

CHAPTER ONE

*The Perennial  
Quest for  
Origins*



## I

To gaze upon the mighty salmon as they fight their way upstream, throwing their whole being in and out of the water to once again be born is a sight which can but cause us wonder. These head-  
5 strong creatures, powerful and vibrant in the prime of life, will to be where they began so they may breed, and dying, go forth again through their progeny into the wide white-crested sea until, by the age old call, they are beckoned once more to  
10 return. The desire and impulse, the drive, to return to the beginning, to the womb, to the source of one's being, is a phenomenon without parallel. So deep, so ubiquitous is it that we forget its hold and power over and within us. While we  
15 may wonder at the salmon we quite forget that in our science, religion, and philosophy, in the inmost depths of our unconscious being, the very same perennial forces are at play. We may distance ourselves in the sands of time from the wonder of  
20 our birth, but death washes us upon the shoals of space until, finally, we turn away, abandoning our daily ablutions, and wonder ever yet again upon

our being, upon the womb of our existence. We too, like the salmon, have buried deep within us that instinct to return and to survive. We want to live, to be forever, and, in this willing to return, is imbedded deep below our surface the desire to know, to cradle in the tiny hands of time the first child that ever was.

Human history has been replete with the phenomena of return. It is so now, and so it will ever be. We humans, like the myriad life and death around us of which we are a part, are obsessed with our origins. The obsession is not unique with us — far from it. Entropy, given enough time, does its work; dust returns to dust, composition decomposes. Neither atoms, nor molecules, nor cells, nor plants, nor other animals can escape — but the dimension of our obsession to return, of its hold upon us and its thrust within us, is of a variety and quality unlike that of any other earthly being.

In philosophy we talk not of origins or drives, but of causes. For Aristotle wonder, the fundamental natural impulse to knowledge,<sup>1</sup> was, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A 980a1; and Book A (I) generally.

end, only directed to and satisfied by knowledge of cause. Νοῦς<sup>2</sup> (nous) was, finally, the final cause towards which everything, like the salmon to their rivers, was drawn, impelled by the power of  
 5 an inborn erotic impulse.<sup>3</sup> This νοῦς was for

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<sup>2</sup> Νοῦς (nous) is very difficult to translate as its implications in Greek, particularly in the linguistic usage of Aristotle, are both tied to the nuances of every day discourse and to the technical meanings of a most subtle and erudite philosophical system. English meanings include the terms Mind, Spirit, Reason but do not convey the active sense of a Divine Thinker never not thinking and hence never not alive and never able not to be.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Λ 1072b3. Aristotle explicitly says that the νοῦς moves as “being loved” (ἐρώμενον). The verb form here is from ἐρώω the Greek word for erotic, physical love. Aristotle does not use the verb φιλέω which in Greek is associated with friendship and non-physical attraction. The kind of passion Aristotle thinks of here is that of the most powerful instinctual attraction associated most often for the Greeks with Aphrodite. In the *DeAnima* (B. 415a24-415b7) Aristotle remarks that in the nutritive soul (θρεπτικὴ ψυχὴ) is lodged the most primitive and widespread power (δύναμις) of the soul, which is

Aristotle a divine animal,<sup>4</sup> a singular god which, while neither creative nor motive, was, nevertheless, alive and the focal point of a cosmic return. Commentators often forget that the Aristotelian νοῦς is both a ζῶον and the object of a cosmic love.<sup>5</sup> To explain how everything turned

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manifested in the act of generation (ἔργα γεννησῶν) and the use of food. He goes on to point out that in the act of generation, or reproduction, animals and plants, as far as they are naturally able, partake of the divine and eternal. He uses here the Platonic verb form for participation (τοῦ ἄεὶ καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ μετέχσιν) and links it with the idea (which we see fully expounded in the *Metaphysics*) that “everything desires such participation” (πάντα γὰρ ἐκείνου ὀρέεται). For Aristotle the final power of the final cause is shown in the inborn instinctual desire of φύσις (nature) for νοῦς. For a fuller discussion of Aristotle’s idea of causation and its importance in his philosophy see my article: “Aristotle and Modern Historical Criticism”, *Laval théologique et philosophique*, Feb. 1980, 17-27.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle uses the term ζῶον: *Metaphysics*, A 1072b29.

