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On Matter: Schelling's Anti-Platonic Reading of the *Timaeus*

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This essay¹ contrasts the so-called emanationism of Neoplatonism, particularly Proclus's, with the naturephilosophy² of F.W.J. Schelling. The contention is that Schelling's thought is Neo-Platonist because thoroughly Platonist (albeit not at all Platonic, that is, dualistic), except that his project stands Neoplatonism on its head by inverting the order of procession. Schelling agrees with Neoplatonism that matter is the lowest and most inferior of the hypostases—not even constituting a proper hypostasis itself, because incapable of self-reversion—but he differs in viewing matter as cosmologically prior to intellect, soul, the demiurge and so forth. The question concerns not the hierarchical but the ontological ordering of matter. For Schelling, procession is not a descent into being (and eventually non-being) from a one beyond being, but an elevation (*Steigerung*) and intensification of being, which precludes the need for return (ἐπιστροφή [*epistrophē*]). This is the trademark of Schelling's late distinction between positive and negative philosophy. Positive philosophy is progressive, beginning with the inferior as the most original in order to ascend

1 This article is a slightly revised and shortened version of chapter three of my *The Contingency of Necessity: Reason and God as Matters of Fact* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

2 In *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2008) Ian Hamilton Grant speaks of Schelling not as a practitioner of the philosophy of nature, but as a naturephilosopher. *Naturphilosophie* does not merely take nature as its object of study as if it were to be ordered amongst the philosophy of the political, the philosophy of gender, the philosophy of religion and so forth, but naturephilosophy, for Schelling, indicates the nature of philosophy as such, that is, philosophy in its universality before it has been delimited to a specific domain of objects. Naturephilosophy does not signify one sub-branch of philosophy amongst others, but the implication is that only naturephilosophy can be true philosophy.

to the superior through a consequent intensification of being, while negative philosophy is regressive, beginning with the inferior only as something already derived in order regressively to retrace its descent back up to the superior one. Being, for Schelling, is not constituted as an eternal circle but the irretrievable temporality of the line, because *no* level of reality reverts upon itself without remainder. In order to elucidate how Schelling's inversion of Neoplatonism forged his later distinction between positive and negative philosophy this essay begins with his reading of the role of "matter"³ in Plato's *Timaeus* and then offers an experimental reading of Proclus's *Elements of Theology*.

Schelling's Early Reading of the *Timaeus*

Schelling's early essay on the *Timaeus* was published in 1795 at the age of nineteen, but this does not mean that it was uninfluential for his mature thought. This precocious teenager here translates the language of the intelligible/determinate and the sensible/indeterminate in the *Timaeus* into the Kantian language of the form of the understanding and the matter of sensibility only to read the *Timaeus* against transcendental philosophy in a way prescient of his later thought.⁴ A few authors have already shown how Schelling's early reading of the *Timaeus* is indispensable for the relation between ground (*Grund*) and existence (*Existenz*), unprethinkable matter and intelligible form, in the 1809 *Freiheitsschrift* and beyond.⁵ Werner Beierwaltes, for example, has argued that

3 The philosophical sense of ὕλη [*hylē*] (matter) is not actually discussed in the *Timaeus*. Rather one finds a discussion of ὑποδοχή [*hypodochē*] (receptacle), χώρα [*chōra*] (Space) and ἀπειρον [*ápeiron*] (the indefinite). Schelling, following the precedent of a number of Neo-Platonists in reading Plato and Aristotle as complementary rather than as antithetical, simply speaks of all these under the common heading of "matter." See also John Sallis, "Secluded Nature: The Point of Schelling's Reinscription of the *Timaeus*," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 8 (1999): 71-85, who states, "Schelling is referring to what Plato—or rather, Timaeus—calls, among its many names, ὑποδοχή [*hypodochē*] (receptacle) and χώρα [*chōra*] ... the nurse (τιθήνη) [*tithēnē*] of generation" Sallis, "Secluded," 75. Schelling also speaks of this as μήτηρ [*mētēr*] (mother), which Schelling relates to the Latin *mater* and *materia*. "*Mater* and *materia* are in principle the same word [*Mater und materia sind im Grunde nur ein Wort*]." SW I/2: 193. All translations of this work are my own.

4 Sallis notes the novelty of this translation of the *Timaeus* into Kantian terminology, commenting that "Schelling's re-inscription of the *Timaeus* in the text of modern philosophy, his re-inscription of the dialogue into a text that while belonging to modern philosophy also renders it radically questionable, perhaps for the first time" Sallis, "Secluded," 71. "For what Schelling rewrites within the text of modern philosophy is a discourse on nature, on nature in its capacity to withdraw, on secluded nature" Sallis, "Secluded," 73 This withdrawn or secluded nature, that is, that nature which does not present itself empirically because it is the presupposition of all presentation, is, of course, the receptacle, which Schelling customarily refers to simply as "matter."

5 In addition to Beierwaltes (quoted in the text), concerning the influence of Schelling's early reading of the *Timaeus* on his later philosophical development, one should again note Sallis: "Schelling inserts [in the *Freiheitsschrift*] a decisive *indication referring this entire development* back

in the *Timaeus Essay* Schelling wanted to show that physics, that is, matter, generates the ideal, that is, the transcendental, writing that (especially in Schelling's later thought) "transcendental philosophy and naturephilosophy [*Naturphilosophie*] basically represent *one* science."⁶ Schelling reads Plato as a physicist or naturephilosopher who places matter, that is, the unruly receptacle or the *χώρα* [*chōra*], as prior to order and form, namely, prior to the intelligible and transcendental.

Schelling notes, in accord with the *Timaeus* itself, that ...

... the elements, insofar as they are *visible*, are to be wholly differentiated from the matter in which they are grounded and which as such never becomes visible, and that they are not properly *matter* itself, but rather *forms, determinations* of matter, which matter obtains externally.⁷

This begs the question concerning what the elements were prior to becoming visible by means of "forms" or "determinations" externally imprinted on matter. What stands outside of question for Schelling, at any rate, is that "matter," so-called, is something for itself, that is, apart from its relation to that which "externally" imprints form and determination upon it; matter is not reducible to its empirical products. Schelling names this being-in-itself of matter "ἀόριστον τί [*aóriston tí*],"⁸ which he later terms, in a more Pythagorean fashion, simply "*Dyas*" and "the ambivalent Nature (*natura anceps*)" (SW II/2: 142).⁹ Matter may be considered in two distinct ways, as an empirical substrate/ὕποκειμενον [*hypokeímenon*] or as potency/δύναμις [*dynamis*].¹⁰ As Plato himself writes in the *Sophist*, "I hold that the definition of being is simply power [δύναμις/

to the *Timaeus* and broaching in effect a re-inscription. The originary longing, says Schelling, is to be represented as a moving "like an undulating, surging sea, similar to Plato's matter" ... the darkness from which understanding is born, that is, the secluded ground, that is, *die anfängliche Natur*, is similar to Plato's matter.... Schelling's discourse on the unruly ground, on secluded nature, may thus be taken—at least in certain decisive moments—as re-inscribing the Timaeian discourse on the receptacle." Sallis, "Secluded," 74-5.

