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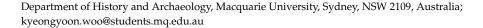
The Adaptation and Development of the Proclean Notion of Κατάβασις: From Proclus to Maximus the Confessor

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of Proclus' notion of divine descent, i.e., κατάβασις, on the formation of core theological doctrines in Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor. The notion of κατάβασις was originally employed by pagan Proclus to explain the downward providence of gods toward humans, emphasizing the dominant role of gods for human perfection. In his exegesis on *Alcibiades I*, Proclus identified Socrates as the incarnation of divine providence, a divinely inspired lover in charge of Alcibiades' conversion to philosophical life. Pseudo-Dionysius adapted the Proclean notion of κατάβασις by supplementing it with the Christian notion of God's ecstatic love, understood as God's providential act toward His creation. In the Celestial Hierarchy and Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, Dionysius endeavored to reveal the reciprocal-ecstatic union between God and humans made possible by His ecstatic κατάβασις during the liturgy. Maximus adapted and further developed the Dionysian notion of κατάβασις. While stressing the crucial role of the κατάβασις for human salvation, he gave it a new meaning by synthesizing it in the context of his anthropology, which stressed the holistic transformation of the human body and soul as a result of the divine descent.

Keywords: Proclus; Pseudo-Dionysius; Maximus the Confessor; Κατάβασις; providence; ecstatic love

1. Introduction

The notion of divine descent, i.e., κατάβασις, was employed by Proclus to explain the downward providence of gods toward humans. Based on this theological notion, Proclus envisioned a blissful life for humans sustained and fulfilled by the divine love of gods. Although Proclus' theology represents the intellectual vanguard of pagan Neoplatonism, his work became hugely influential among Christian thinkers. Thus, my article explores the impact of Proclus' κατάβασις, which he appreciated as the means of our most profound experience of the divine, on the core theological ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite and of Maximus the Confessor, two seminal figures who have shaped a number of Christian doctrines by systematically drawing on Neoplatonic concepts.

2. The Notion of Κατάβασις in Proclus

Among the exegetes of the Platonic dialogues Proclus explicitly emphasized the role of the providential love of gods for human perfection.[1] For Proclus, human salvation is not solely dependent upon the human act of ἀνάβασις[2] but rather upon the κατάβασις of the gods which guides them to perfection. Thus, in his commentary on Plato's *Alcibiades I*, where he identifies two requirements for human perfection, that is, the readiness of humans and the providence of gods,[3] Proclus cast human effort as a mere preparatory step compared to divine providence which practically perfects the readied humans.[4] In this regard, Proclus envisioned human perfection as an outcome of an asymmetrical union between human ἀνάβασις and the gods' κατάβασις since humans are dependent upon the effort of the gods for their perfection. Therefore, Proclus' notion of κατάβασις occupies a central theme in his philosophical discussion of human fulfillment, a theme systematically

negotiated in his exegesis of *Alcibiades I* which focuses on the conversion of Alcibiades from his penchant for vulgar, carnal desire to the intellectual life through his interaction with Socrates.[5] According to Proclus, the κατάβασις of Socrates aimed to introduce Alcibiades to philosophical life and thus enable him to achieve the fulfillment of his soul.

The Proclean notion of the κατάβασις was built on the Platonic anthropology that defined humans as intellectual souls tragically embodied in the flesh.[6] As embodied souls, humans live an ambivalent life between the wise-intellectual and the ignorant-carnal life.[7] Humans can only accomplish their fulfillment when they pursue the higher form of life, that is, the intellectual life they enjoyed before their incarnation.[8] Therefore, for Proclus, human salvation meant the de-materialization of humans from the human body and their subsequent dedication to an eternal contemplation of the Good.[9] In this sense, Proclus argued, following Plato, that even the physical death of humans was not the end of human life, but a new beginning of the human soul freed from materiality.[10] His text reads:

> μέση γάρ ἐστιν ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦ τε νοῦ καὶ τῆς σωματικῆς φύσεως· καὶ ὅταν μὲν εἰς νοῦν βλέπῃ καὶ τὸ ἐκεῖ καλόν, ὁ ἔρως αὐτῆς μόνιμός ἐστιν ὡς τῷ ἀκινήτῳ καὶ ἀμεταβλήτῳ δι᾽ὁμοιότητος συναπτόμενος, νοῦς γὰρ ἐν αἰῶνι τήν τε οὐσίαν ἑστῶσαν ἔχει καὶ τὴν ἐνέργειαν· ὅταν δὲ εἰς τὰ σώματα καὶ τὸ ἐπ᾽ αὐτοῖς κάλλος, ἑτεροκίνητος γίνεται αὐτῆς ὁ ἔρως καὶ συμμεταβάλλει τῷ ἐραστῷ, καὶ γὰρ τὸ σῶμα τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν, ἑτεροκίνητον δήπου καὶ εὐμετάβολον.

For the soul is the middle between the nous and the bodily nature; and when, on the one hand, the soul looks toward the nous and the beautiful there, its love is stable since it joins the unmoved and the unchangeable through the similarity; for the nous possesses the substance and activity in eternity. When, on the other hand, (the soul gazes upon) bodies and the beauty upon them, its love becomes the love that is moved by external force and changes along with the beloved (τῷ ἐραστῷ), it is because such a thing is the body, which is doubtlessly changeable, moved by an external force.[11]

On the basis of this anthropology, through the exegesis, Proclus focused on revealing how the κατάβασις of the gods brings humans to perfection.[12] As stated in his discussion on the gods, the *Elements of Theology*, Proclus argued that it is the gods' nature to communicate anything that is good to the lower beings.[13] Gods lead the imperfect beings toward participation in themselves as an act of providence while not experiencing any form of reduction in their purity or power. Their providence overflows throughout the hierarchy of beings below them, eventually reaching humans. Proclus writes:

> Πᾶν τὸ θεῖον καὶ προνοεῖ τῶν δευτέρων καὶ ἐξήρηται τῶν προνοουμένων, μήτε τῆς προνοίας χαλώσης τὴν ἄμικτον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἑνιαίαν ὑπεροχὴν μήτε τῆς χωριστῆς ἑνώσεως τὴν πρόνοιαν ἀφανιζούσης.

