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*The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon: Platonism in Late Byzantium, between Hellenism and Orthodoxy* by Vojtěch Hladký

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*Reviewed by*  
Börje Bydén  
University of Gothenburg  
[borje.byden@gu.se](mailto:borje.byden@gu.se)

*The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon*, a revised doctoral thesis of 2007 from Prague's Charles University, purports to give a systematic overview of George Gemistos Plethon's philosophy that is based mainly on the primary sources, a departure, as the author explains, from a great deal of previous scholarship which 'relies too much on external information about [Plethon's] personality' [6]. This is a laudable ambition; and fittingly, the seven-page introduction offers only a bare outline of Plethon's life and *Nachleben*, and an overview of earlier works on Plethon so summary that it can only serve the purpose of an *apologia* for the author's own approach.

The main body of the work is divided into three unequal parts:

- (1) Public Philosophy [11–31], in which a letter and two deliberative speeches from the earliest part of Plethon's literary career are discussed in conjunction with two later funeral orations;
- (2) *Philosophia perennis* [35–185], which mainly expounds the contents of the surviving parts of Plethon's *Laws*, supplemented by other sources; and
- (3) Question of Religion [189–285], in which the conclusions of previous scholarship on the subject in hand are assessed.

Following the three parts are an appendix collecting some of the texts discussed, a manuscript supplement providing a transcription of British Library Add. MS 5424 for those parts of the *Laws* lacking in [Alexandre 1858](#), bibliographies, an index of passages quoted, and a helpful general index.

The book's organization—rather than any explicit statement—suggests its origin in a preoccupation with the relation between Plethon's public *persona* and his private convictions. Such an interest is naturally prompted by the

controversial nature of the doctrines expressed in some of Plethon's writings, notably the *Laws*, with its apparent advocacy of pagan polytheism. Modern attempts to understand these doctrines in their contemporary context have typically involved the hypothesis, first proposed by Charles Alexandre and later publicized by François Masai, that the *Laws* was intended for esoteric use by a secret society at Mistra (where Plethon resided from about 1409 until his death). The hypothesis has been expanded in recent times by scholars such as Niketas Siniossoglou into a universal theory, in which each and every humble wellspring in the relatively arid history of Byzantine thought is supposed to be connected by a carefully concealed underground paganist current. For eminently valid scholarly reasons, Vojtěch Hladký discards Siniossoglou's ideas as based on 'no straightforward and unambiguous evidence' [6]. It will turn out that, in part 3, he practically reverses the esotericist perspective by calling into question the extent to which Plethon had any serious agenda in the *Laws* at all [see below].

Part 1, then, takes as its subject matter texts in which Plethon's philosophy was 'openly presented as his own thought to a larger public' [11]. The inclusion among these texts of a letter to Emperor Manuel II and two deliberative speeches directed to named individuals (the emperor and his son Theodore, Despot of Morea) may seem somewhat arbitrary, seeing that several other letters, and especially the *De differentiis*—a treatise on Aristotle's shortcomings as compared to Plato, which sparked a long and fierce debate among the Byzantine *literati* of the 15th century—have been relegated to part 2. One should keep in mind, obviously, that addresses to rulers will have been read aloud in the presence of other dignitaries. Even so, the suspicion lingers that considerations of content have also exerted some influence on the division of texts between the first two parts of the book.

In fact, the letter and the two deliberative speeches are almost entirely taken up with political issues, namely, the urgency of defense measures and social reform in the Peloponnese. With the two funeral orations for Manuel's and Theodore's respective consorts, Empress Helena and Despoina Cleope, the situation is naturally different. In each of these, Plethon presents a string of arguments in favour of the immortality of the human soul, both times ending with one that stands out as much for its weakness as for its potential offensiveness in the context. It is based on the possibility of suicide. As Plethon maintains, people sometimes take their own lives, whatever we

may think of it. But since by nature nothing seeks its own destruction (but everything, so far as possible, its own preservation), it is impossible for one and the same entity to be both the agent and the patient of the same act of destruction; rather, then, what is destroyed must be one entity, clearly mortal, and what destroys another one, presumably immortal.