6 Werner Beierwaltes, "The Legacy of Neoplatonism in F.W.J. Schelling's Thought," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 10(4) (2002): 393-428, here 400. The translation was slightly revised, altering "the philosophy of nature" into "naturephilosophy."

7 F.W.J. Schelling, "Timaeus," *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 12(2) (2008): 205-248, here 229.

8 Schelling, "Timaeus," 229. It will be seen that this cannot be equated with Aristotle's *χωριστόν* [*chōriston*] insofar as Aristotle denies that matter has being-in-itself. He only regards matter as that of which predication can occur.

9 "*Die zweideutige Natur (natura anceps)*," Schelling, SW II/2: 142.

10 Again, as much as this reading is already influenced by Aristotle insofar as the word "matter" is used at all and that in relation to substrate and potency, it will be seen that Aristotle likely only recognizes matter in the sense of a *logical* substrate, that is, the mere potency to receive predication. Matter loses, in this way, its ontological or substantial character in Aristotle. It is de-substantialized, whereas it retains its substantiality in Plato.

dynamis].”¹¹ Dynamically considered, that is, in terms of power/potency, matter only has being as ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*]. Schelling proclaims, in opposition to canonical readings of Neoplatonism, that for Plato matter, thought as ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*], that is, as δύναμις [*dynamis*], is not the last emanation from the one, but it is, despite its lack of self-sufficiency or inability to revert upon itself, the *first* procession from the one (albeit still the lowest in rank) insofar as it is to become the substance of the cosmos. Said differently, insofar as everything can be predicated only of substance, as Aristotle suggests, so the substance of the world is nothing but ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*]; all that exists is ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] or, rather, quantitative determinations of ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*]. Schelling remarks that “all reality is ἄπειρον τι [*ápeiron ti*].” Everything emerges “from out of the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] and, according to its form, from out of the πέρας [*péras*].”¹² Both of these, in turn, the unlimited and the limited or the indeterminate and the determinate, are bound together by the activity of the demiurge.¹³

Schelling does not read Plato according to the canon that suggests that because intelligible form, that is, the definite and ruly, is superior to matter it is also ontologically prior to matter, that is, the indefinite and unruly. This would be as if an attribute could bring about its own substance, that of which it is predicated. Schelling rather states that the demiurge “saw these [form (πέρας) [*péras*] and matter (ἄπειρον) [*ápeiron*]] (regularity and unruliness) as two things constantly striving against one another” and thus concludes that “at this point the pre-existing original matter of the world is presupposed.”¹⁴ Thought in terms of Neoplatonist procession, matter, as the indefinite and unruly, does not stand at the end as the final emanation. Matter is only last in terms of superiority, but it is ontologically originary, just as or more originary than rule, order and form.

Beierwaltes explicates that, in his translation of Plato into Kantian

11 Plato, *Sophist*, 247e4.

12 Schelling, “Timaeus,” 232.

13 Schelling thus identifies the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] with quality and the πέρας [*péras*] with quantity. He writes, with reference to the *Philebus*, that “Plato maintains namely that the world arose through the combining of the elements, insofar as these are ἄπειρα [*ápeira*] ... they only stand under the category of quality” Schelling, “Timaeus,” 223, and “God (the world architect) presented *everything* in the world as *quality* (reality) determined through quantity” Schelling, “Timaeus,” 232. Quality or the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] is thus only “presented,” says Schelling, and not cosmically created. Quality is not created but it is presupposed insofar as everything already “stands under the category of quality.” Similarly, in the *Freiheitsschrift* of 1809, Schelling writes “nowhere does it appear as if order and form would be original, but as if something primordially unruly would have been brought to order [*nirgends scheint es, als wären Ordnung und Form das Ursprüngliche, sondern als wäre ein anfängliche Regellooses zur Ordnung gebracht worden*].” SW I/7: 359. Translations of this work are my own.

14 Schelling, “Timaeus,” 209. Note also: “Plato assumed, after all, a pre-existing matter, but one that had absolutely no determinate empirical form.” Schelling, “Timaeus,” 213. Note 51b-52a of the *Timaeus* itself for Plato’s word here on these two kinds. Only the elements—earth, air, water, fire—have a determinate form. If these, as something in some sense created, are to be called matter, then that pre-existent matter is, as it were, the matter of matter, that is, the substantiality of the elements.

terms, “Schelling translates πέρας-ἄπειρον [*péras-ápeiron*] with ‘*Grenze und Uneingeschränktes*’ (limit and unrestricted) and with ‘*Regelhaftigkeit und Regellosigkeit*’ (regularity and irregularity)”¹⁵ or, better, as the ruly/intelligible and the unruly/unintelligible. Their relation is such that the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*]/indefinite/unruly/irregular is the *substantiality* of πέρας [*péras*]/limit/ruliness/regularity, a pre-existence of which the latter is merely attributed or predicated. The former is the presupposed, ungenerated *subjectum*. Schelling here anticipates a possible criticism of his reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*. What if, as a good Neoplatonist would always be quick to point out, ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] and πέρας [*péras*] are co-originary and mutually determinative; for, in Neoplatonist thought procession from the one, at least unto the point of the sensible reality of the cosmos and the concomitant emergence of time/becoming, is not to be thought as a temporal succession, but as eternal procession. Matter, for example, would not be there *before* intellect, but they are both eternal processions from the one. To this, Schelling offers the following rebuke:

... that the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] first emerges through the communication of the πέρας [*péras*]. Fine! If what is at issue here is *empirical* existence, then in that case both are only present in their being bound together. However, Plato speaks of ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] to the extent that it is *separated from* πέρας [*péras*] [emphasis added] and says ... that the imitations of that which is most beautiful and most glorious, that is, *the ideas*, *must also be found in the* ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] *as such* [emphasis added].¹⁶

Plato, Schelling decries, speaks of ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*], that is, matter, in a way that Aristotle could never permit, namely, as separate from form and determination, that is, as χωριστόν [*chōriston*]. Likely, most Neoplatonists, as most scholars readily admit, are not actually thoroughbred Platonists, but heavily influenced by Aristotle’s reading of Plato. At any rate, says Schelling, the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*], the matter of matter, cannot be consequent, not even eternally consequent, from the Ideas, that is, the realm of pure intellect, because indefinite matter subsists even there. This too is something most Neoplatonists would readily admit, though perhaps not in these terms.¹⁷ More scandalous, however, is that Schelling regards the matter of matter, that is, what is also called χώρα [*chōra*], as an idea itself. Or, to repeat, “The ideas must also be found in the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] as such.”

15 Werner Beierwaltes, “Plato’s *Timaeus* in German Idealism,” in Gretchen J. Reydams-Schils, ed., *Plato’s Timaeus as Cultural Icon*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 267-289, here 272.

