

CREATION AND FREEDOM IN ANCIENT NEOPLATONISM A ROAD TO THE MIDDLE AGES*

Alfons Puigarnau

UNIVERSITAT POMPEU FABRA

Aquest article recull un text presentat a la Universitat de Leeds amb motiu d'un Congrés Internacional de Filosofia Medieval. L'autor centra la seva anàlisi en la filosofia neoplatònica i tracta de veure les múltiples hermenèutiques d'aquest pensament en la Patrística i en el començament de l'Edat Mitjana.

243

In 1277, the Bishop of Paris, Étienne Tempier, published a list of doctrines which had been condemned as heresy, one such doctrine being that of the eternal nature of the world. This controversy is but a minor reflection of a much wider problem: the encounter between the truth based on reasoning and the truth based on faith.¹

I should like in these lines to discuss a matter crucial to the understanding of Neoplatonic philosophy: the crossing of cultures –classical and Christian– in response to a problem common to both: the creation of the material world. This is a philosophical problem, but also a theological one. It is a metaphysical problem, but also –and perhaps for that very reason– an ethical one. This problem should, seemingly, be characterised by a conflict between such concepts as “causality” and “chance”, “freedom” and “neces-

* The present text was delivered to the University of Leeds on the occasion of the *International Medieval Congress*, 8-11 July 1996. It was originally titled “Creation and Freedom in Ancient Neoplatonism. A Road to the Middle Ages”.

¹ CARROL, W.E. “S. Tommaso, Aristotele e la Creazione”. *Annales Theologici*, vol. 8, fasc. 2, 1994, p. 365.

sity", "God" and "the One", as well as between thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus and St. Augustine, Hegel and St. Thomas Aquinas. All of them concepts and thinkers to be found at the root of Medieval philosophy and which laid the groundwork for many of the problems dealt with in this era of the history of philosophy: creationism and emanationism, the dispute over universals, the apparent antagonism between faith and reason, the boundaries between philosophy and theology, proofs of the existence of God, the primacy of free will and freedom, relations between Church and State, etc.

At least up to the point of the Cartesian separation between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, it is evident to anyone who takes the time to think, to philosophise, that there exists a material world which is *somehow related* to *something* of a spiritual or intelligible nature which, depending on the specific circumstances, is in more or less intimate contact with material existence.

In his *Timaeus*, Plato had already accepted without reserve this sort of ontological duality: "What is that which is Becoming always and never is Existent? Now the one of these is apprehensible by thought with the aid of reasoning, since it is ever uniformly consistent."² "The other," he says, "is an object of opinion with the aid of unreasoning sensation, since it becomes and perishes and is never really existent". He sees quite clearly that there is a superior and an inferior, one eternal and the other mortal, one which exists of itself and is identical to itself and the other which exists through another, different from itself.

But he also introduces a relationship between the two: "everything which is born is necessarily born through the action of a cause, since, whatever it may be, it cannot possibly be born without a cause." This relationship is causal: the superior moves the inferior and the inferior is moved by the superior. We can conclude that creation, in Plato's view, requires the existence of a cause, a creator in relation to the created. He makes a key distinction between what is and what must be. Because he asks "whether it has existed always, having no beginning of generation, or whether it has come into existence, having begun from some beginning." And he himself answers: "It has come into existence; for it is visible and tangible and possessed of a body" He then goes on

² *Timaeus*, 27d. *Plato in twelve volumes*. English Translation by the Rev. R. G. Bury, Litt. D. Cambridge-Massachusetts-London: Harvard University Press-William Heinemann Ltd., 1975.

to generalise: "...and all such things are sensible, and things sensible, being apprehensible by opinion with the aid of sensation, come into existence, as we saw, and are generated".³

Here we have then, the terms of the problem: on the one hand, the sensible, with its characteristic properties: it is visible, tangible, it is grasped by means of opinion and sensation, it is subject to becoming, and birth, its birth is caused by another, it is corporeal and it never truly exists. And on the other hand, the intelligible: it is grasped through intelligence and reason, it is identical to itself, it has always existed, it has no beginning and it is the cause of the birth of the sensible.