A striking feature of all these examples of Plethon's 'public philosophy' is the absence of appeals to any specifically Christian ideas, whether in the context of defense against the Infidel or in that of the afterlife of the souls of the deceased Imperial Highnesses. On the contrary, the deliberative speeches stress the continuity of the 15th-century Peloponnese with pre-Christian antiquity, while the funereal ones expressly affirm the universality of belief in the soul's immortality. This, however, Hladký argues, 'does not mean that they are in conflict with Christianity' [28].

Open confrontation with the state religion is certainly not to be expected from texts composed for such occasions. However, it seems to me that Plethon's do stretch the limit of decorum: I am thinking, for instance, of his warnings against the three sources of impiety distinguished in book 10 of Plato's *Laws* and his particular concern with the third of these, resulting in the resolute denial of the efficacy of ritual and prayer in his *Consilium* [Lampros 1930, 125.2–126.22] and his *Oratio ad Man.* [Lampros 1926, 258.2–4]. In his speech to the emperor, *Oratio ad Man.*, this particular warning becomes a diatribe against the 'self-professed philosophers'—to wit, the monks—who deserve no financial support from the state [Lampros 1926, 257.9–259.20].

Similarly, praise of the forebears of Empress Helen (herself a nun for the last 25 years of her life), not for having founded churches and monasteries—which they did—but rather for having, in the legendary person of Eumolpus, established the Eleusinian mysteries 'in view of the immortality of the soul' [*Monodia in Helenam Palaiologiam*: Lampros 1926, 269], must have sounded ominous, even to the original audience, at the beginning of Plethon's eulogy. The claim that no one in his right mind would deny that between the Creator and the human race there are intermediary natures, intellects, or else some kind of superior souls, whose main activity is to contemplate the beings of the world and especially their Creator [*Monodia*: Lampros 1926, 276], may well be, as Hladký says, 'interpreted as a statement in perfect accord with' the angelology of Pseudo-Dionysius [24–25]; but to those who had ears to hear the close resemblance of the description

of these natures to the accounts of the gods in the *Laws* [Alexandre 1858, 144, 246 / TLG 3.34, 1.146–149, 3.43.70–75], it must have been at least a trifle eerie. And the final argument, which also has its counterpart in the *Laws* [Alexandre 1858, 248 / TLG 3.43.89–108; not noted in this context by Hladký but at 258], contains at least the seed of a defense of suicide.

Although it does not really correspond to any theme developed in the works under consideration, the title of the second part, ‘*Philosophia perennis*’, is to some extent justified by Plethon’s belief that the truths of Platonism were handed down from Zoroaster through the intermediary of Pythagoras and his followers (and indeed, by the likely influence of this belief on later Renaissance perennialism). The works considered in this part, besides the *Laws*, are an edition and two commentaries on the *Chaldaean Oracles*; the above-mentioned *De differentiis*; two letters to Bessarion and a longer missive to Gennadios Scholarios that were written in response to the two men’s reactions to the *De differentiis*; *De virtutis*, a self-contained treatise on ethics; and occasionally other writings. To what extent these works have a better claim to the title of ‘*philosophia perennis*’ or, indeed, as already noted, are more ‘private’ or esoteric than the ones discussed in part 1, is not immediately clear. The thesis that the *Laws* was never intended for publication is argued by Hladký in part 3 [see below].

By his own criteria, Plethon must have been the happiest or most successful (εὐδαιμονέτατος) person in his time in so far as his idiosyncratic understanding of the nature of the gods, the world, and human beings was correct—for he thought such an understanding (φρόνησις or σοφία) to be the highest of virtues and necessary for the kind of happiness available to human beings. In spite of considering his own ethics to be in agreement with the ancient Stoics, he seems not to have believed such an understanding to be sufficient for happiness: many precepts in the *Laws* are concerned with aspects of human behavior apparently unrelated to it. In his shorter treatise *De virtutis* (discussed by Hladký on pages 151–154), the four cardinal virtues (which subsume all the lower virtues) seem to possess some degree of independence from each other. Thus, when he speaks of virtue as sufficient for happiness, as he sometimes does [Alexandre 1858, 18 / TLG 1.1.21–24 and *On Virtue*: Tambrun-Krasker 1987, B13], he presumably has in mind the combination of all four cardinal virtues.