16 Schelling, “*Timaeus*,” 236.

17 See sections four and five of Plotinus’s Second Ennead as a prime example of a discussion of intelligible matter.

Aside from Kant, the other largest influence on Schelling's early reading of the *Timaeus* is his reading of the *Philebus*, in which one finds a discussion of all four kinds (γένη [genē]). Of this connection Iain Hamilton Grant writes,

The Platonic gene: it is a phase space of the Idea in unlimited not-being, that is, the always-becoming, in which the Idea acts as the limit-attractor towards which becoming never ceases to become, the *auto* or absolute approximated but never realized in the generated particular.¹⁸

The ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*], as one of Plato's kinds, contains the idea; the idea exists within this kind as the attracted limit for the "always-becoming." The ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*], in turn, is the attractor of limit, of πέρας [*péras*]. As one of the causes of becoming, but yet not something that has itself become, the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] itself can be called an Idea or, better, a generator/attractor of the Idea, the determinate.¹⁹ Schelling writes of these kinds, and particularly of that dark Idea or that dark kind, ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*], generically called matter because it acts as the substrate/substance of things,

One thus sees clearly the extent to which Plato is speaking of intelligible archetypes of every individual object, namely, not insofar as he believed that every individual object has its particular *individual* archetype, but rather insofar as each individual object stands under the universal form of all existence.²⁰

In this fascinating passage, Schelling explicitly associates the indefinite kind, dark and unruly matter, despite its indefiniteness or "materiality," as an "intelligible archetype," normally termed idea. In what sense, then, the unruly and indeterminate is intelligible is clear. It is intelligible because it is a limit-attractor; it attracts definiteness and intelligibility to itself. It is to be called an archetype because it is a "universal form of all existence." Nothing exists that is not ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*]; the indefinite itself constitutes the substantiality of all that is. In this context Sallis writes, "Schelling insistently reinscribes its [the receptacle's] name as *substance*, *substratum*, and especially *matter*."²¹ If something like this can be called an idea even though it can never serve as an

18 Grant, *Philosophies*, 45.

19 Schelling explicitly refers to ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] and πέρας [*péras*] as kinds, remarking that the one kind is operative "by means of the activity of the understanding" and "the other which without understanding and orderliness acts according to chance (ὅσαι μονωθεῖσαι φρονήσεως τὸ τυχὸν ἄτακτον ἐκάστοτε ἐξεργάζονται [*hòsai monōtheisai phroneseōs tò tychòn átakton hekástote exergázontai*] [on the other side those which, bereft of prudence, produce on each occasion a disordered chance effect] (46e5))." Schelling, "Timaeus," 224.

20 Schelling, "Timaeus," 238.

21 Sallis, "Secluded," 84.

archetype for any *particular* individual whatsoever, then what does this mean for the so-called theory of participation and the corresponding doctrine of the ideas? Schelling takes Plato to mean that there are, in fact, only four ideas, that is, the four kinds—γέννη [*genē*]²²—which alone are universal forms operative in all existence and which are, accordingly, not models for participatory copies but genes, that is, generators, of all reality, including intelligible reality.²² Matter or ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*], as the first of the kinds, that peculiar kind which must always be presupposed as that which attracts limit, order and intelligibility to itself, proceeds from no prior hypostasis. It is assumed as one of the four generators for *all* levels of reality. Grant is therefore able to state, “Whatever therefore *appears* or *bodies forth* in nature is necessarily not an image of its original.”²³ Neither Plato nor Schelling divorces model and copies, form and matter. The two-world theory is wrong because matter is not antithetical to the intelligible; it is an attractor of intelligible form. Proclus too agrees that matter is not antithetical to the higher intelligible levels of reality and even the one itself, sarcastically asking, “The unlimitedness and measurelessness of matter must consist of the need for measure and limit. But how could the need for limit and measure be the contrary of limit and measure?”²⁴

The indefinite or unlimited, as one of the four kinds, is an archetype and it is intelligible, that is, it contains the idea within itself—recall that “the ideas must also be found in the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] as such”²⁵—insofar as ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*] attracts πέρας [*péras*] to itself. It is the presupposition of limit and not vice versa just as matter is the presupposition of intelligibility. Limit, however, does not act upon the unlimited as something inert (unlike the matter of the

22 Schelling writes that “matter was *thus* first determined that the elements became visible and, to the extent that the elements emerged through the intelligible forms or, expressed otherwise, to the extent that they are imitations, copies of the intelligible form, they *present* [emphasis added] the intelligible form” Schelling, “Timaeus,” 237. What can “present” mean if not a manifesting or making real for the first time? This is a very strange sort of “imitation” and “copying” at play here, an imitation that is but the manifestation of the original, of the thing itself, in its emergence and first determination.

23 Grant, *Philosophies*, 55. Grant is, therefore, also able to write that “Natural history does not have objects as its field of study, but rather kinds, *gene*”—what will eventually become Schelling’s potencies—“and their becomings, their *genneta* or *gignomena*” Grant, *Philosophies*, 53. Also, “History, according to Platonism, is necessarily *natural* insofar as nature is not *what* is, but is the ‘always becoming’ (*Tim.* 27e-28a)” Grant, *Philosophies*, 54. The idea that reality is fundamentally historical rather than merely logical or eternally intelligible will become a theme later, as this constitutes the division between positive and negative philosophy in Schelling’s later thought. Positive philosophy is historical while negative philosophy is merely logical and eternal, denying any becoming to the order of intelligibility.

24 Proclus, *On the Existence of Evil*, trans. Jan Opsomer & Carlos Steel, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 32, 16-18. Proclus continues by questioning, “How can that which is in need of the good still be evil?” Proclus, “Evil,” 32, 18-19 For Proclus, this is a question concerning the compatibility of matter and the one or matter and evil. As will be seen below, Proclus’s position on this issue and the question concerning the ontological status of matter in general is closer to Schelling than is Plotinus’s.

25 Schelling, “Timaeus,” 236.

modern period, which is utterly inert because completely de-potentiated as nothing more than the merely geometric matrix of extension). As Schelling comments:

Now, insofar as the *form* that god imparted to the world refers only to the form of the movement of the world, the world must also have had its own *original* principle of motion, independently of god, which, as a principle that inheres in matter, contradicts all regularity and lawfulness, and is first brought within the bounds of lawfulness through the form (πέρας [*péras*]) that the divine understanding gave to it.²⁶

The indefinite, in Schelling, is to be equated with the unruly, and so it is neither an inert substrate nor even a pre-partitioned grid. It is irregular motion, but motion all the same. Form, that is, the definite and intelligible, is static, but matter is δύναμις [*dynamis*], a dynamism. “The understanding (namely, the form of understanding) came to *dominate* over *blind* necessity”—the not yet intelligible motion of the apeiratic—“precisely because the pure form of the understanding is unchangeable and cannot take its direction from matter, but rather, on the contrary, matter makes itself subservient.”²⁷ Putting aside the Kantian rhetoric—which is quite obstructive in this passage—one can see that matter, which has a principle of motion within itself, only makes itself subservient to form by coming to a standstill for thought. This is how it attracts limit to itself; this is how it becomes intelligible. The domain of becoming comes to be by arresting rather than by initiating movement. The motion of becoming/time is, as it were, already provided through the substantiality or matter of that which becomes. It was rather stability that had to be added in order for becoming/time to come to be. The originary motion, that which is always presupposed, is the unceasing motion of matter itself as the substrate and attractor of the formal and intelligible. Schelling does, however, at least reaffirm the Neoplatonist stance that intelligibility is *superior* to materiality, even if he rejects that intelligibility is the more original. In so doing he also shatters any notion of matter as the Aristotelian idea of a merely *logical* substrate, which bears no powers, no δύναμις [*dynamis*], except the passive potency of receptivity to predication.

A Break with Neoplatonism?

