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Stephen E. Gersh

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[See table of contents](#)

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Reading Proclus and the Book of Causes: 3. On Causes and the Noetic Triad
by Dragos Calma

Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022. Pp. 649. ISBN 978-90-04-50133-1. eBook. Open Access: <https://brill.com/edcollbook-oa/title/61293?rskey=ohzVho&result=5>

Reviewed by
Stephen E. Gersh*
University of Notre Dame
Stephen.E.Gersh.1@nd.edu

This is the third of a three-volume series of essay collections based on three conferences held in Paris at the *École pratique des hautes études* in 2015–2016. The papers delivered at the conferences have been arranged thematically for publication—with a few essays being moved and a few others commissioned for the printed version—by Dragos Calma as general editor, who planned and organized the original sessions together with the late Marc Geoffroy. The first volume deals with a wide range of topics in connection with the Western intellectual tradition from Antiquity to the Renaissance;¹ the second is arranged geographically and deals with the Byzantium, the Caucasus, the Lands of Islam, the Latin West, and the Hebraic Tradition;² while the third contains the essays having the most overtly philosophical character within the various traditions.

In contrast to Plotinus, who tends nowadays to be considered the quintessential “Neoplatonist”, Proclus was for a long time assigned a somewhat secondary role in the history of ancient philosophy. However, recent studies have underlined the importance of this post-Plotinian Greek Neoplatonist to later traditions of philosophy, especially during the period that we

* STEPHEN E. GERSH is emeritus professor of Medieval Philosophy, University of Notre Dame, Indiana; a member of the Centre for the Study of Platonism, Cambridge University; and a former fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge. He is the author of numerous books on the history of Platonism in European thought, the most recent being the edition (with translation and analytic studies) of Marsilio Ficino’s *Commentary on Plotinus* (Harvard University Press, two volumes to date).

¹ [Edd.] For a review by S.-A. Kiosoglou, see *Aestimatio* ns 2.2: 143–162.

² [Edd.] For a review by M. Abbate, see *Aestimatio* ns 3.1: 171–176.

call the Middle Ages. In the medieval Byzantine world, Proclus' *Elements of Theology* was a standard, albeit controversial, text in the philosophical schools, whereas Plotinus remained esoteric reading. In the medieval Latin world, Proclus was highly influential, at first indirectly through "Dionysius the Areopagite" and later on indirectly through the Arabic-Latin *Liber de causis* and directly through William of Moerbeke's Latin translations, while Plotinus was virtually unknown. The present set of three volumes serves as a valuable supplement to some of the recent general studies of Proclus' influence by collecting detailed evidence regarding the transmission and reconfiguration of his doctrines in many later writers.

The volume has a careful internal organization consisting of part 1, dealing with causes, divided into section 1 on the One and participation and section 2 on causality and free will; and part 2, dealing with the "noetic" triad of being, life, and intellect. The general editor's decision to focus on the issue of causality in organizing most of the papers in this volume is to be welcomed. In Neoplatonism, causality always has a kind of vertical or "pyramidal" structure descending from a single primary cause—called the One, Good, or God—into ever greater regions of multiplicity. This contrasts with the Aristotelian notion of causality—the efficient, formal, final, and material causes—which has a more horizontal configuration. The Neoplatonists, who integrated Aristotelian thought into their own philosophy while overtly criticizing it, tend to ground the horizontal structure within their preferred system of causal verticality. The various essays in the present volume deal with such important aspects of the Neoplatonic theory of causality as the relative influence of the First Cause and secondary causes, the overlapping of causal influences, and the notion of reciprocal causality. In addition, there are contributions dealing with the relation between emanative and intentional causality and with the problem of free will.

Some of the essays are more philosophical and some more doxographic in character, the essays dealing with the "noetic triad" tending to fall into the latter category. Among the best examples of the more philosophical essay are undoubtedly those of O. Boulnois, "Deux Modèles de causalité, deux théories de la liberté. À propos de deux interprétations de la proposition 1 du 'Livre des causes'", and of J.-L. Solère, "Thomas d'Aquin, l'étiologie proclusienne et la théorie du concours de Dieu à la causalité naturelle". Useful doxographical contributions are represented by J. Dillon, "The Early History of the Noetic Triad", and D. Robichaud, "Marsilio Ficino on the Triad Being-Life-Intellect and the Demiurge: Renaissance Reappraisals of Late Ancient Philosophical and Theological Debates".

The volume contains especially valuable discussions of the non-Greek milieu, such as B. Somma's "Causal Efficacy of Nature in the *Neoplatonica Arabica*"; L. Gigineishvili's "Henads as Divine Images: The Epistemological and Ontological Significance of Inner Light and Creation of a New Subjectivity in Ioane Petritsi's *Metaphysics*"; and L. Alexidse's "Cause and Effect in Ioane Petritsi's Commentary on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*". There are also some valuable comparative studies, including A. Vasiliu's "Regards croisés sur la cause première. Plotin, Porphyre, Victorinus, Saloustios, Proclus", and J. Brumberg-Chaumont's "L'Exemple de la triade *esse, vivum, homo* dans les commentaires latins du XIIIe siècle au 'Liber de causis' entre réalisme des universaux et pluralité des formes substantielles".

Somewhat outside the main thematic of the volume is the essay by I. Ramelli, "Some Overlooked Sources of the *Elements of Theology*: The Noetic Triad, *Epistrophē*, *Apokatastasis*, Bodies, God, 'All in All' and the Possible Reception of Origenian Themes". The length of the title and of the essay itself (some 70 pages) indicates how wide-ranging Ramelli's investigation here is. With this essay she gives further evidence for the identification of the two Origenes (pagan and Christian) hitherto assumed by many scholars to have existed separately. More specifically, Ramelli now produces enough textual evidence to show that Proclus thought there was one Origen and was heavily influenced by him. However, this fact (if it is indeed a fact) is an odd one. As the ancients also knew, Origen was a fellow student under Ammonius Saccas, not of Proclus but of Plotinus. Yet the doctrinal differences between Plotinus and Origen are at least as great as the similarities between Proclus and Origen, which Ramelli rightly notes. Probably, we have to conclude that—contrary to the prevailing opinion of modern historians—Origen and Proclus were both somewhat typical late ancient Platonists and that Plotinus was a real outlier in the tradition.

In this brief evaluation, I have not been able to mention all the fine contributions in this volume. There are no really weak links in the chain, even including the writings of the younger scholars. The general level of the best contributions is extremely high, and Dragos Calma is to be congratulated in assembling such a collection and bringing this remarkable set of three volumes to its conclusion.