It is tempting to conceive the *Laws* as something like the philosopher's return to the cave. At least, its stated purpose [Alexandre 1858, 1.1] was to show the author's fellow human beings how to arrange their lives in order to live as happily as possible. Predictably, reactions have ranged from perplexity to indignation, as in the case of Gennadios II (*scil.* George Scholarios), whose resolve to commit the autograph copy of Plethon's work to the flames contrived a problematic textual situation in which between a third and half of the work—Hladký's estimate is 43 % [252]—survives in fragments, most of which are preserved in the 15th-century London MS mentioned above and a few others are divided between the 15th-century Brux. 1871–1877 and Plethon's autograph Marc. gr. Z 406. (Alexandre's edition, long due for replacement, makes use of none of these manuscripts.) As I have already hinted, the question of the real purpose of the *Laws*—and indeed of how its seemingly anti-Christian tenor should be interpreted—is addressed by Hladký in part 3.

But let us first dwell for a while on the themes of part 2. Plethon's understanding of the nature of the gods, the world, and human beings, allegedly deduced from 'common notions', is set out by Hladký in proper order, beginning with his 'rational theology'. I should have liked to see a synopsis of the contents of the *Laws* here, if only in the form of a translation of the *pinax* of the work.

What does the reality deducible from the common notions look like? At a cursory glance, not very different from the reality envisaged by late antique Neoplatonism. Everything is ultimately dependent on a single source, the most prominent features of which are its absolute unity and goodness. Even the distinction between essence (οὐσία) and activity (quaintly referred to by Plethon as ἐνεργία [sic], or, in the *Laws*, as πρᾶξις) collapses.<sup>1</sup> In the *De differentiis*, it is said to be 'beyond being' («ὑπερούσιος») but in the *Laws* it is repeatedly described as 'being-in-itself' («αὐτοὄν») and 'truly and really being' («ὄντως ὢν τῷ ὄντι»). Accordingly, there is some disagreement about the status of the first principle in Plethon, with some scholars maintaining that it falls decidedly short of the transcendence of the first principle in Neoplatonism and others, including Hladký, adopting a more cautious stance. Hladký suggests [74–75: cf. 163–165] that the mere fact that the first principle

<sup>1</sup> In addition, it is 'eternally of such a nature as to have a will and an ability that coincide' [Alexandre 1858, 100 / TLG 3.15.17–18].

is the cause of everything else and not an effect should be enough to warrant its radical independence; however, the problem remains as to whether its independence is compromised in any way by the participation of lower entities. He rightly points out that even in the *Laws* some of the epithets of the first principle, notably the Plethonic coinage «προαιώνιος» ('pre-eternal'), seem to stress its independence, although it is possibly misguided to treat «ἐξάίρετος» as a technical term meaning 'transcendent' [45–46, 75, 76, 85].<sup>2</sup>

One might add that the passage from Plethon's first letter to Bessarion [Mohler 1942, 460.32–461.3], sometimes cited as evidence against the transcendence of the first principle, seems in fact to be better taken as evidence in favor of it. It is true that Plethon here seems to allow (if only for the sake of the argument) that being may be attributed to the first principle (since after all the first principle is the only thing that 'is' what it 'is' on account of itself); but, in the same breath, he categorically denies that being in this case could be the same property that we attribute—in this case synonymously—to all the other things that there are. Apart from that obtaining between the first principle and all the other things that there are, the only case of 'homonymy of being' that Plethon is prepared to recognize is that between, on the one hand, the things that there are and, on the other, 'privations, destructions, and in general, evils', since the latter are in fact instances of falling away (ἀποπτώσεις) from being. It seems likely, then, that the description of the first principle in the *Laws* as 'being-in-itself' is intended to suggest that its property of being is unlike that of everything else. Hladký's interpretation of the passage in Plethon's letter seems to be along these lines on page 74, whereas at pages 170–171 and 183 he suggests that it proposes 'the identification of the One and being'.