Under Schelling’s (Kantian) interpretation, Plato provides a physics of the transcendental; he provides the transcendental with its substance. There

²⁶ Schelling, “Timaeus,” 210.

²⁷ Schelling, “Timaeus,” 225.

is a materiality even of the formal. Even the Neoplatonists speak of an intelligible matter, but I would like to raise the possibility that when Plotinus, for example, thinks of matter as mere non-being and hence mere privation, that his Platonist side has become dominated by Aristotle. In this vein, Grant has convincingly argued that Aristotle's philosophy brought about for later Antiquity a "desubstantialization of *ousia*."²⁸ He argues that in Aristotle "matter loses all substantial existence" by means of "its reduction to logic, to a purely extensional *logos* Aristotelian metaphysics is that science concerned with substance not insofar as this is particular, sensible or material, but insofar as it is a *predicable essence*, that is, only insofar as it is the subject or *hypokeimenon* supporting a *logos*."²⁹ For this reason Aristotelian matter, which thought in itself is unlimited, cannot exist apart from a limiting form. Matter, in Aristotle, does not signify any sort of ontological or cosmological reality, that is, a substantial reality, but only an indeterminate X as the logical subject of predication. Consequently, one finds Aristotle recoiling at the idea of attributing any sort of substantiality, that is, ability to exist apart as *χωριστόν* [*chōriston*], to matter in the *Metaphysics*. Immediately after seemingly according matter some substantiality, he recants: "But this is impossible; for it is accepted that separability and individuality belong especially to substance. Hence it would seem that the form and the combination of form and matter are more truly substance than matter is."³⁰ Ironically, it may be that Plato's insistence, at least upon the readings of Schelling and Grant, that matter can, in fact, exist apart is the very thing that saves Plato from a two-world dualism because, by this means, Plato is able to retain an ontological rather than merely logical status of matter. This matter is neither a logical nor inert substrate, but it bears a principle of (chaotic) motion within itself, which means that it is a *principle*. As Grant remarks: "Platonic physics concerns the emergence of order from disorderly and unceasing motion, which creates a post-Aristotelian conception of Platonism: no longer a formal or moralizing two-worlds metaphysics, but a one-world physics."³¹ Should one find this narrative plausible, then one cannot exclude that Neoplatonism, arguably as influenced by Aristotle as Plato, has in part developed under Aristotle's misrepresentation of the role of matter, so-called, in Plato. In this vein one finds Schelling lamenting that Plotinus, though a "profound spirit, had already given up the Platonic pre-existence of a lawless entity striving against order, and adopted a certain viewpoint according to which it is assumed that all has begun from the most pure and perfect."³² One wonders whether Neoplatonism, in relegating matter to the most inferior, has also removed its ontological status as something pre-existent and thereby fashioned it as the most derivative, as last in the procession from the one

²⁸ Grant, *Philosophies*, 35.

²⁹ Grant, *Philosophies*, 34.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1029a27-30.

³¹ Grant, *Philosophies*, 41.

³² Beierwaltes, "Legacy," 414.

rather than first. To approach this question one must turn to Proclus and not Plotinus; for, Proclus levels a criticism against Plotinus's account of matter and thereby attempts to restore, at least somewhat, the dignity of matter. Matter, for Proclus, is not evil and so, perhaps, it is also not degraded to nothing more than the last station on the descent from the one.

There are many reasons to suggest that Proclus recognized, the one aside, that matter is pre-existent to every hypostasis. He details in his own commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* and in obvious opposition to the more Aristotelian Porphyry and strikingly even Iamblichus, with whom he shares more affinities, that "those around [those who side with] Porphyry and Iamblichus castigate this position on the grounds that it puts the disordered before the ordered, the incomplete before the complete and the unintelligent before the intelligent in the universe."³³ That one does not find the term "matter" in this passage has to do with the fact that Proclus is much more careful than Schelling to hold matter as such, that is, as something elemental, as a stuff and substrate, apart from the "matter of matter," that is, the substantiality of the substrate as the indefinite or unlimited, the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*].³⁴ This legitimate refusal to equate the two can be seen in the following lengthy passage of Proclus:

[Plato] placed first unlimitedness, the [unlimitedness] which is prior to the mixed, at the summit of the intelligibles and extends its irradiation from that point (*ekeithen*) all the way to the lowest [reaches of being]. And so, according to [Plato], matter proceeds both from the one and from the unlimitedness which is prior to one being, and, if you wish, inasmuch as it is potential being, from one being too.... And [it is] devoid of form, on which account [it is] these prior to the forms and their manifestation.... For just as Plato derived (*paragein*) two causes, limit and unlimitedness, from the one, so also did the theologian bring aether and chaos into existence from time, aether as the cause of limit wherever it is found, and chaos [as the cause] of unlimitedness. And from these two principles he generates both the divine and the visible orders.³⁵

First, Proclus situates the unlimited at the "summit" of the intelligibles and traces its influence from there down to the lower, more derivative levels of reality.

³³ Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus, Volume II*, trans. David Runia & Michael Share, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 382, 14-17.

³⁴ Schelling writes, "the *matter of the world* ... is this constituted out of the elements...? That which is continually appearing in various forms but which appears usually as fire is not *fire* but rather always only something *fire-like*, nor is it water, but always only something *water-like*. Thus, neither can we give a *determinate* name.... The elements *flee from* every determinate designation" Schelling, "Timaeus," 226.

³⁵ Proclus, *Commentary*, 385.10-14, 385:16-22.

Accordingly, the unlimited cannot itself be the lowest procession, because its effect takes hold already at the level of intelligible reality and extends its influence from there down. Second, matter, here called by name explicitly and not just in terms of the unlimited, “proceeds from the one;” matter is not the last in the procession from the one, but it is an immediate procession from the one that does not first pass through the intelligible, soul and so forth. Third, matter proceeds “from the unlimitedness which is prior to one Being ... and from one Being too.” Here one sees how Proclus is careful to distinguish matter proper from its own substantiality, that is, that from which it has proceeded, namely, unlimitedness, the ἄπειρον [*ápeiron*]. Moreover, he even tantalizingly suggests that this matter of matter, unlimitedness, is even prior to one Being, though he is careful to add that it proceeds from one Being too. What is not up for debate is that unlimitedness (and limit) is an immediate procession from the one and not a later, mediated procession. It could not be otherwise for it to retain its status as an originary kind. For, these kinds are generators of intelligible forms and here Proclus too asserts that the unlimited is both “prior to the forms and their manifestation.” It is thus not just a condition of the appearance or manifestation of forms in the sensible cosmos, but it is prior to forms as such. Cosmologically considered, limit and unlimitedness are to be equated with “aether and chaos” or, as this essay might suggest, the elemental substrate and its apeiratic substantiality. As a final word, Proclus notes that from these two kinds “both the divine and the visible orders” are generated.

In addition to the lengthy passage just cited one also finds Proclus asserting that the Demiurge only “took over” matter,³⁶ minimally ascribing to matter a pre-existence with regards to the sensible cosmos as such, and that “the paradigm *takes over* matter from the good and informs it—for the forms *qua* forms are offspring of the paradigm—and the demiurgic [cause], receiving the forms from the paradigm, regulates (*diakosmein*) them by means of numbers and imposes order upon them by means of proportions (*logoi*).”³⁷ Matter is thus explicitly stated to be pre-existent to the forms and affirmed to be a procession ensuing immediately from the good, itself the presupposition of all lower levels of reality, where lower is here understood not in terms of inferiority but in terms of ontological ordering.

