the daemons there above are god-daemons (θεοὶ δαίμονες), and similarly for the angels and heroes [there above].³⁶

Celestial daemons may therefore justly be called θεοὶ as they too participate the specific property of deity. This participation is afforded them by grace of their place as the most universal members of the daemonic order. In fact, as Proclus writes,

in all the genera [of reality] — bodies, souls, intellects — the preeminent places are consecrated to the gods, so that in each order there are terms analogous to the gods, which bring together the secondary beings in unity and maintain their existence.³⁷

Therefore, far from tightly restricting θεός to the henads, Proclus holds that there are entities which might be called θεός occupying the preeminent position at every level of reality.

It is not in the *Elements*, however, but in the *Platonic Theology* that Proclus offers his most detailed reflection on the semantic scope of the term θεός and the nature of the divine attribute of “deity (τὸ θεῖον)”:

the intellect that holds each thing together in a manner that is stable, uniform and invariant, and, thirdly, there is the soul that is filled up with intellect and articulates that which intellect holds in a single embrace. The first is truly god (ὄντως θεός), the second is divine to the utmost degree (θειότατος), and while the third is itself divine (θεία...αὐτή), it also illuminates the living being with the specific property of divinity (θειότητος ἰδίωμα)."

³⁵ Plato, *Ti.* 39e10–40a2.

³⁶ *In Ti.* 3.109.14–24.

³⁷ *Inst.* §139.

And first there is this simple word, “deity (τὸ θεῖον)”: to what are we referring when we say it? Surely, then, from what was said at the beginning of this work, it is clear that every god exists according to that highest unification amongst beings; for to us ascending from bodies, the gods appeared as henads, supra-essential henads, which produce, perfect, and measure beings by attaching all the primary beings to themselves. But “deity” is not simply pure existence (ὑπαρξις) and the one which is in each order of being, but it is at once the participant and the participated, of which the one is god, the other is the thing deified [...] For now, we must affirm that “deity” is as follows: Being that participates the One or the One tightly bound up with Being.³⁸

Proclus then goes on to note how Plato himself calls various beings θεός, including the intellect, the soul, and even the Eleatic stranger.³⁹ All of this, Proclus declares, obliges us to admit

that “god (θεός)” is at once what is simply a god, what is a god by unification, by participation, by contact, or by similitude; for each of the things beyond being is a god in the primary sense, each intellectual being is a god by unification, and each of the psychic beings is a god by participation, the divine daemons are gods by contact with the gods, and the souls of men have a share in this noun by similitude. But each of these, as I have said, is more divine (θεῖον) than god (θεός) [...] And deity (τὸ θεῖον) is secondary to primary divinity (πρωτίστος θεότητος), just as the unified is to the One, the intellectual to the Intellect, the animate to the Soul.⁴⁰

In these passages, Proclus initially restates his position from the *Elements*: every god is a supra-essential henad. There is a difference, however, between being a god and possessing deity (τὸ θεῖον). Deity is an attribute of the gods in which other beings throughout the order of procession may participate, an attribute which Proclus defines as “Being that participates the One or the One tightly bound up with Being”. This definition of deity, however, echoes the above-mentioned idea that there are gods at every level of reality. The henads (i.e. the One tightly bound up with Being) most definitely possess deity, but there are also entities within each order of beings that participate the One directly, and this is the mark of their share in deity.

38 *Theo. Plat.* 1.114.5–22.

39 Plato, *Soph.* 216a5–6.

40 *Theo. Plat.* 1.115.15–116.1.

This consideration of deity as a participated attribute of the gods, as well as the wide array of things to which θεός is predicated by Plato, leads Proclus to finally revisit his initial definition of θεός. He now points out that a being may be described as θεός for at least five different reasons: it may be simply a god, or be a god by unification, by participation, by contact, or by similitude. According to this descending scale of 'godness', even a human soul may be called θεός based on its similitude to the gods. Yet it, like the divine daemons, souls, and intellects, "is more divine than god". Only the divine henads are θεός "in a primary sense", because they possess not only deity but "primary divinity (πρωτίστος θεότητος)", in the same way that unparticipated Soul possesses soul in a different manner than animate beings.

In these last passages, we see how Proclus accommodates the natural fluidity of the term θεός to the order of procession by arguing that there are degrees of deity and therefore degrees of θεός. Thus, while we may justly call many different beings at different levels of order of procession θεός, in truth, the divine henads remain the only 'real' gods. Moreover, insofar as these 'real' gods form a clearly delimited class whose internal order can be discovered by means of dialectic, theology remains a science.

CONCLUSION

In his analysis of the term θεός, Proclus makes explicit what is implicit in Pindar and others, namely, that for a practitioner of Greek polytheism, it was no great difficulty to call very diverse things θεός. Some of these things, such as Zeus Basileos, Athena Polias, or a divine henad, were far more θεός than others, such as certain daemons or mortal men. So much more, in fact, that they could be considered a class unto themselves. To the Greek mind, the term θεός could be predicated to a whole spectrum of beings, but most genuinely to one extreme of this spectrum.

Proclus' analysis of the term θεός therefore resembles those of Parker, Versnel, and other contemporary historians of Greek religion. While the theology of Proclus is not commonly studied by historians

of religion, it is worthy of their attention not only as a specific manifestation of Greek religion, but perhaps also, as we have seen, as a tool to aid in the study of the structure of Greek religion in general.

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