The disagreement about the transcendence of the first principle is part of a wider debate over the extent to which Plethon may be said to have repudiated Neoplatonic negative theology. As suggested by his scepticism on the issue of transcendence, Hladký reasonably objects to those scholars who have seen in Plethon's approach to the first principle a radical departure from both the

<sup>2</sup> It is true that «ἐξάίρετον [εἶναι]» seems to be used synonymously with «ἐξηρημένον εἶναι» in Plethon's commentary on *Or. Chald.* [Tambrun-Krasker 1995, 33]. Nonetheless, it would have been desirable for Hladký to refer to this passage and examine Plethon's general use of the word before assuming that this is always what he means by it.

ancient Neoplatonic tradition and its medieval Christian offshoot established by Pseudo-Dionysius [see 75n22]. One must admit, however, that Plethon's apparent insistence that this principle is an object of human understanding would seem to place the burden of proof firmly on the shoulders of those who claim that he adhered to the traditional approach. Hladký does, to some extent, take the task in hand [75–78] but arguably fails to bring it to an entirely satisfactory conclusion. He cites Plethon's commentary on *Or. Chald.* [Tambrun-Krasker 1995, 33], in which the Father's property of being uncreated and self-caused, by virtue of which His divinity transcends everything else, is said to be unimpartable to anything else on account of its 'passing into its contradictory' («τῷ ἐς ἀντίφασιν περιίτασθαι»). He also cites the commentary on *Or. Chald.* [Tambrun-Krasker 1995, 28b], in which the highest, exceedingly unitary, god is declared to be accessible not to our ordinary intellect but to its 'flower' («τὸ τοῦ νοῦ ἄνθος»), which is the highest unitary part of our intellect. As he points out, this is relatively orthodox Neoplatonic doctrine, apart from the (perhaps significant) fact that Proclus in his own commentary on the *Oracles* [Des Places 1971, fr. 4.51–69] introduced a distinction between the flower of the intellect and the flower of the entire soul, precisely because he had little faith in the capacity of the former to reach beyond intellection in a way that would admit unification with the One [76–77]. According to Hladký, the access to the highest god granted to the flower of the intellect 'must be a kind of supra-intellective, mystical union...' [77]. And yet Plethon calls it intellection (νοεῖν). Hladký, for his part, proceeds to explain that through it 'we can...know the main features of the first principle' [77], namely, those described by Plethon in the *Laws*. One is left wondering how it is possible for such a clearly theoretical understanding to be imparted through mystical union and, conversely, why mystical union would be necessary to obtain it.

Other passages in which Plethon speaks optimistically about the contemplation and intellection of the highest god are mentioned *en passant* in other contexts but never brought to bear on the present discussion.<sup>3</sup> Hladký

<sup>3</sup> In the final chapter of the *Laws* (suitably entitled 'Epinomis'), Plethon explains that 'human beings evidently share in the gods' contemplation of being things and indeed do not miss out on the conception (ἐννοια) of Zeus, which is the furthest that even the gods can reach' [Alexandre 1858, 246 / TLG 3.43.72–75: cf. Hladký 155]. And in his *Contra Scholarii obiectiones* [Maltese 1989, 28.9, 34.19–24], Plethon praises Plato

expresses his full agreement with Paul Oskar Kristeller's view that the mystical element 'so prominent...in the thought of the ancient Neoplatonists' is absent from Plethon's Platonism [167]. Surprisingly, the authenticity of the short prayer *Ad deum unum*, which offers perhaps the clearest example of the language of negative theology in the Plethonic corpus, is suspected by Hladký [44], apparently for this very reason. In sum, there remains uncertainty here, as regards both Plethon's view and Hladký's interpretation of it, and I wish Hladký had made more of an effort to resolve it.