All the divine provides for the secondary beings and transcends those that are provided by; neither the providence abates its pure and unitary supremacy, nor the separable unity destroys its providence.[14]

In the commentary, divine providence was described in the form of divine love, which mediates between gods and humans. Here, Proclus defined the divine love as the descending love of gods that cares and reverts the imperfect humans and ultimately leads them to perfection:

> ὅπου δὲ ἡ ἕνωσις καὶ ἡ διάκρισις τῶν ὄντων, ἐκεῖ καὶ ὁ ἔρως μέσος ἐξέφηνε· συνδετικὸς γάρ ἐστι τῶν διῃρημένων καὶ συναγωγὸς τῶν τε μετ᾽ αὐτὸν καὶ τῶν πρὸ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπιστρεπτικὸς ἐπὶ τὰ πρῶτα τῶν δευτέρων καὶ ἀναγωγὸς καὶ τελεσιουργὸς τῶν ἀτελεστέρων.

Where both the union and the separation of beings exist, there the love reveals (itself) as the middle; because (the love) is the binder of divided beings and the uniter of beings-

after-it and beings-before-it, and the converter of the secondary beings toward the primary beings, and the raiser and the perfecter of the imperfect beings.[15]

In the text, Socrates was depicted as the incarnation of this divine love, i.e., the divinely "inspired lover (ὁ θεῖος ἐραστὴς),"[16] who, because of his likeness to the gods,[17] cared and led Alcibiades to philosophical initiation.[18] Proclus viewed Socrates as a mediator who enables imperfect Alcibiades a pathway to the perfection of gods.[19]

> ὁ Σωκράτης ἐστὶ δυοῖν ὅρων μέσος, αὐτὸς μὲ ν εἰς δαίμονα καὶ θεὸν ἀνηρτημένος, ἑαυτοῦ δὲ ἐξάπτων τόν τε ἐρώμενον καὶ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν Ἀθηναίων· καὶ οὕτω δὴ πᾶσιν αἴτιος γίνεται τῆς τοῦ θείου μετουσίας, καὶ τοῖς χείροσι. Socrates is the middle between two boundaries. On the one hand, he is dependent upon his daimon and god. On the other hand, he himself clings to both the beloved and the people of Athens; in this way, he becomes responsible for everyone's participation in the divine, especially of those inferior.[20]

Proclus demonstrated Socrates' use of certain methodologies to guide Alcibiades, starting with dialectics. He identified four significant functions through which dialectics allows souls to reach perfection,[21] starting with the attentive function: "First, it makes the hearer more attentive, forcing him to follow closely the questions without allowing the influence of the speaker (makes) him hold his mind toward other things (πρῶτον μὲ ν τὸν ἀκούοντα προσεκτικώτερον ποιεῖ, παρακολουθεῖν αὐτὸν ἀναγκάζων ταῖς ἐρωτήσεσιν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀφέντα τὴν τοῦ λέγοντος ῥοπὴν αὐτὸν πρὸς ἄλλοις ἔχειν τὸν νοῦν)."[22] Second, dialectics urges souls to turn their focus on themselves "by reverting him (the answerer) to himself away from thoughts of external matters (ἐπιστρέφων αὐτὸν εἰς ἑαυτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξω φερομένων λόγων)."[23] Third, it purifies the souls: "Because it makes him who holds false opinions turn away from himself, and disagree with himself and, while fighting against himself to look upon the shame of the fraud, and stretch toward the true knowledge (ποιεῖ γὰρ δὴ τὸν τὰς ψευδεῖς ἔχοντα δόξας αὐτὸν ὑφ' ἑαυτοῦ περιτρέπεσθαι καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν διαφωνεῖν καὶ ἑαυτῷ διαμαχόμενον καθορᾶν τὸ αἶσχος τῆς ἀπάτης καὶ τῆς ἀληθοῦς ἐπορέγεσθαι γνώσεως)."[24] Fourth, it enables souls to achieve recollection of the divine knowledge, the souls' *a priori* wisdom: "He said, 'if someone asks in the right way, those who are being asked answer everything from themselves. Like this, learning is recollection" ('ἂν γάρ τις', φησί, 'καλῶς ἐρωτᾷ, πάντα παρ' ἑαυτῶν οἱ ἐρωτώμενοι λέγουσιν'· οὕτως ἡ μάθησις ἀνάμνησίς ἐστι).[25] For Proclus, dialectics was a process of initiation since its purpose was the conversion of the souls from their indulgence in the matter toward self and ultimately the Good.[26] Furthermore, Proclus argued that participation in the perfection was given to Alcibiades through an asymmetrical union between the κατάβασις of Socrates and the ἀνάβασις of Alcibiades in the course of their exchange of arguments. Although Proclus accentuated the reciprocal relation between the two participants in the dialogue, he put more emphasis on the dominant role of Socrates for human perfection.[27]

While Proclus stated dialectics as the main methodology, he also noted two other ways through which Socrates guided Alcibiades. The first of these involves Socrates using the name of Alcibiades' father to call Alcibiades. Proclus viewed this unique way of calling Alcibiades as a technique employed by Socrates to revert Alcibiades' interest from the carnal love, i.e., the love of a vulgar lover, toward the intellectual love, i.e., the love of Socrates:

> ἡ ἐρωτικὴ συνουσία ταύτην ἀρχὴν προΐσταται τῆς οἰκειώσεως, τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐγειρομένην ἐν τῷ ἐρωμένῳ φιλοφροσύνην. κινεῖ γὰρ ἡ μὲν τοῦ πατρὸς μνήμη τὴν ἐν τῷ νεανίσκῳ πρὸς αὐτὸν οἰκείωσιν, αὕτη δὲ τὴν πρὸς τὸν Σωκράτην κοινωνίαν.

