How are the Forms Participated? — Three Imperfect Analogies

A core tenet of Platonic philosophy is that, in some manner, sensible things participate eternal forms, or ideas. Near the beginning of the fourth book of his commentary on the *Parmenides*, Proclus examines three different analogies, inherited from earlier teachers in the tradition which attempt to illustrate or explain participation. Proclus argues that all three capture something about participation which will, at least, be of some use to beginning students, but Proclus also warns his readers that "We must realize that none of these analogies has any scientific value, nor do all of them together adequately grasp the true nature of participation in the divine forms." They can only take us so far, before we must leave them behind or be hopelessly misled by them.

In tonight's session, we'll follow Proclus in examining those three analogies, in the hopes of better understanding the challenging yet critical issue of participation. As Thomas Taylor invites, "Let us now proceed to consider the mode in which forms or ideas are participated, following the divine Proclus as our leader in this arduous investigation."[1] As Proclus himself makes clear, this discussion presumes the reality of participation, asking not *whether* it occurs, but rather, *how* participation could work.

> The participations of intellectual forms are assimilated to the representations in a mirror; for as, in these, *habitude* and *position* cause the image of the person to be seen in the mirror; so, the *aptitude* of matter extending itself as it were to the Artificer of the universe, and to the inexhaustible abundance which he contains, is filled from him with forms. The participations are also assimilated to the impressions in wax. For ideas impart a certain vestige and impression of themselves; and neither is this impression the same with the seal by which it was produced, as neither is the form merged in matter the same with the immaterial and divine form from which it originated. But this latter mode differs from the former so far as it indicates a certain passive property in the recipient; for the mirror does not exhibit passivity sensibly, as the wax does in the latter instance. Hence some of the Platonic philosophers, considering matter as impassive in the participation of forms, assimilate it to a mirror, but call forms images and representations. Others again, considering matter as passive, say, that it is impressed like the wax by the seal, and call forms the *passions* of matter.
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> Forms also are said to be like the similitudes of icons, whether effected by the painter's, or the plastic, or any other art. For these forms, being fashioned by a divine artificer, are said to be *similar* to divine forms; and hence the whole sensible order is called the icon of the intelligible. But this assertion differs from the former, so far as this separates the maker from the exemplar; but those produce the analogy from considering both as one. And such are the modes according to which material forms have been said to subsist with relation to such as are divine.

1 From note 17 to his translation of Plato's *Parmenides*, which begins on page 118 of the Prometheus Trust edition. Where possible, the translations from Proclus' *Parmenides Commentary* have been drawn from this lengthy endnote; in the case of a few passages of Proclus which were not included by Taylor (noted below) these have been supplemented from the translation of Glenn Morrow and John Dillon (Princeton University Press, 1987), adapted to accord with Taylor's preferred vocabulary for key terms. The relevant passages are found in columns 839–848 of Cousin's edition (given in the marginal numbering of both translations).

Having set out the three analogies — both in their individual character, and in their contrasts with one another — Proclus goes on to consider how each analogy falls short of fully capturing the nature of participation:

> It must, however, be observed, that each of these is imperfect considered by itself, and incapable of representing to our intellectual conceptions the whole truth respecting this participation. For, in the first place, consider, as to the mirror, that the countenance beheld in it turns itself towards the mirror, while, on the contrary, an intellectual cause beholds itself, and does not direct its vision to outward objects. If, too, the mirror appears to possess a communication of something, but in reality does not, (for the rays are reflected back to the countenance,) it is evident that this also is foreign from the participation of divine forms; for, as they are perfectly incorporeal, nothing can be separated from them and distributed into matter.
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> In the second place, if we consider the impressions in wax, we shall find, that both that which impresses externally impresses, and that which is passive to the impression is externally passive; but form pervades through the whole of the subject matter, and operates internally. For nature fashions body inwardly, and not externally like art. And above all, in this instance, that which is participated approximates to that which participates. But it is requisite that divine forms should be exempt from all things, and not be mingled with any thing of a different nature.
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> In the third place, let us consider the analogy from icons, and we shall find this also deficient. For, in the first place, forms fashion the whole of the subject matter by which they are received, and this by an internal energy: and, in the next place, the exemplar and the maker are here separated from each other. Thus, the figure which is painted does not produce its likeness on the canvas, even though the painter should paint a resemblance of himself; for it is the soul which operates, and not the external figure, which is the exemplar; nor does that which makes, *assimilate* that which is produced to itself; for it is soul which makes, and that which is produced is the resemblance of external form. But divine forms are at the same time paradigmatic and demiurgic of their resemblances: for they have no similitude to the impressions in wax, but possess an efficacious essence, and a power assimilative of things secondary to themselves.
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> No one of these modes, therefore, is of itself sufficient to represent the true manner in which divine forms are participated. But, perhaps, if we can discover the most proper mode of participation, we shall see how each of these touches on the truth, at the same time that it falls short of the whole characteristic.