Plethon's first principle generates the world of Forms, in which essence and activity are first distinguished. The second principle (the Form of Forms) is an image of the first; the third (the Form of Matter), an image of the second; and so forth. They all share a commonality but are differentiated as the series progresses by decreasing perfection. Exactly how the higher principles are supposed to contain the lower principles within themselves—'implicitly', 'in the manner of unity' [91, 96, 165]—is unclear, since they admit of no distinction between actuality and potentiality [66]: in other words, they are completely free of matter [88, 91, 100]. In fact, Plethon goes so far as to state [Alexandre 1858, 104–106 / TLG 3.15.172–189 (summarized on Hladký 100)] that the second and third principles encompass all the respective subordinate Forms *in actuality* (ἐργῶ), the difference between them being only that the second principle is also the actual cause of every (immanent) form in the lower realms of being, whereas the third principle is the actual cause of prime matter.<sup>4</sup>

The only elucidation of the process of the generation of lower from higher principles afforded by Plethon seems to be what he tells us [Alexandre 1858, 94 / TLG 3.15.28–45, quoted in 90n41]: in contrast to the generation of numbers, brought about by adding the previously generated highest number to the monad and thus proceeding infinitely, the generation of new principles is accomplished by 'dividing' the previously generated lowest Form, unfolding

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for holding, in contrast to Aristotle, that virtue is impossible without understanding (φρόνησις) and that the noblest part of understanding is that which is concerned with the contemplation and intellection of the highest God [cf. Hladký 152–153].

<sup>4</sup> The possibility that «ἐργῶ» should be taken to mean 'as an act' in contradistinction to the product of that act (i.e., «κατ' αἰτίαν») seems to be ruled out by the application of the same term in the same context also to 'our world', that is, to the temporal and mortal realm.



what is present in it ‘in the manner of unity’ («συλλήβδην τε καὶ καθ’ ἓν») [cf. [Alexandre 1858](#), 46 and 94 / [TLG](#) 1.5.34; 3.15.174–175] and keeping some of it while discarding the rest. Since the division is based on contradictories, it will not be an infinite progress. This is all very well; but what exactly it means for a lower principle, prior to its generation, to be in actuality (although ‘in the manner of unity’) present in a higher principle still eludes me; and Hladký’s ‘implication’ metaphor does not help.<sup>5</sup> *Ex hypothesi* the higher principles are simpler, not more complex—contrary to what Hladký seems to imply [91].

In this fashion the whole eternal world of Forms is created. The second realm, which is temporal but everlasting, is created by the Forms; and finally the third, temporal and mortal, realm is created by the entities of the second one. The first principle is thus directly involved only in the creation of the world of Forms. The Forms are 22 in number and ranked ‘according to their generality’ [97] or, strictly speaking, perhaps, the generality of their effects. They are also Intellects, which contemplate each other. This is taken by Hladký [95–96] to contribute to their unity—evidently as a collective, for the combination of intelligibility and intelligence rather seems to compromise the simplicity of each individual Form. Hladký suggests that their commonality in fact resides in their essence (οὐσία), which is simply their ‘common nature of [being] eternal entities’ and causes of the temporal realms, whereas the attributes (προσόντα) by which they are differentiated from each other coincide with their actual causation of different specific forms in the temporal realms [68–70, 96].

This interpretation seems to run up against two difficulties: first, it seems to give priority to the effect over the cause in the order of explanation—a formulation which clearly expresses such an inversion is found on page 165, where it is stated that ‘[the Forms] mutually differentiate among themselves according to what they are models of’. Second, the attributes inherited by each Form from its nearest superior do contribute to their commonal-

<sup>5</sup> Take, as an example to reflect upon, mathematical number and mathematical magnitudes, which are said to be attributes ‘in the manner of unity’ («καθ’ ἓν») of the third principle, the Form of Matter (or Hera, if you wish), which ‘also rules over the whole infinity that relates to them [sc. to number and magnitudes]’ [[Alexandre 1858](#), 114 / [TLG](#) 3.15.312–315].

ity according to Plethon's explicit statement at [Alexandre 1858](#), 102 / [TLG](#) 3.15.134–140.<sup>6</sup>