The erotic communion establishes the beginning of the affection, the friendliness aroused in the beloved by the father. It is because, on the one hand, the memory of the

father moves the affection inside the young man towards him; on the other hand, it moves the affection toward the communion with Socrates.[28]

> ὁ Σωκράτης ἐνδεικνύμενος διὰ τῆς πρώτης ταύτης κλήσεως ἐγείρει μὲν τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ ἐρωμένου πρὸς τὴν τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ κάλλους ἀντοχήν, ἀνακινεῖ δὲ τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ θαῦμα τῆς φιλοσόφου ζωῆς, περιάγει δὲ αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν τῆς ἀληθοῦς ἐρωτικῆς ἀποπλήρωσιν.

Socrates, declared through this first appellation, on the one hand, arouses the mind of the beloved toward its attachment to the true beauty, and on the other hand, stirs up in him (the beloved; Alcibiades) the wonder of the life of the philosopher, and leads him toward the accomplishment of the true love.[29]

The second other technique identified by Proclus involves Socrates inviting Alcibiades to contemplate on Socrates himself. Proclus explained that Socrates made Alcibiades contemplate on his perfect form of life so that Alcibiades could be, with amazement, motivated and attuned to Socrates' *vita* and *dicta*[30]:

> ἔτι τοίνυν διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν τούτων ῥημάτων ἅμα μὲν εἰς ἑαυτὸν ὁ Σωκράτης συλλέγει τὸν Ἀλκιβιάδην καὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πρόνοιαν, ἅμα δὲ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς αὐτὸν καὶ τῶν ἔνδον κινημάτων καθίστησι θεωρόν, καθαίρων μὲν αὐτὸν ἀπὸ αἰσθήσεως καὶ φαντασίας καὶ τῆς περιττῆς ἐν τοῖς ἐκτὸς οἰήσεως, ἐπιστρέφων δὲ εἰς τὴν ἔνδον ζωὴν καὶ πείθων γνωρίσαι τὰς κινήσεις τὰς ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐπισκέψασθαι τὸ τέλος αὐτῶν εἰς ὃ βλέπουσι καὶ τὸν τρόπον τῆς τελειώσεως αὐτῶν.

Therefore, through the same words, Socrates partly gathers Alcibiades to himself and his foresight and partly makes him the spectator of his soul and the movement within, on the one hand, purifying him (Alcibiades) from sensation, imagination, and superfluous perception of external things, while restoring him, on the other hand, to the life within and persuading him to know the movements within him and to inspect their end, toward which they aim and the manner of their fulfillment.[31]

Overall, the notion of κατάβασις occupies a central role in the Proclean theology. In his exegesis on *Alcibiades I*, Proclus explained how the κατάβασις of the gods perfects humans through philosophical practices, mainly the dialectical discussion and the contemplation on the *vita* and *dicta* of Socrates. In the text, Proclus affirmed that the κατάβασις of the gods converts humans from their indulgence in ephemeral materiality toward the recollection of the true knowledge which pre-existed within themselves. In the end, he emphasized that the divine descent ultimately enables humans to contemplate the Good, which is identified as the perfection of humans.[32]

Although Proclus followed Plato in arguing that the perfect state of the human soul occurs in the eschatological setting, where the soul becomes truly free from the body after its physical death, he held that perfection is attainable for humans in advance thanks to the providence of the gods. Proclus promoted the philosophical endeavor as the medium between the κατάβασις of gods and the ἀνάβασις of humans. Both are required for humans to reach fulfillment. However, Proclus believed in an asymmetrical form of union which enables human perfection: while human endeavor is required, it is the providence of the gods that mainly converts, guides, and eventually bestows the fulfillment.[33]

3. The Notion of Κατάβασις in Pseudo-Dionysius

The Proclean notion of κατάβασις was adapted in Christian form by Pseudo-Dionysius: Dionysius introduced a Christian notion of the Proclean κατάβασις in the *Divine Names*, while he explained how the κατάβασις is actualized across the entire creation in his *Celestial Hierarchy* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius envisioned the creation as arranged in a hierarchy, being dependent on the love of God, which produces, sustains, and perfects the entire created beings.[34] Dionysius identified the κατάβασις of God as the downward-ecstatic

love of God that reaches to creations through hierarchies, which he described as the divine light.

> ὅτι φῶς νοητὸν ὁ ἀγαθὸς λέγεται διὰ τὸ πάντα μὲν ὑπερουράνιον νοῦν ἐμπιμπλάναι νοητοῦ φωτός· πᾶσαν δὲ ἄγνοιαν καὶ πλάνην ἐλαύνειν ἐκ πασῶν, αἷς ἂν ἐγγένηται ψυχαῖς, καὶ πάσαις αὐταῖς φωτὸς ἱεροῦ μεταδιδόναι, καὶ τοὺς νοεροὺς αὐτῶν ὀφθαλμοὺς ἀποκαθαίρειν τῆς περικειμένης αὐταῖς ἐκ τῆς ἀγνοίας ἀχλύος...