The subject of these lines is the relationship established by ancient Neoplatonism between these two terms, the creator and the created. And in referring to ancient Neoplatonism, we have chosen two of its chief proponents: one of them classical –Plotinus– and the other decidedly Christian, although nonetheless Platonic –St. Augustine–. The question is a double one: firstly, does the creator create necessarily or deliberately?⁴ And secondly, does he create out of nothing or out of something?

The first question must be answered in the light of Plotinus' concept of the One's freedom: here, deliberation consists essentially of a being's belonging to itself, a belonging which is the basis for *souveraineté*, which we will translate here –somewhat freely– as "dominion".⁵ This dominion is to be understood as dominion over the created, or at least, for the moment, over the "realised".

The French author writes that "*L'absolue souveraineté est égale à une absolue liberté*"⁶, in commenting on these words of Plotinus: "But the Principle, since it has nothing before it, has not anything else to be in; but since it has nothing else to be in, (...) it encompasses all the other things. But in encompassing them it is not dispersed

³ Ibid., 28e.

⁴ Obviating, from the start, any possibility of creation by chance: "To attribute the being and structure of this All to accident and chance is unreasonable and belongs to a man without intelligence or perception; this is obvious even before demonstration and many adequate demonstrations have been set down which show it." (*Enneads*, III2, 1-5). Plotinus. English Translation by A.H. Armstrong. Cambridge-Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989. (hereinafter, En.)

⁵ Cf. LEROUX, G. Plotin. *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l'Un*. Paris: Vrin, 1990, p. 392. The author is commenting here upon texts corresponding to: En, V5, 9, 14; III3, 4, 6-7 and V18, 4, 26.

⁶ Ibid., p. 395.

into them and it possesses them without being possessed."⁷ It would seem that, in this manner, without mixing with things, it can remain free of them. This is, precisely, an initial point of contention between the Plotinist concept of the One and the Christian concept of a personal God: "*C'est la première opposition entre être et volonté (...) Dans cette opposition (...) le chrétien argumente en faveur d'une théologie qui maintient la liberté de créer contre la nécessité de se diffuser ou d'émaner.*"⁸ We find, in Plotinus, a clear opposition between being and the need to be, which in is direct contradiction of the freedom of the One in the act of creation. In Christian terms, one cannot imagine, either philosophically or theologically, a God who is conditioned by his own being. But, on the other hand, the Simplicity of Plotinus' One leaves no room for any distinction in God between Being and Good, a distinction which seems to be closed to Christian thought. Since creation is a result of divine freedom, this can be nothing other than the effect of his will itself and not its *necessary* result, as Greck philosophy explains when speaking of heat as a *necessary*, rather than contingent, effect of fire.⁹

What we have called the Dominion of the One over the created has a relatively accessible explanation: "and the giver of its shape will give it a shape which is different from matter itself, and a size, and everything, bringing them to matter, so to speak, from its store of realities". In effect, the One appears, at first glance, to dominate from outside. But its freedom is not made quite clear: "the idea that the will of the maker keeps in step with the size is a fiction. But if, too, the making principle is prior to the matter, matter will be exactly as the making principle wills it to be in every way, tractable to everything, and so to size too". The maker is in fact powerful but, in Plotinus, does not manage to maintain a complete transcendence over the material: "So when the form comes to the matter it brings everything with it; the form has everything, the size and all that goes with and is caused by the formative principle".¹⁰

This is a fundamental difference between Plotinus' One and the Christian God: in defending emanation, the One eliminates transcendence and, along with it, providence; with God, on the

⁷ *En.*, V, 5, 9.

⁸ LEROUX, p. 118.

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁰ *En.*, II4, 8, 15-25.

other hand, transcendence is compatible with providence. This is the difference between Plotinus' emanationism and St. Augustine's creationism.