To help us discover that most proper mode of participation, Proclus next considers the ways in which both the eternal forms and their participants contribute causally to the participation of the latter in the former:

> It is requisite, therefore, in order to this participation, to consider as the causes by which it is effected, the efficacious power of primary and divine forms, and the desire and aptitude of the natures which thence derive their formation. For neither is the fabricative and efficacious power of forms alone sufficient to produce participation; for they are every where similarly present, but are not similarly participated by all things. Nor is the desire and aptitude of the participants

> sufficient without the productive energy of forms; for desire and aptitude are of themselves imperfect. The prolific essence, therefore, of the demiurgic intellect exerts an efficacious energy, which the subject nature of sensibles receives. But, in effecting this participation, it neither makes use of impulsions, for it is incorporeal; nor of any indefinite impetus, as we do, for it is impassive; nor of any projectile force, for it is perfect; but it operates by its very essence. Hence, that which is generated is an image of its maker, intellection there concurring with essence: so that, according as he intellectually perceives, he fabricates; and, according as he fabricates, intellectually perceives. Hence, too, that which is generated is *always* generated by him; for, in essential productions, that which is generated is every where consubsistent with its maker. In consequence of this, in things subsisting according to time, form, in *the sudden*, supervenes its subject matter, whatever has been effected previous to its presence alone removing the impediments to its reception. For, *the sudden* imitates according to *the now*, the at-once-collected and eternal generation of all things through the aptitude of the recipient.

With this double contribution — from the eternal activity of the forms themselves and of the demiurgic intellect, and from the temporally-variable receptivity of the participants — we might compare Proclus' discussion of divine allotments, in the first book of his *Timaeus Commentary*.

As to accounting for the latter's receptivity, Proclus will link the doctrine of "Father and Maker" (drawn from Plato's *Timaeus* 28c, and his own commentary thereupon; cf. *Platonic Theology* book V, chapter 16) with the mysterious teaching about the *chōra* or receptacle of *Timaeus* 51a (which is after Proclus' surviving commentary on the dialogue breaks off). In brief, a divine cause acting as Father (i.e., paternally) is responsible for wholes and unities — including, in some way, the Gods themselves considered as superessential wholes — while a divine cause acting as Maker is responsible for the progression, or the leading forth into light, of the forms. Yet as both this passage, and the related texts of the *Timaeus Commentary* and the *Platonic Theology* explain, these do not occur without appropriate media: thus Proclus distinguishes the cause who is Father alone, the cause who is Father and also Maker, the cause who is Maker and also Father, and the cause who is Maker alone, as well as the respective effects of each of these four. It is the second of these, i.e., the paternal and also creative, whose activity Proclus will especially explore here in this context. The translation follows Morrow and Dillon, modified slightly to agree with Taylor's typical choices of vocabulary.