The Good is said to be intellectual light because, on the one hand, it fills every hyper-celestial intellect with intellectual light, and, on the other hand, it expels all ignorance and deceit from all the souls in which it comes to be, and communicates to all of them a share of the sacred light, and it cleanses their intelligible eyes from the fog of ignorance which surrounds them...[35]

Dionysius argued that this κατάβασις of God is bestowed on humans during Christian liturgies. While Proclus emphasized the role of Socrates as the medium of divine κατάβασις, Dionysius focused on the theurgic character of liturgies which can enable the κατάβασις of God through which humans are purified, illuminated, and perfected. More precisely, he introduced hierarchies of beings that pass on God's κατάβασις to humans during sacraments, a doctrine clearly influenced by Proclus, as I shall further argue below.

Of course, although Dionysius incorporated Proclean ideas to explain the κατάβασις of God, his notion of κατάβασις was fundamentally Christian. Thus, as pointed out by Armstrong[36] and Vasilakis[37], while Proclus viewed the divine κατάβασις of gods as a natural consequence of their overflowing abundance, Dionysius introduced the ecstatic character of God's κατάβασις. As noted by Motia,[38] Dionysius supplemented the Proclean understanding of κατάβασις with the term "ἔκστασις" arguing that God is willingly reaching out to His creations in the form of erotic descent with a view to enable their participation in His transcendence. In this sense, Dionysius emphasized the reciprocal ecstasy between God and the created beings that occurs in the sacraments; on the one hand, God freely bestows Himself on His creations. On the other, created beings participate in God's transcendence that is fundamentally beyond their capacity. Dionysius defined God's ecstatic κατάβασις as follows:

> Ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἐκστατικὸς ὁ θεῖος ἔρως οὐκ ἐῶν ἑαυτῶν εἶναι τος ἐραστάς, ἀλλὰ τῶν ἐρωμένων. The divine eros is ecstatic, not allowing the lovers to belong to themselves but to the beloved.[39]

According to Dionysius, this ecstatic love is clearly revealed in the Incarnation of Christ. As argued by Vasilakis, while Proclus emphasized the "undefiled transcendence of the gods" when discussing the gods' providence, Dionysius focused on the manic/ecstatic philanthropy of God which is vividly revealed at the moment of Incarnation; assuming the guise of the manic lover, God became a human being. This is a zealous God who willingly intermingled with humans out of His philanthropy.[40] Simultaneously, in the same text, Dionysius insisted that regardless of this ecstatic κατάβασις, "(there is) no suffering to the fullness of God by the unutterable act of emptying" (μηδὲ ν πεπονθὼς εἰς τὸ ὑπερπλῆρες αὐτοῦ πρὸς τῆς ἀφθέγκτου κενώσεως).[41]

In the context of the liturgy, Dionysius demonstrated that God's κατάβασις is bestowed to humans through hierarchies. First, Dionysius placed hierarchies of intelligible beings between God and humans as mediators who communicate their fulfillment to humans. Dionysius' definition of their role reminds us of the role of Proclean Socrates from his exegesis on the *Alcibiades I*[42]:

> καὶ αὐτῆς ἐφιέμεναι, καὶ τὸ εἶναι καὶ τὸ εὖ εἶναι ἔχουσι, καὶ πρὸς αὐτὴν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀποτυπούμεναι καὶ ἀγαθοειδεῖς εἰσι καὶ ταῖς μεθ’ αὐτὰς κοινωνοῦσιν ὡς ὁ θεῖος θεσμὸς ὑφηγεῖται, τῶν εἰς αὐτὰς ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ διαφοιτησάντων δώρων.

As they yearn for the goodness of God (ἀυτῆς), they strengthen their being and their wellbeing, and as they are imitating the goodness of God as attainable, they become quasi-good, and they communicate to the lower ranks, according to the divine decree, the gifts with which they were filled by the Good.[43]

In the next paragraph, Dionysius refers once more to the:

> αἱ πρὸς τὰς κρείττους ἀναγωγικαὶ τῶν ὑφειμένων δυνάμεις, αἱ περὶ τὰ δεύτερα πρόνοιαι τῶν πρεσβυτέρων.

Powers which elevate the lower to following of the higher, and the providence of the latter towards the former.[44]

Celestial hierarchies, as mediating beings, on the one hand, yearn for the ecstatic union with God. However, on the other hand, they urge, restore, and uplift humans to perfection. In his *Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius demonstrated how God's κατάβασις is passed on to humans via three celestial hierarchies.[45]

Celestial Hierarchies	Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones Dominions, Powers, Authorities Principalities, Archangels, Angels

Dionysius envisioned the downward passing of the fulfillment of beings in the form of ecstatic love among hierarchies. Each class of beings, as the mediator between the higher and the lower, communicates the fulfillment they accomplished with the assistance of higher beings to lower beings, thereby raising lower beings to perfection.[46] In this sense, each celestial hierarchy serves as a mediator, thereby ultimately delivering God's κατάβασις to the lowest beings in the entire hierarchy, i.e., angels. Here, it should be noted that in Dionysian doctrine, the perfection that each hierarchy experiences refers not to the ascension of lower beings to higher beings, i.e., changes in the hierarchy, but rather to the full participation in God within their designated position.[47] Overall, each being experiences the fulfillment of its hierarchy through God's κατάβασις and communicates their fulfillment to lower beings. Finally, God's κατάβασις reaches angels, the lowest beings in the celestial hierarchy, and it is angels who communicate their fulfillment to humans.