Despite the evidence garnered in these passages, one likely still feels compelled to follow the more canonical reading of Proclus which allows him to fit more neatly into the Neoplatonic corpus as a whole. Neoplatonist and Procline scholar Radek Chlup offers a decisive word here, informing his readers that “most ancient Platonists were convinced that the image [of a primordial disorder] is not to be taken literally.”³⁸ According to the canon—and it is not the task here to rewrite the canon, but merely to make plausible an alternative

³⁶ Proclus, *Commentary*, 388.1-2.

³⁷ Proclus, *Commentary*, 388.5-9.

³⁸ Radek Chlup, *Proclus: An Introduction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 202, note 5.

reading—Proclus, though he has a more positive account of matter than Plotinus, only regards matter as a passive rather than active potency, an end and not a beginning—which is to say that matter is not a principle that has its own motion, however chaotic it may be, within itself. Matter may not be mere privation, as it was for Plotinus (and eventually also for St. Augustine) but, unlike in Schelling, it cannot positively begin anything. Perhaps Chlup is correct and one is to take very little in the Neoplatonists, who were so fond of allegorical interpretations, literally.³⁹ Proclus himself will often speak of these issues in almost mythical fashion or as if on a par with mere myth and allegory. He writes:

In giving existence to the discordant and unordered ahead of the production of the cosmos [Plato] is copying the theologians. For just as they introduce wars and uprisings of the Titans against the Olympians, so too does Plato assume two starting-points, namely the unorganized (*akosmos*) and that which produces organization (*kosmopoios*).⁴⁰

Whether his words are to be taken literally or figuratively, it should not be surprising that Proclus, arguably the most Platonist and least Aristotelian of the Neoplatonists, was the one to criticize the deflationary account of matter provided by Plotinus, at least not if one finds any merit to the thesis that the true follower of Plato will accord to matter a genuine ontological status instead of relegating it to the shadows of non-being as Aristotle's merely logical presupposition. Whether Proclus truly adopted matter or the unlimited as an unruly and, hence, ever-moving and actively dynamic (*δύναμις* [*dynamis*]) principle at the origin of things or whether he relegated it to a mere passive

³⁹ As an example of Neoplatonism's penchant for analogy and allegory Chlup writes: "Eastern Neoplatonists take a different course. In their metaphysical accounts they are able to speak of the one quite clearly and precisely, but at the same time they constantly stress that none of their statements actually capture the true one as such." Chlup, *Proclus*, 55. This is to be read against the many analogies of the one offered by Plotinus, who apparently believes himself actually to be hitting at the reality of the one as such by these means. Yet, Chlup also asserts: "Proclus postulates the 'henads' or 'gods' as the basic 'subunits' existing within the one." "The incomprehensible one turns out to be really just a tiny point on the top of the pyramid of all things in which everything else is subject to apprehension. Although the henads are unknowable themselves, we can know them safely through their effects." Chlup, *Proclus*, 61. If the henads can be known through their effects, then one is committed to a notion of univocal causing, which should not be surprising as this is a staple of participation—which affirms that there cannot be more being in the participated than in that in which it participates, hence that the participated cannot assert anything other than what it has found in that in which it participates. Yet, if causing is univocal and if the participated cannot express something otherwise than that in which it participates, then the participated *does* reveal something about the unparticipated or that in which the participated participates. Accordingly, it seems that some statements, even if they must be analogical rather than literal statements, should actually be able to divulge something about the unparticipated itself.

⁴⁰ Proclus, *Commentary*, 390, 28-32.

potency as the final procession emptied of all being cannot here be decided. The attempt here is simply to offer an experimental reading of Proclus's *Elements of Theology*, altering one of his presuppositions in accordance with Schelling's reading of the *Timaeus* in order to see what might follow as a consequence for the rest of the propositions of the *Elements of Theology*. Finally, it must be asked if this bastard reading corresponds to what we find in the later Schelling. Did Schelling, in fact, develop his later thought as an outgrowth of reading Plato's *Timaeus* in the nineteenth year of his life?

An Experimental Reading of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*

If matter is the most incomplete, imperfect, discordant and inferior—concerning which Schelling and the Neoplatonists alike are in perfect agreement—then should one assert that matter lies at the ultimate basis of things, so the complete, perfect, ordered and superior could only be consequent and not original. If one begins with matter as the only cosmological pre-existent and progresses toward the more perfect and ordered, then one is denying the Medieval doctrine that the effect cannot contain more being than the cause (and perhaps even the Ancient doctrine that like causes like insofar as order would be consequent upon a disorder which it is in no way like). This is precisely the proposition (#7) to be axiomatically denied in Proclus's *Elements of Theology*, which states, “*Every productive cause is superior to that which it produces.*”⁴¹ Any further alterations of propositions in this experimental reading will ensue as a result of this first amendment. It is to be seen, however, that a rejection of this proposition already entails a break with any metaphysics of participation considered as a doctrine that the participated cannot contain more being than and be superior to that in which it participates. In other words, by substituting Proclus's premise with a more Schellingian one, one will be led to regard the procession of being as a gradation (*Steigerung*) of higher and higher levels of superiority and not as a descent according to which being is gradually lost until one hits rock bottom in the non-being of utterly inferior and derivative matter.

Now, proposition 8 reads as a direct consequence of proposition 7. “*All that in any way participates the good is subordinate to the primal good which is nothing else but good.*”⁴² Proclus offers as an implication that “all appetite implies a lack of, and a severance from, the object craved.”⁴³ How is this not the exact implication that causes Plotinus to regard evil as a mere privation, arguably the presupposition at the heart of the vast majority of Western metaphysics? Desire/appetite is, in this way, thought completely in terms of lack, that is, apophatically rather than cataphatically. Desire or appetite has no being of

41 Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, trans. E.R. Dodds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), Prop. 7.

42 Proclus, *Elements*, Prop. 8.

43 Proclus, *Elements*, 11.

its own, but is only culled by the absent object, “the object craved.” Desire is a consequence of having departed from the good which can satisfy it, which begs Nietzsche’s (amongst others’) question: Why did the good ever leave itself? In response, this essay proposes that one reserve the term ‘good’ only for the one in its return or ἐπιστροφή [*epistrophē*]; for, only in return is the one desired as the *missing* object of desire. Procession, however, according to Neoplatonist thought, does not occur because of a missing or absent good, but instead on account of the effusiveness of the one (even if this effusiveness is still conceived in terms of apophatic theology as a negation of all inferior forms of being). Furthermore, if one reserves the term “good” for the one only as the object reverted to in ἐπιστροφή [*epistrophē*], then proposition 13 follows all the more tightly.