The Forms are named after ancient Greek deities. This is one of the features of the *Laws* that have alternately scandalized and titillated readers through the centuries. Still, as Hladký shows [111–122], Plethon's pantheon differs in many respects from anything that he could have encountered in any ancient sources, although he points to some striking similarities with Plato's *Cratylus* and Proclus' commentary on this dialogue [114–121]. Assuming, then, that he was not swayed by pagan piety, why did Plethon make himself so vulnerable to the ire and suspicion of the Orthodox establishment when he might as well have simply assigned ordinal numbers (or Greek letters) to the Forms or else named them after, say, seraphim, cherubim, and thrones? One reason, Hladký suggests [165–166, 273], is that he wanted his principles to be gendered in order to be able jointly to produce entities in the temporal realms of being. It may be objected that inasmuch as 'male' and 'female' in the *Laws*' account of the causation of these realms are really only proxies for 'formal' and 'material', Plethon, as a staunch admirer of the Pythagoreans, must have realized that odd and even numbers would do the job just as well. The 'chief reasons', however, Hladký considers to be 'practical'. Plethon wanted his *Laws* to regulate the lives of actual communities, and '[i]f the ancient names were used properly, [Plethon's new theology] might then become a kind of "philosophy for the masses"' [47]. Notwithstanding this, to my mind, rather uncharitable suggestion (implying as it does that Plethon was completely out of touch with the religious sentiments of his contemporaries), Hladký eventually concludes that

the *Laws*, especially in its philosophical passages, seems to be a workbook rather than a sacred book,...a kind of exercise book,...most probably a text that contained personal and private thoughts [263],

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<sup>6</sup> Hladký's idea that the attributes of each Form are determined by all the other Forms [95–96; cf. 164] seems to be based on a mistranslation [68] of [Alexandre 1858](#), 46 / [TLG](#) 1.5.36–39, where « τὰ δὲ πρὸς ὅντα...ἄλλους ὑπ' ἄλλων διατίθεσθαι τε καὶ κομμεῖσθαι » means 'with regard to their attributes, the ones [*scil.* Intellects] are conditioned and equipped by the others [i.e., by their respective immediate superiors]'. As is clear from the agent phrase, the infinitives are in the passive voice.

a conclusion for which he finds support in the fact that its author never seems to have taken any measures to have it duplicated [cf. 254]. But this brings us to the theme of part 3 and we are not quite finished with part 2.

Plethon repeatedly stresses [e.g., [Alexandre 1858](#), 94 / [TLG](#) 3.15.26–28, quoted at 90n41] that the first principle has no need for any contributory cause (covaίτιον) in generating the Forms. The contributory cause that he has in mind is (intelligible) matter [[Alexandre 1858](#), 92 / [TLG](#) 3.15.8–10]. On the other hand, the Form of Matter, that is, the cause of the existence of matter in the temporal realms, is an image of the first principle at two removes. Evidently Plethon has set his heart on a strictly monistic all-encompassing system. As a result, like all the Neoplatonic systems, his is haunted by the problem of evil. Why does the generation of ever lower entities give rise to ever greater imperfections in the world, if there is no contributory cause that sets a limit for the beneficial agency of the first principle? Plethon's reply seems to be encapsulated in the adage 'because a different is always the cause of a different' [93].<sup>7</sup> Since the first principle is an absolutely perfect model, then, its image must have some degree of imperfection. But unless the adage is meant to express an independent principle of entropy by which dualism is surreptitiously introduced into Plethon's system, it must be the absolutely unitary first principle itself that is somehow fraught with this difference. That is to say, the generation of a *second* principle must be part of what it is to be the first principle.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, this also means that the first principle, which is, in addition, absolutely good, must be the origin of all the imperfections in the world; but it seems as though Plethon, like all his Platonic predecessors (outside the Gnostic ranks, at any rate), would have denied this.

<sup>7</sup> The comparison in [Alexandre 1858](#), 98 / [TLG](#) 3.15.90–105, referred to at 92n45, to human fathers, who beget, in descending order according to the vigor of their seed, boys who are their spitting image, ditto girls, boys who look like their mother, ditto girls, boys or girls who look like some other member of the family, ones who simply look like human beings and ones of whom not even that much could be said, should probably not be pressed too hard.