Where is the key to this relative *imperfection* of Plotinus' One to be found? Quite simply, in the confusion between the exemplary Cause and the efficient Cause. In Plotinus' view, the sensible world, far from being a self-constituting Hypostasis, is not even an Hypostasis as such, since, being nothing more than an image of the Intelligible, it requires a separate medium in which to subsist. Up to this point, Plotinus' follows in the footsteps of his teacher, Plato.¹¹ But while, in *Timaeus*, the efficient cause, i.e. the Demiurge, is distinct from the exemplary cause, i.e. the living intelligible, in the *Enneads*, one sole hypostasis is at once the efficient cause and the exemplary cause, Demiurge and Model. Strictly speaking, Plotinus' Demiurge is Intelligence. But his Demiurge is very different from the artisans of our world, not only because it is at once Demiurge and Model, but also because it creates spontaneously, with no deliberation whatsoever¹², with no effort and merely as a consequence of being what it is.¹³

Plotinus identifies not only the two causes, the efficient and the exemplary, but also the two causalities¹⁴: for Intelligence, to exist as Model and to create an image of itself are one and the same. For this reason, the sensible world is an image in the strictest sense.¹⁵

This incompatibility of Plotinist emanationism and Christian providentialism leads back to the a corresponding impossibility of reconciling the doctrine of creation with Greek metaphysical monism:¹⁶ "But since we affirm that this universe is everlasting and has never not existed, we should be correct and

¹¹ In spite of what follows here, it must be stressed that both Plato and Plotinus recognise the need for creation by the Demiurge or the One. For example, Plato says: "For, in truth, this Cosmos in its origins was generated as a compound, from the combination of Necessity and Reason. And inasmuch as Reason was controlling Necessity by persuading her to conduct to the best end the most part of the things coming into existence, thus and thereby it came about, through necessity yielding to intelligent persuasion, that this Universe of ours was being in this wise constructed at the beginning." *Timaeus*, 47c.

¹² Cf. *En.*, V8, 7; V17, 1.

¹³ Cf. *En.* III2, 1, 43-45.

¹⁴ IGAL, I. "General Introduction" to *Plotino, Enéadas I-II*. Biblioteca Clásica Gredos, 57. Madrid: Gredos, 1992, sec. 57, pp. 72-73.

¹⁵ Cf. *En.*, V14, 10, 1-15.

¹⁶ Cf. LEROUX, p. 119.

consistent in saying that providence for the All is its being according to Intellect and that Intellect is before it, not in the sense that it is prior in time but because the universe comes from Intellect and Intellect is prior in nature, and the cause of the universe as a kind of archetype and model, the universe being an image of it and existing by means of it and everlastingly coming into existence, in this way".¹⁷ The identification of providence with the harmony between the cosmos and Intelligence is in itself tantamount to doing away with the One's providential freedom: on the basis of the concept of providence (always in lower case in Plotinus), it is shown that Plotinist emanationism negates the One's creative freedom.

Plato, in his doctrine on the origin of the world, may be closer to Christianity than to Plotinist Neoplatonism. This is rather evident with regard to the pantheism inherent in Plotinus in the figure of the Demiurge that mediates between eternal material and the Idea, *creating*, although not *ex nihilo*, as in St. Augustine, the sensible world.¹⁸

It is precisely Plato who raises the second subject we cited at the outset. We have seen a fundamental difference with regard to the act of producing visible things: in Plotinus, the One is extremely simple but maintains neither creative freedom nor providence: it remains "too much" a part of things, it is "excessively" implicated in its own work. The first Hypostasis conserves what it has: it loses constantly but without diminishing: it emanates, and thus "makes". On the other hand, in Christian philosophy it is possible, through a distinction in reasoning, to explain a reality, not logical, but rather ontological, in God: he remains completely separate from the things which he creates, he maintains at once his freedom to create them and his divine providence; he maintains them, as we shall see shortly, in being, without loss or decrease and with no risk of any sort of pantheism. Creation consists of making them participate in Being, while maintaining independence with regard to the Need to Be.

Once again, it is Plato who frames the second question, as already mentioned. This is another point at which Neoplatonism is crossed with Christian philosophy: was the sensible world created out of nothing, *-ex nihilo-* or was it a result of an action carried out

¹⁷ *En.*, III2, 1, 20-28.