Regarding the κατάβασις of God for the sake of humans, Dionysius situated humans in the ecclesiastical, more precisely, liturgical context, thereby advocating the theurgic character of the liturgy.[48]

Ecclesiastical Hierarchies	The Rite of Illumination, The Communion, The Sacrament of Ointment Hierarch, Priests, Deacons Monks, The Initiated, The Uninitiated (The Penitents, The Possessed, Catechumens)

As the table cited above indicates,[49] Dionysius believed that human perfection is achieved via liturgical participation. By insisting on the fundamental power of liturgies, he claimed that sacraments purify, illuminate, and perfect humans. Hence, the Rite of Illumination, i.e., the Baptism, purifies humans by making them eligible to participate in the Communion and Sacrament of Ointment.[50] Both the Communion and the Sacrament of Ointment lead humans to illumination and perfection.[51] The middle hierarchy, i.e., the clerical order, serves as the mediator between liturgies and humans. "The order of deacons is the order of purification and the separation of things that are dissimilar (Ἡ δὲ τῶν λειτουργῶν τάξις, ἡ καθαρτικὴ καὶ τῶν ἀνομοίων διακριτικὴ)."[52] The order of priests "initiates (us) with clarity into the knowledge of sacred things, and teaches us the sacred conditions and powers that correspond to them (τὰς ἐπιστήμας τῶν ἱερῶν ἐκφαντορικῶς μυοῦσα, καὶ ἐκδιδάσκουσα τὰς ἀναλόγους αὐτῶν καὶ ἱερὰς ἕξεις τε καὶ δυνάμεις)."[53] Finally, the order of hierarchs, as the highest rank of the clerical order

and as the presider of liturgies, is tasked with passing on liturgical perfection to humans.[54] In this way, Dionysius envisioned humans receiving the κατάβασις of God through the efficacy of their liturgical participation.

Overall, while Proclus discussed the κατάβασις of gods under the mediating role of philosophers, especially Socrates, Dionysius claimed that God's κατάβασις occurs through Christian liturgy. He insisted on the theurgic character of the liturgy arguing that during the liturgy God's κατάβασις is eventually communicated to humans through the divine hierarchies. Here, despite their differences, Dionysius was indebted to the Proclean notion of inspired lovers which he adapted to refer to the mediating activity of hierarchies.

4. The Notion of Κατάβασις in Maximus the Confessor

Maximus shared the Dionysian notion of the divine κατάβασις. In the *Five Hundred Chapters* Maximus directly borrowed Dionysius' definition of God's κατάβασις as an ecstatic movement through which God cares for humans and leads them to perfection. Using Dionysius' exact words, Maximus writes:

> Ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἐκστατικὸς ὁ θεῖος ἔρως, οὐκ ἐῶν ἑαυτῶν εἶναι τοὺς ἐραστάς, ἀλλὰ τῶν ἐρωμένων. The divine eros is ecstatic, not allowing the lovers to belong to themselves but to the beloved.[55]

And he continues:

> Καὶ δηλοῦσι τὰ μὲν ὑπέρτερα, τῆς προνοίας τῶν καταδεεστέρων γινόμενα· καὶ τὰ ὁμόστοιχα, τῆς ἀλλήλων συνοχῆς· καὶ τὰ ὑφειμένα, τῆς πρὸς τὰ πρῶτα θειοτέρας ἐπιστροφῆς.

The superior entities reveal (this) by bestowing providence toward the inferiors, and those of equal rank through joining together with each other; and the lower entities through the more divine return toward the first.[56]

However, regardless of the evident Dionysian influence, Maximus developed a distinctive understanding of God's κατάβασις.

First, Maximus emphasized the efficacy of the divine descent in the holistic transformation of the human body and soul. Maximus defined the κατάβασις as the transforming power of God that bestows humans a new mode of being in which both the human body and soul accomplish their fulfillment as envisioned in the Incarnation of Christ. This distinctive view was formed by his *holistic* anthropology in the context of which he viewed the human body as a co-recipient of eschatological bliss, thereby offering a broader vision of human perfection. As analyzed by Plested,[57] Maximus was deeply influenced by Macarius, who emphasized the somatic aspect of human perfection.[58] Following Macarius, Maximus denied any attempt to view humans as the incarnation of pre-existing souls.[59] Rather, he accentuated the human body as the essential indicative of the human being. This holistic anthropology enabled Maximus to write on the Incarnation of Christ with a more profound view regarding the ecstatic love of God.

> Τοῦτο κυρίως ἐστὶ τὸ τῆς προνοίας καὶ τῶν προνοουμένων πέρας, καθ' ὃ εἰς τὸν θεὸν ἡ τῶν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ πεποιημένων ἐστὶν ἀνακεφαλαίωσις.

This (the Incarnation) is, surely, the limit (goal) of providence and of those who experience providence. Through the Incarnation occurs the recapitulation of the beings created by Him toward God.[60]

As per the text above, Maximus emphasized God's physical descent and its clear impact on the human body. God physically became a human being, and He suffered the physical suffering, and the physical death for the purpose of the "healing (ἰατρεία)"[61] of the tarnished "human mode of being (τρόπος),"[62] which includes both the human body and soul.[63] Maximus stressed the Incarnated Christ as a bestower of a new reality of the human body and soul, in which they are no longer restricted by wrongly oriented pleasure, but entirely participate in God. Based on the holistic understanding of the Incarnation,

Maximus envisioned the moment of human perfection from the Biblical event of the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor. As Plested argued, Maximus identified the Transfiguration of Christ as the model of human perfection, i.e., the fulfillment of the human body and soul.[64]

> Οὕτως γὰρ ἐδόξασεν τὴν προσληφθεῖσαν ἀνθρωπότητα ὅτι ὥσπερ ἐν τῷ παθητῷ σώματι ὢν ὤφθη ἐν τῷ ὄρει μεταμορφωθείς, οὕτως ἡμεῖς ἐν τῇ ἀναστάσει ἄφθαρτον ἀπολαμβάνοντες σῶμα ἐσόμεθα.