> What is the source of this receptivity and how does it come about? This is the next question to be answered. Shall we not say that it comes from the paternal and creative cause? The whole of nature that is subject to the work of the Demiurge was produced, if we may rely upon those who are expert in divine matters, by the intelligible Father, whoever this is. Upon this nature another Father who is also Maker cast reflections of himself; and the Maker who is also a Father ordered it as a whole; and the Maker alone filled it up with particulars by means of his craftsmanship. From these four causes appears first the matter which is prior to all form-giving activity, described in the *Timaeus* as a shapeless kind which is a universal receptacle; second, something that has received traces of the Forms but is disordered and inharmonious; third, the cosmos as a whole, composed of wholes in accordance with the unique and universal paradigm; and last the cosmos provided with all the living beings — the different causes producing all these creatures, both

> immortal and mortal, prior to the cosmos as a whole. But what these causes are we must learn from the family of the theologians. We ought not then to wonder whence come these various aptitudes. For the things in this world that seem to be relatively permanent are the products of more sovereign powers in the intellectual world that because of their indescribable plenitude of being are able to penetrate to the lowest grades of existence, and the things here imitate in the indefiniteness of their own nature the ineffable being of those higher powers. The substratum therefore possessess their reflections, I mean the one substratum as well as the many and diverse kinds of receptivity by which the things here are disposed towards desire of the Forms, and of the rich plenitude of the demiurgic reason-principles and their texture. Being endowed with these aptitudes, the substratum supports the visible cosmos and participates in the whole process of creation.

Thus, we have the first of three major attempts to link the analogies for participation with the various modes or levels of divine activity. From another, complimentary perspective (returning to Taylor's translation):

> If, again, we desire to see what it is which connects demiurgic power with the aptitude of recipients, we shall find it is goodness itself, this being the cause of all possible union. For, participations proceed to mundane causes through a desire of good; and demiurgic forms, through goodness, make their progressions into secondary natures, imitating the inexhaustible and exuberant fountain of all good, which, through its own transcendent goodness, gives subsistence to all the divine orders, if it be lawful so to speak. We have therefore these three causes of the participation of forms, the one goodness of the Father of all things; the demiurgic power of forms, and the aptitude of the natures which receive the illuminations of forms. But, participation subsisting according to these causes, we may perceive how it is possible to assimilate it to representations in a mirror, and to *reflection*. For aptitude and desire, which are imparted to sensible natures from on high, become the causes of their being again *converted* to the sources whence they were derived. This participation too may, after another manner, be assimilated to a *seal*. For the efficacious power of divine causes imparts a *vestige* of ideas to sensibles, and apparent impressions from unapparent forms. For we have said that the demiurgic cause unites both these together. But he who produces an icon effects something of this kind. For in a certain respect he congregates the subject and the paradigm; since, when this is accomplished, he produces an impression similar to the exemplar. So that these modes, in a certain respect, touch upon the truth. But it is by no means wonderful if each is found to be deficient. For the recipients of ideas are partible and sensible; and the characteristic peculiarity of these unapparent and divine causes cannot be circumscribed by the nothingness of corporeal natures.

Finally, Proclus concludes the discussion by connecting the three analogies to the activity of the three "lowest" orders of divine activity, by examining the contributions of the hypercosmic or supermundane Gods (a.k.a., the Leader-Gods), the Gods who are both hypercosmic and encosmic (a.k.a., the liberated Gods), and the encosmic or mundane Gods. The translation is based on Morrow and Dillon, modified to accord with Taylor's typical word choices, and good grammatical sense.

Perhaps it is better and more in accord with theology not to make these distinctions, but to say that sense objects simultaneously partake of intellectual forms as present to them, receive reflections of them, and resemble them as icons. For Plato in this very passage says simply that things here "participate the forms," as if the primary forms were participated in all these ways by sense-objects. There are three intermediate ranks of Gods: the encosmic Gods, the Gods independent of the cosmos, and the leader-Gods. Through the rank of the encosmic Gods, things in this world partake of the forms by way of impression, for these Gods are most directly their supervisors. Through the liberated Gods, they get reflections of the forms, for these Gods are in some respects in contact with things here and in some respects not, but because of their transcendent powers they can provide sensible things with appearances of the primary forms. And through the assimilative Gods (these are what I have called the leader-Gods) sensibles are made like the intellectual realm. Consequently, it is through the single demiurgic source and cause that impressions, reflections, and likenesses all come to be, and through its all-perfecting goodness.