<sup>8</sup> As Hladký writes:

This is the traditional Platonic concept of *bonum diffusivum sui*, according to which the supreme good, because of its goodness, *cannot refrain from* creating something *different* and yet similar to itself. [128: my italics]

It may, of course, be said that the first principle cannot properly speaking be responsible for all these imperfections since evidently it generates the second principle out of necessity. Indeed, Plethon maintains that the strongest necessity of all ('necessity on account of itself') belongs to the first principle, even though this principle is admittedly undetermined, for lack of a higher cause that may determine it [[Alexandre 1858](#), 66 / [TLG](#) 2.6.26–35, quoted at 146n31].<sup>9</sup> But, since it is also emphatically asserted to be its own cause, it would presumably be more accurate to say that it is self-determined; and if so, it may not be such a straightforward thing to clear it of responsibility after all. Be that as it may, it makes little sense in the context of a strictly monistic deterministic system like Plethon's to explain the existence of imperfections by attributing them to 'a world that is the best possible' [146], since in such a system, of course, there is no *other* possibility than the actual state of affairs. It may equally well (or rather equally inappropriately) be called 'the worst possible world'. Either way, it really should be nothing less than perfect.

But I digress. The point that I wish to make is that if Plethon made any attempt, besides repeating the above-quoted adage, to solve the fundamental problem as to why, if everything is caused by a single perfect first principle, the world abounds with imperfections, I should have liked to be informed about it in a book on Plethon's philosophy (one reason for this, albeit not the most important one, is that it may have shed some light on the question of Plethon's relation to Proclus and other Platonic predecessors). If he did not, I should have liked to be informed about that too, since it is of some importance for my assessment of Plethon as a philosopher. Perhaps I am being overly demanding and not entirely fair. Hladký does in fact touch briefly on these and related issues in his 'global overview' of Plethon's system [see 163–167] but his discussion goes only a little way towards quenching my thirst for information—which illustrates what I consider to be the major flaw of *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon*. As Hladký is 'aware' [7], most of it is given over to detailed summaries of the contents of some of Plethon's works, in particular the *Laws*, while little is offered in the way of philosophical analysis

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<sup>9</sup> Note that this is the very necessity on which every other necessary fact depends [[Alexandre 1858](#), 74 / [TLG](#) 2.6.114–117]. For this reason, I cannot agree with Gersh that "[n]ecessity" is obviously an affirmative divine name applied to Zeus from subsequent things rather than a property that he has *per se*' [[Gersh 2014](#), 223n34].

or indeed of source studies or historical contextualization. I shall return to Hladký's source studies shortly.

Unsurprisingly, human beings are assigned a very special place in Plethon's world, at the boundary between the everlasting and the mortal realms. They occupy this place by virtue of their unique soul. What sets human souls apart from those of other animals is the fact that they are partly rational, thanks to their relation to the Forms—a relation that is alternately described as one of similarity (or kinship) and participation. The rational behaviour of other animals is governed by the World Soul. Apart from this, we do not hear much of the World Soul in Hladký's book (there are four references in the general index) but it seems as though Plethon might have located it in the Sun [143].

The determinism of Plethon's system applies without restriction to the human soul. This application is the topic of chapter 11, which is one of the strongest of the book, especially pages 144–150. Even the governing part of the human soul, what Plethon calls τὸ φρονοῦν (and Hladký translates by 'the prudent part'), is pre-programmed to act in accordance with what it considers best; and what it considers best is, of course, a result of its history and other circumstances. No human being is free in the sense of not being entirely subject to external forces. But then again, nor are any other agents, even in the eternal realm, except the first principle. As Hladký shows, however, Plethon prefers to understand human freedom as the attainment of one's most fundamental desires.