Proposition 13 reads: “*Every good tends to unify what participates it; and all unification is a good; and the good is identical with the one.*”⁴⁴ Procession is a departure from the one or, as it were, diffusion, whereas the unity of all things is only constituted through their reversion to the one. The one only exerts a unifying operation and is thus only the good proper in return or reversion, because “all unification is a good” and because “the good is identical with the one” insofar as it is unity-bestowing. Proclus comments:

For if it belongs to the good to conserve all that exists (and it is for no other reason that all things desire it); and if likewise that which conserves and holds together the being of each several thing is unity (since by unity each is maintained in being, but by dispersion displaced from existence): then the good, wherever it is present, makes the participant one, and holds its being together in virtue of this unification.⁴⁵

The good is only good insofar as it is one-making, that is, *limit-giving*. This means that the one is only to be called good in return, not as the first but as the *last*. For this reason, in fact, Aristotle’s god, which Proclus criticizes for its impotency to act as principle and begin any process, but only acting as *end* of movement, is to be called good, that is, precisely only insofar as it is an end and not an origin, a culmination and achievement of unity and not a generator of difference. Like Aristotle’s god, which is a perfectly self-enclosed circle that ensures that the object of desire is never absent, self-desiring desire, goodness is only intrinsic to that which can revert upon itself, that is, goodness is only in that which is self-sufficient. This, then, is why matter, for Plotinus, is at the end of the day still likely thought as a deficiency of goodness, a mere privation of the good, that last procession in which all goodness has finally been dissipated, which is to be seen in the fact that it is *essentially* discordant and

⁴⁴ Proclus, *Elements*, Prop. 13.

⁴⁵ Proclus, *Elements*, 15.

unable ever again to become one with itself (It is, of course, always capable of *receiving* oneness or determination insofar as it is a one-attractor). Proclus, for all his criticisms of Plotinus, thus far falls in line with Plotinus, viewing the good as one-bestowing and desire as motivated by a *lack* of goodness, that is, a deficiency or privation of oneness, insofar as Proclus too denies that matter can self-revert, thereby acquiring self-sufficiency.

Chlup notes in this context: “The emanation can only stop at a level that is no longer capable of self-reversion.”⁴⁶ This level is, of course, the material world, because soul, for example, is still perfect, that is, sufficient, because capable of self-reversion. Only in matter has the one proved itself as *effusive* and perfect, albeit still *not* self-sufficient. The one, as effusive, is not self-sufficient because it is self-overflowing; it cannot suffice with itself. It ends not in sufficiency, but in excess. Prior to matter—the excess of the one—has the one actually proved itself to be effusive? In other words, is the one effusive prior to the procession of matter? If not, then matter would not just be permitted, but it would be required for the one to be identified *as* the effusive good to which things ought to return and hence matter, as Proclus wishes to affirm, could not be evil as such or even the source of evil. Matter is rather the posterior condition of the good as the posterior proof of the one’s effusiveness, its inability perfectly to revert upon itself. Matter itself would then not so much participate in the good—which it clearly does not do insofar as, as the receptacle of limit, it lacks oneness and identity in itself—but it would establish the one’s effusiveness and thereby generate the need to return in order that things may become one and hence good. It would be the condition of the one *as* the good, as the absent object that bestows unity on that which has been disseminated. Only that capable of reversion is capable of oneness.

Now, in proposition 24, Proclus brings the discussion to its decisive juncture. He writes, “*All that participates is inferior to the participated, and this latter to the unparticipated.*”⁴⁷ Given this study’s methodological rejection of proposition 7 and the insight that the consequent overflow of the one, matter, operates as that artifice by which the one proves itself to be more than one, that is, more than itself or effusive, namely, an effusive *good*, so too must this proposition be denied. According to the experimental or even bastard reading offered here, this proposition must be rejected because the one too has acquired something more, something extra, namely, its goodness, through its consequent: matter. The good is only good because it is extra-one, that is, more than one. The good is good because it bestows oneness on the participating and reverting even though it itself, in the production of matter, surpasses oneness; it produces an extra, a supplement to the one. The good, consequently constituted through matter, which thus proves the one’s effusiveness and generates the need for reversion, is accordingly superior to the one prior to the emanation of matter,

⁴⁶ Chlup, *Proclus*, 75.

⁴⁷ Proclus, *Elements*, Prop. 24.

superior to the one in its pre-processual or pre-lapsarian state. There is something more in the one as consequent, that is, as good, as object of desire, than it had as pre-processual antecedent. What is to be affirmed in its entirety, at any rate, at least in a sense, is proposition 26, which states, “*Every productive cause produces the next and all subsequent principles while itself remaining steadfast.*”⁴⁸ The suggestion of this experimental reading is to read $\mu\omicron\nu\acute{\eta}$ [*monē*] along the lines of Schelling’s idea of “the never presencing remainder.”⁴⁹ This too affirms that the cause or, stated in a more deflationary manner, the antecedent is never dissipated in its consequent, but rather heightened and greatened! The antecedent, the one, is now not just the one that begins a motion (procession)—a first cause simply—but also an end, that is, also an object of desire, also the good.

Proclus states in proposition 32, “*All reversion is accomplished through a likeness of the reverting terms to the goal of reversion.*”⁵⁰ Sense can no longer be made of this proposition, as the consequences of this bastard reading of the *Elements of Theology* has made the one to differ from itself in its pre-processual state as it is only good in a post-lapsarian sense as the object of return. In other words, it is now unlike itself as it was prior to the act of procession (however much such a pre-processual state is simply a moment for thought and nothing actual). There is thus a denial that like causes like precisely because there is also a denial that there cannot be more in the consequent than in the antecedent. The one as consequent has become unlike itself as antecedent by becoming superior to itself as antecedent, by becoming the good, a bestower rather than diffuser of unity. This marks the break with the traditional understanding of the theory of participation. The one as antecedent, although it indivisibly remains ($\mu\omicron\nu\acute{\eta}$ [*monē*]), although it is not assumed and encapsulated by its consequent, is nevertheless altered by a change that occurs ‘outside’ it, the ex-cretion of matter. It is not a change *in* the one itself that alters it, but it is a change that occurs *outside* the one that alters it. This is the consequence of thinking the good and desire for the good in positive terms rather than as negativity, that is, as mere privation; the one now works to heighten and elevate itself to more superior domains, the domain of the good. Neoplatonism operates from the top down while Schelling works from the bottom up. The former approach affirms that causes are superior to their effects—which always leaves one wondering why it would leave itself (the notion of the effusiveness of the one aside⁵¹)—

48 Proclus, *Elements*, Prop. 26.

49 “*Ein nie aufgehender Rest.*” Schelling “Philosophische,” 360. This phrase, following Slavoj Žižek, is normally translated as “indivisible remainder.” Never presencing remainder, however, though clumsier, intimates that it is the source or substratum of all presentation without itself ever occurring within what is presented.