For in this way He glorified the humanity He had assumed; because as He was seen transfigured on the mountain, while being in a passible body, so we will be in the resurrection receiving an incorruptible body.[65]

Furthermore, Maximus stressed the fundamental role of the divine κατάβασις for human fulfillment. More precisely, he argued that the divine κατάβασις not only perfects humans but also eternally sustains their blissful status, an emphasis Maximus developed while opposing Origenism. Through this, Maximus, on the one hand, tried to reassure humans of their eschatological status which the unstable eschatology of the Origenists had challenged,[66] and on the other hand, he sought to secure the absoluteness of God's transforming power. Based on his negative view of the metaphysics of the Origenists who suggested that human eschatological bliss is perishable by the fragility of humans, Maximus separated the efficacy of the upward human movement from the efficacy of the downward divine movement. Human activity is required for human perfection in so far as it prepares humans to receive the divine κατάβασις. However, human activity ceases entirely when God comes down and enables the fulfillment of human body and soul. Here, Maximus accentuated the absolute role of God by describing the human activity during the κατάβασις: human activity, he insists, ceases and humans merely receive and experience the ecstatic movement of God which transcends human capacity.

> τὴν δὲ κυρίως ἀληθινὴν ἐν μόνῃ τῇ πείρᾳ κατ' ἐνέργειαν δίχα λόγου καὶ νοημάτων, ὅλην τοῦ γνωσθέντος κατὰ χάριν μεθέξει παρεχομένην τὴν αἴσθησιν· δι' ἧς κατὰ τὴν μέλλουσαν λῆξιν τὴν ὑπὲρ φύσιν ὑποδεχόμεθα θέωσιν ἀπαύστως ἐνεργουμένην.

On the other hand, there is (knowledge) that is true which is gained only by actual experience, without reasoning and concepts, which provides, by grace through participation, a whole perception of the One who is known. Through this knowledge, according to the culmination that is about to be, we receive union with God beyond our nature that is in action unceasingly.[67]

Overall, Maximus developed the Proclean notion of κατάβασις via Dionysius' reworking of it, albeit in a different setting. Under his holistic anthropology, Maximus defined the divine descent as God's transforming act on the human body and soul, which bestows humans a new mode of being, as envisioned in the Incarnation and Transfiguration of Christ. Then, Maximus defended the dominant role of κατάβασις for human perfection by placing it in a more austere framework where human effort is separated from the efficacy of the divine κατάβασις.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I examined the Neoplatonic notion of the κατάβασις of gods as articulated by Proclus and adapted by Christian thinkers to explain the providential love of God toward humans aiming at their intellectual and spiritual fulfilment. Thus, my work focuses on a core aspect of the influence of Neoplatonism on Christianity.

Proclus developed his theology focusing on the notion of κατάβασις, which emphasized the dominant role of divine providence for human perfection. He identified divine providence as the divine love according to which gods care and revert the lower beings and lead them to perfection. In his exegesis of *Alcibiades I*, Proclus demonstrated how the

κατάβασις of gods fulfills humans through philosophical practices, mainly through the philosophical exchange between Socrates and Alcibiades. Proclus portrayed Socrates, as an inspired lover who invited Alcibiades to fulfillment through philosophical practices. Here, Proclus emphasized the dominant role of Socrates much more than Alcibiades' endeavor for human fulfillment. In this sense, Proclus envisioned the perfection afforded to humans as a result of an asymmetrical union between the ἀνάβασις of humans and the κατάβασις of the gods that occurs in the course of the human philosophical endeavor, mainly, through dialectics and the contemplation of the *vita* and *dicta* of Socrates.

While Proclus argued that divine κατάβασις occurs through the mediation of philosophers, for instance, Socrates, Dionysius claimed that such experience occurs in the liturgical context. Dionysius endeavored to reveal how his Christian understanding of God's κατάβασις, i.e., God's ecstatic κατάβασις, is passed on to humans during the sacraments, focusing on his hierarchy doctrine in which beings from each rank communicate their fulfillment to lower beings. Here, Dionysius incorporated the Proclean notion of inspired lovers to refer to the activities of hierarchies, although there exists a clear difference.

Maximus the Confessor directly followed the Dionysian definition of God's κατάβασις by using Dionysius' sentences in his work. However, he further developed the Christian notion of Proclean κατάβασις, by synthesizing it with his major doctrines, i.e., the holistic anthropology and human fulfillment, and uttermost emphasis on the fundamental role of the κατάβασις for human perfection.

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Notes

1   (Armstrong 1961) argued that Proclus' exegesis of divine love is closer to original Platonism compared to that of Plotinus who did not believe in the providential aspect of divine love toward creation; see for example, Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.5.12.

2   I use the term, ἀνάβασις, i.e., ascension, to refer to human endeavor toward perfection. See (Liddell and Scott 2007, p. 47).

3   "The perfecting power of the giver, and the utmost fitness of the recipient (τὴν τελεσιουργὸν τοῦ δώσοντος δύναμιν καὶ τὴν ἄκραν ἐπιτηδειότητα τοῦ ληψομένου)." See *In Alc.* 123; all the Greek texts of *In Alc.* follow (Westerink 1954) and all translations of *In Alc.* are mine having consulted (O'Neill 1971). Also see (Riggs 2016, p. 463).