<sup>5</sup> By using the term ζῶον in reference to the νοῦς Aristotle is indicating most clearly, and in a way

toward νοῦς how the best in us strained for the

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consonant with any Greek world-view, that the νοῦς is an ensouled being. In other words the νοῦς has a soul, a ψυχή. At the same time this divine νοῦς is the object of erotic love as pointed out in *note 2* above. Aristotle in the *De Anima* tries to distinguish between the nutritive, sensitive, and intellective powers of the soul. The problem arises for him of how the νοῦς can be most complete and yet without nutrition and sensation. Aristotle's answer is that it is self-sufficient and without external desire: that is, its desire is for itself alone and is, therefore, presumably complete. The problem which Aristotle is left with is twofold: (1) how can the intellective soul be more complete than a soul that is also nutritive and sensitive; and (2) how can an intellective "life" be simple (ἁπλῶς — *Metaphysics*, Λ 1072a 32) if it is both subject and object, and, if subject and object are the same (ταῦτόν — *Metaphysics*, Λ. 1072b21) by contact (θιγγάνων — *Metaphysics*, Λ. 1072b21), how can they be distinguished? We can see the effort to overcome this set of paradoxes in the Neoplatonic synthesis of Plato and Aristotle, wherein the νοῦς is set within an hierarchy of beings. For a full account of this see my book: *The Logical Principles of Proclus' Στοιχείωσις Θεολογική as Systematic Ground of the Cosmos*, Amsterdam, 1980.

state of νοῦς<sup>6</sup> was the final result of Aristotle's own path home. But for Aristotle's successors his νοῦς could not be final. For the Platonists who finally completed the Greek speculative journey νοῦς is a kind of undeveloped δημιουργός, or divine craftsman, a fixed point in a truncated cosmos. After centuries of meditation and generations of comment upon the major texts of antiquity the Aristotelian νοῦς was incorporated into a cosmic format which represents the last flowering of Greek philosophy.<sup>7</sup> This speculative exegesis, which has

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<sup>6</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (X. 1177b) Aristotle asserts without reservation that the noetic life is the best possible and that it is the only path to immortality in so far as such a state may be possible. "If then the divine in man is reason (νοῦς), even this life is divine compared to human life. And it is not necessary to mind (φρονεῖν) those counselling that men and human things are mortal. Rather we must, as far as is possible, be immortal by doing (ποιεῖν) everything in life according to the best that is in us." (*Nic. Eth.*, X.7. 1177b30-34) (All translations in *Psyche and Cosmos* are by the author unless stated otherwise.)

<sup>7</sup> The Neoplatonists could never accept Aristotle's idea that the nous was the highest and first principle. For them νοῦς is still infected with plurality.

Plotinus states this very clearly in his sixth Ennead (VI,7,41, ll.8-17): *What does the νοῦς itself need in order to think? Surely it does not sense (αἰσθανέται) itself — for it need not — nor is it two. Rather there is the manifold of the νοῦς itself, the act of thinking — for the νοῦς and νόησις are not the same — and the third, even the object of thinking. Suppose then the thinker (νοῦς), the act of thinking (νόησις) and the object of thinking (νοητόν) are the same, becoming one by hiding in each other; yet, once distinguished, something will not again be undistinguished. Any otherness must be given up as the best nature does not need any help at all. For what might you add, when the addition is a lessening of what needs nothing.*” The νοῦς is for Plotinus, as the second hypostasis, an intermediary principle between the One and the Soul. As such it produces soul in the Platonic way of participation. In Proclus we see the completed form of Neoplatonic synthesis. Here the νοῦς is fully incorporated into the hierarchy of Being in a cosmos consisting of the One and Being. Proclus follows Plotinus in thinking of the νοῦς, as subject and self-object, as numerically one but yet not logically one. That is to say, for the Neoplatonists, the logical distinction is a *real* distinction which renders the νοῦς, as a being, below the One. Proclus develops this idea more fully than did Plotinus by introducing the henads (ἐνάδες) between the One and νοῦς. Each



henad is a unit in which there are no distinctions; unlike the "hidden" triadic nature of νοῦς as also νόησις and νοητόν. At the same time, however, each henad is also a "participant" in unity and, therefore, according to Proclus, cannot be pure unity (*Elements of Theology*, Prop. 2); in addition, there is a multiplicity of henads, while there is only one One. Thus the henads are more akin to the One than νοῦς, while, like the νοῦς, they are numerically one. Yet they are not *the* One. That Proclus fully understands Aristotle's claims for νοῦς can be seen by a close reading of his *Elements of Theology*, particularly *Propositions 165-184* especially Prop. 168). At the same time these propositions show how Proclus integrated Aristotle's first principle into an hierarchy in which it is an intermediate principle. The Neoplatonic rejection of Aristotle's νοῦς as the first principle is not based on a misunderstanding of Aristotle's position, but on understanding it as needing to be integrated into a Greek cosmos which can account for production as well as return, even as it assumes that Being as φύσις and νοῦς always is. Aristotle had evidently thought of the νοῦς as analogous to Plato's idea of the δημιουργός while at the same time thinking of the νοῦς as *unmoving* and, therefore, without the defect of motion, which Plato had attributed to the best soul as first cause and νοῦς (*Laws*, X, 873b-899d; see especially 897c for the conjunction of