50 Proclus, *Elements*, Prop. 32.

51 Chlup correctly remarks that for Neoplatonists “the one is often compared to the sun, whose rays do not illuminate our world intentionally, being a natural result of the sun’s hotness” Chlup, *Proclus*, 63. Procession from the one occurs according to Neoplatonism because the one is effusive, which means that there is no intention or volition involved. The one could not have failed to

while the latter posits that causes are inferior to their effects. According to the latter option every creation is a heightening and intensification of being and not a diffusion and descent unto the inert non-being that is matter. On the former account, considered from the perspective of the one itself, there would be no need for reversion; reversion would leave the one as is. Reversion would be, so to speak, no good for the one on the traditional Neoplatonic reading. The latter Schellingian reading, however, recognizes this and therefore drops the cyclical character of reversion altogether in order to think through the implications of linearity, that is, historicity. This Schellingian reading suggests that a cause is only a cause if it brings about a consequent that is *independent*, that is, no longer participatory, precisely insofar as the effect inversely posits the cause *as* antecedent. As Proclus himself elsewhere states, “God brings all unlimitedness into existence, he also brings matter, which is ultimate unlimitedness, into existence. And this is the very first and ineffable cause of matter.”⁵² Could this not be read as saying that god brings the unlimited into existence *as* matter, that is, *as* substrate or *as* antecedent, and it brings limit into existence *as* consequent? In this respect, one can affirm both the historical nature of creation, that is, the division of times into before and after, antecedent and consequent, while still affirming the eternal nature of procession. Things proceed from the one always with an *as*-character. Matter or the unlimited proceeds always *as* antecedent, precondition, past and *subjectum* and limit always *as* consequent, that is, *as future* consequent; for, a consequent is always the consequent *of* a ‘prior’ antecedent. This historical process would not occur ‘in’ time because the positing of the unlimited *as* antecedent/past and limit *as* consequent/future is, in fact, the very positing of time itself. Time itself cannot be posited ‘in’ time just as Becoming cannot itself become, but time is timelessly or eternally posited. There is nevertheless a veritable prior and posterior and not the Neoplatonic circle of simultaneity/eternity in which everything happens in one stroke. This reading, in concurrence with Proclus and Neoplatonism in general, preserves the ineffability of the one, because the effect, as no longer resembling or being *like* the cause, discloses nothing about the cause (This is where St. Thomas departs from Neoplatonism and the doctrine of participation in requiring that god’s causing be thought non-univocally.) The effect is now no longer a mere predicate or attribute of the cause as fully participatory in it, but the effect is only an effect at all *because* of its independence, that is, lack of participation, in the antecedent cause. This is precisely how it inversely posits the antecedent

process/create; it is not free not to do so. The one *is* free, that is, self-determined, but it does not *act* freely, but rather out of its overflowing perfection. It is, so to speak, constrained to overflow itself. Schelling, in beginning with the inferior rather than the effusiveness of the perfect, rather speaks of the origin as a “decision,” a free decision, and not an overflowing by nature. Chlup provides the Neoplatonic response here: “A perfect being needs no decisions whatsoever, being always capable of acting in the best way possible” Chlup, *Proclus*, 69. Progression or amelioration is impossible if one begins with the perfect.

52 Proclus, *Commentary*, 385, 1-4.

as antecedent rather than as simultaneous with itself as an eternal source of presence and participation. Non-univocal or heterogeneous causing, in denying that like causes like, rejects that the effect remains in, that is, participates in, the cause, but it accepts that the cause remains in itself, never subsumed into the effect, that is, its consequent become independent. Causality is thus not participation and unification, but independence and differentiation! Contra Neoplatonism, this author asserts that to be an effect is to be independent from the cause and to be a cause, as Proclus would want of the one, is thus to be unparticipated, an indivisible remainder. There is, in short, a transitive breach between cause and effect, antecedent and consequent, past and future, which spells the end of participation and reversion.

This bastard reading, then, also denies proposition 35: “*Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts upon it.*”⁵³ It does, however, wholeheartedly agree with proposition 75: “*Every cause properly so called transcends its resultant.*”⁵⁴ Effects cannot encapsulate or exhaust their cause, but not because they are always less than their cause, but because they are *more* than and independent of their cause, which is inversely altered by this change in the effect that is now *outside* it, that is, no longer participatory in it. To dispute what Proclus says in proposition 69, the effect is *not* a part participatory in the whole-before-the-parts and this constitutes a decisive break with participation as the doctrine that the participated retains only passive potency and so can have no inverse effect on the being of the cause. The one, for example, can indeed be altered into the good by means of the independence of its effect/consequent, primarily matter, which is but the proof of the one’s unparticipatedness, proof that the one can produce something extra in the sense of non-participatory, something incapable of reversion and return to the one itself.

Standing Neoplatonism on its Head

This author does not purport to pronounce judgment concerning the correct interpretation of the role of matter in Proclus, but it does show that Schelling’s reading sets the *canonical* reading of Neoplatonism (and Platonism at large)—which is likely more Plotinian and Aristotelian than Procline—on its head by rejecting the idea that reality descends from superior originals to inferior copies. This essay has attempted to explicate what would ensue if proposition 7 of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology* concerning the inferiority of the effect with regard to its cause were methodologically denied in accordance with Schelling’s reading of Plato. The contention is that Schelling’s later thought continues to build upon his early reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*, but in such way that it inverts the *direction* of so-called emanationism in Neoplatonism. Emanation (or if one

⁵³ Proclus, *Elements*, Prop. 35.

⁵⁴ Proclus, *Elements*, Prop. 75.

prefers, procession) descends from the superior to the inferior, but Schelling hopes to ascend, that is, repeat at a higher intensity, from the inferior to the superior.

Schelling stated (more than once) in the 1840s:

The entire collection of his remaining works is thoroughly dialectical, but at the summit and point of transfiguration ... in the *Timaeus* Plato becomes historical and breaks through, albeit only violently, into the positive, namely, in such a way that the trace of scientific transition is scarcely to be detected or only with great difficulty. It is more of a breach from the foregoing (namely, the dialectical) than a transition to the positive (SW XIII: 100).⁵⁵

In Schelling's own estimation, then, the turn in Plato's later thought from a dialectical (and, given his re-inscription of this into Kantian terms, transcendental) project to a historical and narrative method becomes the impetus for Schelling's own division between negative and positive, that is, historical, philosophy, hence his philosophy of mythology and revelation. The precedent had already been set by the historical turn in Plato's cosmology or naturephilosophy. Peculiar to the emphasis on history is that movement is linear and one-directional and not cyclical, as it must be if one adheres to a doctrine of ἐπιστροφή [*epistrophē*]. Schelling's positive philosophy is a priori only in the sense that it proceeds from the *prius* forth,⁵⁶ while negative philosophy seeks to regress back to a first cause, first ground or first being; positive philosophy is progressive and negative philosophy is regressive. It is the directionality of the method that marks the difference between negative and positive philosophy, that is, regressive and merely logical philosophy on the one hand and progressive and historical philosophy on the other hand. Now, the need for reversion in Neoplatonism was to bestow oneness and goodness on that which had proceeded from the one and was thus deficient in oneness, longing for the one as the absent but desired object. Reversion is needed because procession was a movement from the superior to the inferior. Beierwaltes acutely judges, however, that for Schelling, already in the middle period of his thought marked by his drafts of *The Ages of the World (Die Weltalter)* (1811-1815), "The end of this processive self-revelation of god is—in opposition to the Neoplatonic procession of the one/good—the '*highest*.'" ⁵⁷ Schelling's is not a system of emanation hinged

55 "Die ganze Reihe seiner übrigen Werke hindurch dialektische ist, aber im Gipfel und Verklärungspunkt ... im Timäos wird Platon geschichtlich, und bricht, freilich nur gewaltsam, ins Positive durch, nämlich so, daß die Spur des wissenschaftlichen Übergangs kaum oder schwer zu entdecken ist—es ist mehr ein Abbrechen vom Vorhergegangenen (nämlich dem Dialektischen) als ein Übergehen zum Positiven." Translations of this work are my own.