¹⁸ Cf. SALMONA, B. *La libertà in Plotino*, Milan: Marzorati, 1967, p. 111.

on something pre-existing or eternal? "For we say that it *ôisö* or *ôwasö* or *ôwill be,ö* whereas, in truth of speech, *ôisö* alone is the appropriate term; *ôwasö* and *ôwill be,ö* on the other hand, are terms properly applicable to the Becoming which proceeds in Time, since both of these are motions."¹⁹ In Plato, there is an eternal Substance (here, in the upper case), and substances bound up with time and therefore with change and movement. Particular substances do not, therefore, exist in themselves, they are subject to change and Substance is the only one which exists without beginning or end.

As I see it, Plato's approach allows us to make a certain analogy: it is, on the one hand, partly the same as and partly different from the classical viewpoint and, on the other hand, partly the same as and partly different from the Christian viewpoint. It has in common with the classical viewpoint the Plotinist concept of the One, understood as an Hypostasis, as a unique substance from which the other hypostases –including Material– emanate, according to the principle of loss without decrease. In common with the Christian viewpoint, it has the idea that the movement of particular substances is a sort of imperfection, an accidental manner of being –from the Aristotelian point of view, as adopted by St. Thomas Aquinas' scholasticism– and therefore imperfect: in a manner of speaking, the only thing which Exists is the First Cause without cause, i.e. God.

Plotinus relies on the concept of the eternal Hypostasis, from which everything else emanates, thereby eliminating the concept of creation *ex nihilo*. Christian philosophy, on the basis of being through participation (at the most basic level, through the concept of substance), allows God, freely, to create beings out of nothing, providing one more argument in favour of Revelation.²⁰ As St. Thomas Aquinas points out, creation out of nothing must be understood in two complementary senses, one philosophical and the other theological. In the philosophical sense, creation out of nothing means that God, independently of material causes, ordains that all things exist as radically different from Himself, although completely dependent upon his Causality. This, doubtless, allows any shadow of Plotinist pantheism to be avoided. The the-

¹⁹ *Timaeus*, 38a.

²⁰ In 1215, the 4th Lateran Council declared that God created everything that is, both material and spiritual, the world and the angels, out of nothing (*de nihil con-didit*) and that this act of creation occurred *ab initio temporis*.

ological sense of creation, based on faith, denies nothing, of the philosophical sense. It merely adds the fact that the created universe has a beginning in time. This theological sense is not a philosophical fact, since it is only known through revelation. In fact, there is no necessity for the created world to have a temporal beginning, since God is completely free to create whenever he wishes. The genius of St. Thomas Aquinas lies in his perfect distinction between what is concerned with faith –creation *ex nihilo*– and what is concerned with reason –existence of a first cause with freedom and initiative to create out of nothing, since everything which moves must necessarily be moved by something else–.²¹ Now, perhaps we should reduce the distance which one tends to perceive, with regard to the created world, between Plotinus and the Christian thinkers: while it is true that the *creatio ex nihilo* is a fact provided by faith, this can also be said, in spite of everything, philosophically, in the view of St. Thomas Aquinas, of the fact that it should be possible for God to create a universe which is at once eternal and created in time.²²

In this respect, Christian philosophy, aided by Revelation, goes a step further than Plato. He conceived the origin of the world as an initial act by God to reduce the movement of the irregular and the disordered, which already existed, to harmony. But what Plato fails to resolve, as Eckhart, for example, and even Hegel, for that matter, also fail to resolve, is that whatever moves must be moved by someone, a difficulty which Aristotle had overcome with the definition of the unmoved First Mover. In Plato, chaos was not originated by God. This seems to be his opinion and obviously suggests the hypothesis of the existence of some other creative agent, either blind or malevolent,²³ a problem dealt with in Christian Revelation by the fact, based on faith, of *creatio ex nihilo*.

St. Augustine strengthens the idea creation out of nothing. He states that when we say that God created things out of nothing, we are referring to the fact that there was no pre-existing material before He created it,²⁴ thus directly opposing the Platonic propo-

²¹ Cf. CARROLL, W.E. "S. Tommaso, Aristotele, e la Creazione", *Annales Theologici*, Vol. 8, fasc. 2, 1994, p. 369-370.

²² Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

²³ INGE, W. R., *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, vol. I, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, (1929), 1968, p. 144.

²⁴ Cf. *Ad Orosium*, 1-2 and *De Div. Quaest.*, 83. Cited in INGE, I, p. 145.

sition of a Demiurge ordering an already produced world.

In spite of everything, there is reason to suspect that there are various fundamental differences between Plotinus' metaphysics and creationist metaphysics, such as in the case of St. Thomas Aquinas. Perhaps the main reason for such a suspicion is that Plotinus is not a bona fide proponent of Parmenides' legacy, which refutes the axiom that nothing cannot give rise to nothing. The crux of the Thomist philosophical notion of creation is the causal dependency of being: *Deus est causa universalis totius esse*, he states. The effect of God's causal activity itself is constitution of the being of all things.²⁵ And here, Aquinas rather resembles the Parmenides from whom Plotinus is distancing himself. But neither are Plotinus and St. Thomas Aquinas so far apart: when the Christian God creates, He causes the (radical) Being of things; on the other hand, Plotinus' One unfolds its multiplicity, causing "existence".

The concept of Evil is fundamental to understanding the relationship between creation with freedom out of nothing and the third and last question which I wish to examine in this essay. Is man free? The answer seems clear-cut: if Plotinus' Hypostasis, the One, created out of necessity, and if the Christian God created *freely*, then one would have to conclude that, in Plotinus' view, man acts *out of necessity*, and in the view of Christian philosophy, he enjoys the use of free will.

In this treatise on human freedom, St. Augustine raises an apparently disturbing question: On the basis of my understanding of the previous book, it is obvious that we enjoy the use of free will and that, furthermore, it is the sole source of our sins. In St. Augustine's view, not only is freedom not demonstrated –it is obvious, self-evident– but it is also the source of evil: sin. He agrees with Plotinus on the formulation of evil as non-being: "evil cannot be included in what really exists or in what is beyond existence; for these are good. So it remains that if evil exists, it must be among non-existent things, as a sort of form of non-existence, and pertain to one of the things that are mingled with non-being or somehow share in non-being". Now, although there is the same formulation of what evil is (both St. Augustine and Plotinus are Neoplatonists), the concept is different. In Plotinus, evil is found in the sensible: 'The whole world of sense is non-existent in this way, and also all sense-experience and whatever is posterior or

²⁵ Cf. GERSON, I. I. P., *Plotinus*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 27-32.

incidental to this, or its principle, or one of the elements which go to make up the whole which is of this non-existent kind. At this point one might be able to arrive at some conception of evil as a kind of unmeasuredness in relation to measure, and unboundedness in relation to limit, and formlessness in relation to formative principle, and perpetual neediness in relation to what is self-sufficient; always undefined, nowhere stable, subject to every sort of influence, insatiate, complete poverty."²⁶

Underlying, this doctrine is a concept of freedom, conceived of as a liberation from corporeality,²⁷ rather than as choice between Good and Evil. Providence is thus a sort of destiny, fatal in the case of the evil and optimum in the case of the good. The good have been able to liberate themselves from the material; the evil have remained tied to it. For his part, St. Augustine attacks this concept of providence: "Without any doubt, it is by divine providence that human kingdoms are set up. If any one ascribes them to "fate" because he uses that term for the will or power of God, let him maintain his conviction but correct his language."²⁸

The fundamental difference between human freedom in Plotinus and in St. Augustine is that, quite simply, in St. Augustine's view, this Freedom is the Efficient Cause of human actions.²⁹ Human actions are caused by the agent and this is the source of freedom, whether in accordance or not with the end "provided" by the Creator for His free creature. This is where sin and virtue take on their fullest sense, as an adaptation to the end of nature itself. In Plotinus, on the other hand, freedom is not in fact freedom, since, rather than being the efficient cause of actions, it is the final Cause; it is an end in itself which attracts human actions in a coercive manner; it is a progressive dissociation from the Material, "climbing" Material hypostases to the Soul, from the Soul to Intelligence and from Intelligence to the One-Good: this is Plotinus' freedom.³⁰ Through the definition of

²⁶ *En.*, I, 8, 3, 10-15. Plotinus' texts on the concept of Evil are quite numerous: *En.*, I, 8, 4, 1-5; I, 2, 4, 13; I, 8, 7; III, 2, 7, 1-12, etc.