νοῦς with the best soul (ἀρίστη ψυχή). Aristotle's νοῦς as a ζῶον and a δημιουργός can be a kind of combination of the θεός in *Timaeus* as δημιουργός (see *Timaeus*, 29a3 and 30a2 for the Platonic transition from δημιουργός to ὁ θεός) with the providential character of the Platonic self-moving soul as the principle of life. The Platonic παραδείγματα (exemplars) (*Timaeus*, 28e6) are incorporated by Aristotle into the νοῦς when he refers to it as the "form of forms" (*De Anima*, 432a1 — καὶ ὁ νοῦς εἶδος εἰδῶν) and to the intellectual soul (ψυχή νοητική) as the "place of the forms" (*De Anima*, 429a27 — τόπος εἰδῶν). While Aristotle can be seen to have tried to bring together the various grades of being into the νοῦς, he can also be said to have tried to purify from νοῦς the very same variety. This is the chief dilemma and paradox of the Aristotelian philosophy. The reduction of φύσις to the principle requires that the principle be its completion (ἐντελέχεια). At the same time this completion as unmoving (ἄκίνητος) and without matter (ὑλη) or potentiality (δύναμις) is an ἐντελέχεια as ἐνέργεια that is simple (ἁπλῶς) and self-contained. In short Aristotle would have to equivocate any term he uses to describe the νοῦς in order to use it both of nature (φύσις) and of νοῦς. The later Neoplatonists, particularly Iamblichus and Proclus, tried to get around this difficulty in two ways: (a) ontologically, by follow-

ing Plotinus' criticism of the νοῦς as having plurality while at the same time clarifying Plotinus' distinctions between ἔν, νοῦς, and ψυχή; and (b) logically, by developing the *via negativa* in relation to the idea participation. (For an exposition of the Neoplatonic hierarchy and the relation between Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus see my book: *The Logical Principles of Proclus' Στοιχείωσις Θεολογική as Systematic Ground of the Cosmos*, *op. cit.*, especially the Introduction, pp. 1-27, and the Appendix: the latter is a consideration of the relation between Proclus' *Elements of Theology* and *Platonic Theology*.) Commentators have tried to get around the difficulty of synthesizing Aristotle's idea of the relation of νοῦς to φύσις by distinguishing his use of νοῦς in *Metaphysics* from that in *De Anima*. The notorious controversies over whether the noetic soul in Aristotle is immortal, which go back to Neoplatonic times, continued in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and still flourish in some circles today, are an indication of the depth of the problem. The perennial nature of the dilemma is due, however, as is argued in *Psyche and Cosmos*, not so much to discrepancies or disunities in the actual statements of Aristotle, but rather to the nature of the Greek cosmos itself as a cosmos in which being as hierarchy is assumed.

come to be known as Neoplatonism, was not content either with Aristotle's semi-platonism or with Plato's hints at a mathematized<sup>8</sup> cosmos full of ideas participating in a single One or Good.

5 Plotinus developed and Proclus completed with help from Iamblichus a speculative cosmos in which the point of return was also that of origin.<sup>9</sup> The One was beyond Thought as beyond Being and Life, but it was also the source of what it

10 was beyond and to which in some manner all desired, as to the Aristotelian final cause, to return. To be *one* with the One was to be truly blessed. To enjoy, to recollect once again, that state of bliss was, we may say, the *be all and end*

15 all of life. Νοῦς, the One, Anaximander's (ἄπειρον),<sup>10</sup> Parmenides' Being (ἔόν)<sup>11</sup> —

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<sup>8</sup> For an interesting and informative account of these Platonic "hints" see J.N. Findlay's *Plato: the Written and Unwritten Doctrines*, New York, 1974.

<sup>9</sup> For an account of the speculative cosmos see my book: *The Logical principles of Proclus' Στοιχείωσις Θεολογική as Systematic Ground of the Cosmos*, Amsterdam, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> See Anaximander's fragments, particularly *Fragment 1*, in: *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. H. Diels

whatever to find the source, the very font of Being and of Life, was the original philosophical impulse — the original philosopher's dream. And, as we shall see, this original autochthonous ground has remained and will remain at the very heart of philosophy, at the leading edge of philosophical desire.

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and W. Kranz, vol. 1, 6th ed. Dublin/Zürich, 1951-1952.

<sup>11</sup> See Parmenides' fragments, particularly *Fragment 6*, in: *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz, vol. 1, 6th ed. Dublin/Zürich, 1951-1952.