56 "*Vom Prius herleitend*" (SW XIII: 177-530, here 249).

57 Beierwaltes, "Legacy," 406.

upon notions of imitation and participation, but a metaphysics of novel production and elevation. Schelling denies that reality has descended from superior originals to inferior copies and rather argues that reality moves from inferior matter, which is yet a principle with its own discordant motion(s), to higher and more superior levels of order and organization. Beierwaltes's gloss is then perfectly accurate:

Schelling understands matter in his speculative physics as a process productive in itself, and in the *Weltalter* as the precondition of the dynamic process of an historical unfolding of the Absolute....Thus, in his ennobling of matter....Schelling departs decisively from Plotinus. This difference has less to do with the concept of matter as an element and basis of nature than it has to do with the *progressive weakening* or destruction (*Zer-nichtung*) of reality.⁵⁸

Beierwaltes is correct to indicate that the issue does not concern matter as such as the basis of reality, as both Plotinus and Proclus themselves affirm an intelligible matter, but the *Zer-nichtung*, the bringing to nought or bringing to non-being of reality. Matter is considered as mere non-being, as reality emptied of being and δύναμις [*dynamis*]; this is the end of procession for the Neoplatonist, hence the need for reversion. By conceiving of procession as progression, that is, a heightening, potentiation or intensification of reality rather than as a descent or emanation, Schelling is able to avoid the need for reversion, which returns to things their lost unity and goodness. By conceiving of procession as an escalation, Schelling also posits the whole process as an open-ended, one-directional line without any need to return or close itself back up into a circle. This, for Schelling, is positive, historical philosophy. Not even god, for Schelling, much like the one of the Neoplatonists, is self-sufficient, except that Schelling is able to view god/the one as effusive from the outset. Matter is not the *last* emanation that proves the effusiveness and impossibility of self-reversion for the one, but it is *first* and it is a *principle*, a productive principle.

One may plausibly argue that for Proclus, contra Plotinus, matter is not the last but rather the first emanation, but it nevertheless does not seem to be a productive principle. First, regarding the possibility that Proclus views matter as the first emanation from the one, Chlup can state that for Proclus, “matter is paradoxically very close to the one, being produced by it *only* [emphasis added] and bearing *no traces* [emphasis added] of the lower levels ([*Elements of Theology*] 72).”⁵⁹ Similarities between the one and matter abound, for example,

⁵⁸ Beierwaltes, “Legacy,” 415.

⁵⁹ Chlup, *Proclus*, 88. It is also highly recommended that one view Chlup's chart depicting the stages of emanation on page 98 of this same text, which clearly shows that matter is a *direct* procession from the one and not, as it were, the last on the ladder of descent, first having to pass

both are simple, properly invisible, non-intelligible (though the one is higher than the intelligible as inscrutable and ineffable and matter is rather less than intelligible) and so forth. Moreover, both are otherwise than being: “the one is non-being in the sense of what is ‘superior to being,’ while matter in the sense of what is weaker than being”⁶⁰ and regarding their shared non-intelligibility, Chlup adds, “The lowest inanimate objects are thus particularly suited for manifesting the divine, for by being deprived of all traces of intelligence they symmetrically mirror that which transcends intellect.”⁶¹

Given Chlup’s foregoing consideration and his clear depiction of matter as a direct and immediate procession from the one, it then seems baffling to read a passage like the following from him, a passage which must be rejected by this work’s attempt to stand Neoplatonism on its head. “[Plotinus] seems to grant (in common with Proclus) that in the end matter is the final link in a long causal chain whose beginning lies in the good.” “It was the lowest offshoot of soul (i.e. Nature) which produced matter (*Enn.* V 2, 1, 21).”⁶² However true this judgment may be of Plotinus, it is surely dubious in Proclus, for whom Chlup elsewhere clearly suggests that matter is *not* “the lowest offshoot” and *not* “the final link in a long causal chain” but rather pre-existent for *all* other levels on the chain of being as the first, albeit most inferior, and direct emanation from the one. If Chlup is correct in aligning Proclus with Plotinus in this respect, then Schelling’s reading of the *Timaeus* would stand in direct contrast with Proclus’s, standing Proclus on his head. If, however, Proclus does admit that matter is preexistent for all other levels of reality, then the main difference between the two is simply that Proclus does not admit that matter acts as a principle of motion and so fails to admit that reality could ascend and potentiate itself. At the end of the day, matter is still an emptying out of dignity and rank,⁶³ which functions as proof of the impossibility of self-reversion for the one, rather than being the presupposed substrate that allows for potentiation, intensification and elevation.

Concerning Schelling’s relation to Plato and Neoplatonism, Grant has argued that Schelling avoids two-world Platonizing precisely by holding

through soul, sensible reality and the like. Matter, if one believes (at least this particular chart of) Chlup, is last in rank for Proclus, but first in the order of procession.

60 Note also Chlup, *Proclus*, 223, where he says that Proclus “admits that matter is a kind of non-being, but ... non-being for him is connected with potentiality ... it is the necessary ‘vacuum’ element in each level of reality... It follows that non-being is to be found on all planes of reality, matter being but its lowest and most passive expression.”

61 Chlup, *Proclus*, 90.

62 Chlup, *Proclus*, 206.

63 Chlup comments similarly of Plotinus, “Matter is seen by Plotinus as total privation, deforming forms and preventing their full realization” Chlup, *Proclus*, 77. The Schellingian position, however, views matter as that *precondition without which* the good could not come to be rather than viewing it as an impediment to the good. Note in this context Plato’s distinction at the end of the *Phaedo* between merely material preconditions without which something could not be what it is and the actual reason *by which* a thing is the thing that it is.

to the idea of preexistent and unruly matter, which Plotinus (and, perhaps, also Proclus) rejected. More recently Daniel Whistler has reiterated this same point, writing, “The model of emanation is grounded in the very ‘two-world’ metaphysics Schelling rejects. The distinction between copy and archetype is brought about by the process of emanation. Pre-existing archetypes produce inferior copies of themselves.”⁶⁴ Accordingly, Schelling has no need for reversion; one-directional linearity reigns. This is precisely the point of Schelling’s late positive, that is, historical, philosophy, which *progresses* from the origin without the accompanying need for reversion because reality always potentiates itself rather than emptying itself into degraded and imperfect copies. For Schelling, things must not revert to the one to acquire their oneness, but the one acquires its unity all the more intensely the more things progress toward greater degrees of unity yet unknown. The one is produced or constructed, not disseminated. For the canonical reading of Neoplatonism emanation always produces only failing and inadequate forms of the one itself, hence their need to revert back upon their source, while for Schelling all forms of unity are not derivate copies but excessive intensifications of oneness. The produced is always more than the source of production; consequents always exceed the anterior in rank and dignity. The world did not begin with the perfect, but the hope is that it might end with it. It is precisely this aspect of Schelling, which lead to the speculative rejection of proposition 7 in the experimental reading of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology*, that sets Neoplatonism on its head or, just perhaps, on its feet, firmly implanted in a material base.

64 Daniel Whistler, *Schelling’s Theory of Symbolic Language: Forming the System of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 87.