²⁷ Cf. SALMONA, B. *La libertà in Plotino*. Milan: Marzorati, 1967, p. 116.

²⁸ *City of God*, V, 1. In: *Saint Augustine the City of God against the Pagans in seven volumes*. English Translation by William M. Green. Cambridge-Massachusetts-London: Harvard University Press-William Heinemann Ltd., 1978. Hereafter *City*.

²⁹ Cf. INGE, W. R. *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, Vol. II. Connecticut: Greenwood Press (1929), 1968, p. 186.

³⁰ "Soul, surely, is another principle which we must bring into reality -not only the Soul of the All but also the individual soul along with it as a principle of no small importance; with this we must weave all things together, which does not itself

the human soul in relation to its freedom, Plotinus arrives at a serious confusion between Providence and destiny applied to man's individual freedom.

But in Christian thought, how is human freedom to be made compatible with divine Providence? This is surely the key question on subject of the nature of freedom raised by St. Augustine. He himself answers: "All powers are derived from him, though the wills of all men are not ruled by him."³¹ In his view, the existence of a Provident God is crystal clear: "For it is a conspicuous act of madness both to agree that God exists and to deny his foreknowledge of the future"³². "We Christians declare both that God knows all things before they happen, and that it is by our own free will that we act, whenever we feel and know that a thing is done by us of our own volition. (...) Moreover, even if there is in God's mind a definite pattern of causation, it does not follow that nothing is left to the free choice of our will. For in fact, our wills also are included in the pattern of causation certainly known to God and embraced in his foreknowledge. For the wills of men are among the causes of the deeds of men, and so he who foresaw the causes of all things cannot have been ignorant of our wills among those causes, since he foresaw that these wills are the causes of our deeds".³³

To conclude this brief essay and after lengthy reflection on the texts cited, I hope to have shown that Plotinus is, deep down, Christian and that St. Augustine, also deep down, is a Plotinist. Plotinus takes as his point of departure *Timaeus*, a profoundly classical cosmogony. St. Augustine takes as his point of departure Genesis, another cosmogony, which, in its historicity, is the basis, as revealed truth, of so many aspects of Christian faith. Both Plotinus and St. Augustine are Neoplatonists. Both are seeking the same end when they discuss the concepts of creation and freedom: to know more about Being, and about the Soul, in order to better understand the link between them, to arrive in the best way pos-

come, like other things, from seeds but is a cause which initiates activity. Now when the soul is without body it is in absolute control of itself and free, and ways in control, as it forms part of an order with other things. Chances direct, for the most part, all the things round it, among which it has fallen when it comes to this middle point, so that it does some things because of these, but sometimes it masters them itself and leads them where it wishes. The better soul has power over more, the worse over less." *En.*, III1, 8, 5-10.

³¹ *City*, V, 8.

³² *Ibid.*, V, 9, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, V, 9, 3.

sible, at a mysticism, a union with God. Plotinus falls into a sort of spiritualist pantheism as a result of confusing in the One, being and existence, the Efficient Cause with the Final Cause, errors which he probably inherited from Plato. But they perhaps meet at the end of the way, except that Plotinus remains at the level of Theosophy, whereas St. Augustine attains Theology. Plotinus' road leads him to ethics, and St. Augustine's leads him to morality. Along the way, Christian philosophy is enriched by elements of classical culture and the latter opens the way to a new cultural revolution: the Middle Ages.

Abstract

This article is a text presented at Leeds University during the International Congress on Medieval Philosophy. The author focuses his analysis on the neoplatonic philosophy and tries to observe the various hermeneutics of this trend of thought in Patristics and at the beginning of the Middle Ages.