4   In *In Alc.* 121 and 139, while insisting on the significance of human readiness, Proclus clearly argued that it is the providence of gods that actually leads humans to perfection. In the text, he clearly portrayed Socrates as having the power to perfect Alcibiades, a prepared soul, acting in a way that evokes the providence of gods, especially that of Apollo who bestows humans purification and elevation (*In Alc.* 83). Note that Proclus refers primarily to the providence of lower deities, that is, to the Olympian gods as incorporated into the Proclean hierarchy. See (Chlup 2012) who argued that the Olympian gods are the second-lowest deities in Proclean theology, just above cosmic deities. See *In Alc.* 83, 121, 139; cf. (Vasilakis 2021, pp. 78–91).

5   See (van den Berg 2017) who examined Socrates' leading role in redefining the emotion of φιλοτιμία, translated as ambition/love of honor. Hence, while vulgar lovers seduced Alcibiades to the φιλοτιμία of ephemeral power and honor, Socrates urged him to the φιλοτιμία of the philosophical life.

6   See *Phaedrus* 248C-E. Please, note all references to Plato are given in accordance with the Loeb Classical Library editions, specified in the bibliography: (Fowler 1914), (Emlyn-Jones and Preddyand 2017).

7   See *In Alc.* 116.

8   In this sense, (van den Berg 2003) connected Proclus' philosophy with Greek theurgy, arguing that both have the same character and purpose in freeing humans from corporeality toward the perfect intellectuality of souls.

9   In his major dialogues, for instance, in the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, Plato identified the mode of life that is dedicated to the constant contemplation of the Good as the blissful life that human souls enjoyed before their tragic incarnation. Plato argued that human salvation begins by recollecting their *a priori* knowledge through philosophical endeavor, especially dialectics, that converts humans from carnal life toward intellectual life. In this sense, Plato identified the salvation of souls as the freedom from the body: while souls that failed to live philosophical life suffer from an inappropriate carnal desire and re-incarnation after their physical death, philosophers' souls enjoy the bodiless-intellectual life in the realm of Forms. See *Phaedo* 81A-E; *Phaedrus* 248C-E; 249A-B.

10   Proclus followed Plato, who in the *Phaedo* described physical death as the goal of philosophical endeavor in a sense that freedom from the material body is required of philosophers for the perfect intellectual life. In this sense, Proclus also envisioned the

perfect form of souls in the context of freedom from material bodies. He specifically identified the love of knowledge as divine while devaluating the love of the body as ephemeral. See *Phaedo* 80E; *In Alc.* 117.

11　See *In Alc.* 116.

12　(Marler 1993) demonstrated that in Proclean philosophy the perfection occurs as the result of the reciprocal relationship between "agent-patient."

13　See *Inst. Theol.* 120.

14　See *Inst. Theol.* 122; the Greek text of *Inst. Theol.* follows (Dodds 1963), and this translation of *Inst. Theol.* is mine having consulted (Dodds 1963).

15　See *In Alc.* 53.

16　See *In Alc.* 53.

17　More precisely, according to the likeness of the spirit/god Apollo. See *In Alc.* 83.

18　Here, Proclus followed Plato, who identified philosophical fulfillment as religious initiation. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato defined philosophers as those initiated in "a mystery rite (τελετή)," captured by "madness (μανία)" which urges them to the knowledge of Forms. Here, he accentuated that only the initiated shall experience reinstatement to their original state. See *Phaedrus* 244A; 253C; 256D.

19　See *In Alc.* 159.

20　See *In Alc.* 159.

21　See *In Alc.* 170–171.

22　See *In Alc.* 170.

23　See *In Alc.* 170.

24　See *In Alc.* 170.

25　See *In Alc.* 171.

26　In *In Alc.* 20 Proclus identified three kinds of reversion; first, the reversion to inferior beings. Second the reversion to human-self, and third the reversion to superior beings. According to Proclus, dialectics gradually frees humans from human indulgence in materiality toward human-self, which eventually elevates humans to divine knowledge. See *In Alc.* 20–21. Also see (Vasilakis 2019b), where he interpreted 'the reversion to inferior beings' as meaning the providential movement of Socrates.

27　See *In Alc.* 123.

28　See *In Alc.* 26.

29　See *In Alc.* 27.

30　See (Wohl 2012) who argued that the contemplation on Socrates' *vita* and *dicta* functioned as a significant pedagogical methodology that enabled Alcibiades (and also the readers of the *Alcibiades I*) to imitate the perfect life of Socrates in real life.

31　See *In Alc.* 141.

32　This theme is prevalent in the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo* as well, where Plato connected closely the constant participation in the Good through the contemplation with the restoration of human soul, i.e., the salvation. See *Phaedrus* 256D; *Phaedo* 84A-B.

33　The tension between the ἀνάβασις of souls and the κατάβασις of gods in the context of human fulfillment exists in the works of Plato. For instance, while Plato stressed the significance of the souls' act of ἀνάβασις in the *Phaedrus*, he also stressed the importance of κατάβασις from the superior being, i.e., Socrates, in the *Alcibiades I*. The same tension resides in Proclean works; however, Proclus accentuated more the role of the κατάβασις of gods in the form of downward divine love that occurs throughout the Proclean hierarchy, as revealed in his *Elements of Theology* and the exegesis on the *Alcibiades I*. See *Phaedrus* 248D-C, where Socrates emphasized the significance of philosophical endeavor for the salvation of the soul. And see *In Alc.* 40–41, where Proclus identified Socrates as the divine κατάβασις to lead Alcibiades to fulfillment. Also, see *Inst. Theol.* 122, where Proclus introduced the principle of divine κατάβασις within the hierarchy, from divine Henads toward the physical world.

34　See *Div. Nom.* 4.4 (PG 3:700A). Please, note Pseudo-Dionysius is cited according to (Migne 1857).

35　See *Div. Nom.* 4.5 (PG 3:700D); all the Greek texts of *Div. Nom.* follow Migne (PG 3), and all translations of *Div. Nom.* are mine having consulted Luibheid 1987.

36　See (Armstrong 1961).

37　See (Vasilakis 2021).

38　See (Motia 2021).

39　See *Div. Nom.* 4.13 (PG 3:712A).

40　See (Vasilakis 2017), arguing that the notion of God's manic philanthropy as revealed in the Incarnation is the key difference between Dionysius and Proclus; cf. (Vasilakis 2016).

41　See *Div. Nom.* 2.10 (PG 3:649A).

42　However, it should be noted that although Dionysius incorporated the Proclean notion of the inspired lover to refer to the activities of hierarchies, he only adapted its epistemological feature, not the ontological ramification of Proclus' system: By leaning on Proclean feature, Dionysius endeavored to reveal how his Christian understanding of God's κατάβασις, i.e., God's ecstatic κατάβασις, is gradually passed on to humans. See (Perl 1994; cf. Vasilakis 2019a).

43   See *Div. Nom.* 4.1 (PG 3:696A).

44   See *Div. Nom.* 4.2 (PG 3:696B).

45   See *Coel. Hier.* 7; 8; 9 (PG 3:205A; 237B; 257A); I followed Luibheid's translation of names in (Luibheid 1987, pp. 161–73).

46   See *Coel. Hier.* 4.2 (PG 3:108A-B).

47   This unique view of perfection was formed in the context of Dionysius' endeavor to revise Origen's doctrine. Origen introduced a disorderly reality of created beings in which created beings were constantly recreated as different levels of beings as the result of their life in each aeon, i.e., periods of time between repeated judgments and re-creations until the final judgment. As argued by (Constas 2018), Dionysius introduced the fixed hierarchy of creations into his theological discussion as a way of amending Origen's unstable cosmology and to theologically assure humans' place in the process of divine providence.

48   As argued by Louth, Dionysian view on the process of human perfection is theurgic; although the human effort is a prerequisite, the κατάβασις of God through liturgies is crucial for human perfection. See (Louth 1986).

49   See *Eccl. Hier.* 2.1; 3.1; 3.3.6; 4.1; 5.1.5–6; 6.2 (PG 3:392A; 424B; 432C; 472C; 505B-508B; 533B); I followed Luibheid's translation of names in Luibheid 1987, 200–238.

50   See *Eccl. Hier.* 2 (PG 3:392A-404D).

51   See *Eccl. Hier.* 3:4 (PG 3:424B-445C; 472C-485B).

52   See *Eccl. Hier.* 5.1.6 (PG 3:508A); all the Greek texts of *Eccl. Hier.* follow Migne (PG 3), and all translations of *Eccl. Hier.* are mine having consulted Luibheid 1987.

53   See *Eccl. Hier.* 5.1.6 (PG 3:505D).

54   See *Eccl. Hier.* 5.1.5 (PG 3:505B-C).

55   See Maximus' *Cap. Quin.* V.85 (PG 90:1384D) and Dionysius' *Div. Nom.* 4.13 (PG 3:712A), see note 39; all the Greek texts of *Cap. Quin.* follow Migne (PG 90), and all translations of *Cap. Quin.* are mine having consulted (Palmer et al. 1981). Please, note that Maximus the Confessor is cited from (Migne 1860) throughout the article.

56   Here, although there are some changes in words, Maximus directly followed the Dionysian argument. See Maximus' *Cap. Quin.* V.85 (PG 90:1384D) and Dionysius' *Div. Nom.* 4.13 (PG 3:712A).

57   On Macarius' influence on Maximus, see (Plested 2004, pp. 213–54); also, see (Plested 2015).

58   See Plested 2004 for an analysis of Macarius' influence on Maximus, especially on Maximus' view on the human body. According to Plested, Macarius' emphasis on the human physical heart as the centre of the human intelligence, and the physical sensation as the recipient of God's κατάβασις, as well as the physical transformation as the efficacy of divine κατάβασις, formed the central doctrines of Maximus' pro-somatic anthropology. See (Plested 2004, pp. 213–54).

59   Maximus introduced his holistic anthropology in the context of his refutation of Origen's extreme anthropology, which viewed humans as materialized souls due to corruption. In his *Ambiguum* 7, he emphasized the human body as the essential indicative of humans defining humans as the body and soul simultaneously created as a human being at the moment of creation. See *Amb. 7* (Constas 2014) (DOML 28:138).

60   See *Q. Thal.* 60 (PG 90:621A); all the Greek texts of *Q. Thal.* follow Migne (PG 90), and all translations of *Q. Thal.* are mine having consulted (Constas 2018).

61   See *Cap. Quin*. 4.40 (PG 90:1322D).

62   See *Cap. Quin*. 4.40 (PG 90:1322D).

63   See *Cap. Quin*. 4.38-43 (PG 90:1320C-1324C).

64   See (Plested 2004, p. 218).

65   See *Q. Dub.* 190 (CCSG 10: 131–132); the Greek text of *Q. Dub.* follows (Declerck 1982) (CCSG 10), and this translation of *Q. Dub.* is mine having consulted (Prassas 2010).

66   As demonstrated by Blowers, Origen presented the persistence of intellectual beings to contemplate God as a prerequisite for their perfection. Maximus viewed it as problematic since he thought this idea eventually suggests an endless repetition of the beings' satiety and their Fall. Thus, he endeavored to amend it with the absolute role of the κατάβασις of God that perfects the fragile humans. See (Blowers 1992).

67   See *Q. Thal.* 60 (PG 90:622D).

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