In Hladký's account, Plethon holds that all human beings most fundamentally desire to do well, where, in accordance with a lemma from Plato's *Republic*, being just is a necessary and sufficient condition for doing well. (I should point out that this is only my own reconstruction of the argument presented by Hladký on page 149; and, since it seems to conflict with what I said above about the relative independence of the cardinal virtues in Plethon, I may well be mistaken.) Those who are just, then, have attained their most fundamental desire and consequently are free. Conversely, however, no human being desires not to do well. It follows that those who are unjust, and thus have not attained their most fundamental desire, are not free. In other words, for Hladký, Plethon thinks that all and only those who are just are also free. But if that is the case, it seems unwarranted to hold anyone who is unjust morally accountable for their deplorable state and Plethon seems

in fact happy to accept this consequence; at least, he stresses that divine (or daemonic [166]) punishment should be understood only as a means of correction [150]. It is not clear from Hladký's account whether Plethon addresses the underlying problem as to why, in 'a world that is the best possible', those erroneous judgments that lead to injustice occur.

In the final chapter of part 2 [163–185], Hladký tries, as I have mentioned, to summarize the main features of Plethon's system, after which he proceeds to compare it with those of other Platonists. Inevitably, a large part of this chapter is devoted to the question of Proclus' influence on Plethon. There has been a strong tendency among Plethon scholars in recent years to emphasize the differences between the Byzantine philosopher's system and that of the Platonic Successor. The above-mentioned view, partly challenged by Hladký, that the traditional Neoplatonic negative theology is absent in Plethon naturally comes into play here. Most of Hladký's discussion of the question is restricted to the explicit criticism of a couple of specific points in Proclus' system in Plethon's first letter to Bessarion [169–173], although he also mentions, as more general points of difference, Plethon's dim view of the ancient poets and his lack of interest in theurgy as well as the fact that 'the structure of reality in Plethon's philosophy is far less diversified than in Proclus' [169]. On the other side of the argument, in view of 'some undeniable parallels' [114] between Proclus' commentary on the *Cratylus* and Plethon's version of the Greek pantheon,<sup>10</sup> as well as Plethon's demonstrably 'good knowledge of Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*' [276n17], he considers it 'very likely that Plethon both studied Proclus and was influenced by him, including even in his overall rational approach to theology' [179]. He concludes nevertheless, and probably rightly so, that Gennadios Scholarios' allegation that Plethon had silently drawn the doctrines of the *Laws* from Proclus' works is not to be relied upon [168].

Instead, Hladký [176–179] suggests that the 'list of philosophers' enumerated in the introductory chapter of the *Laws* should be taken 'seriously' [168], although he promptly excludes from consideration more than two thirds of the names on the list for not being 'historical persons' (including Solon of Athens and Thales of Miletus, whereas Timaeus of Locri and Pythagoras are retained). But experience should teach us to handle Byzantine writers'

<sup>10</sup> He goes so far as to say that Proclus' commentary's 'presence seems to be so massive that one may conclude that Plethon used it when studying Plato's *Cratylus*' [122].

own claims of intellectual descent as circumspectly as the counterclaims of their opponents. Taking references such as these seriously does not mean accepting them at face value but checking them carefully. Hladký's attempts in this direction are feeble. In fact, the major shortcoming of his discussions of the influences on Plethon is that there is no real effort to trace the sources of the actual doctrines and arguments in the Byzantine philosopher's works. Most of the attention is devoted to preliminaries, such as ascertaining which works may have been available to Plethon (mainly on the basis of citations in the contemporary literature).

The question as to why certain philosophers are not mentioned in Plethon's list is an interesting one but the answer is clearly not that they played no part in shaping Plethon's 'perennial philosophy'. Hladký's contention that Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch 'were studied really widely, in contrast to the works of the Neoplatonists whose circulation was more limited' [177] needs to be supported by more than a reference to a couple of dated surveys of Late Byzantine intellectual life.<sup>11</sup> There has been much research on the Byzantine *fortuna* of Proclus and other late antique philosophers in recent years.<sup>12</sup> Regarding the knowledge of the works of the Neoplatonists in Middle and Late Byzantium, it should be said, that

- (1) it is clear that Proclus (especially his *Elements of Theology*) never fell out of fashion among the Greek *literati* between the 11th and the 15th centuries;
- (2) even non-commentary works by Plotinus, Iamblichus, and others enjoyed relatively wide circulation from the late 13th century onwards; and, most importantly, that
- (3) Aristotle was practically always studied (as was indeed Plato, in so far as he was studied for the philosophical content rather than the literary style of his works) with the aid of philosophical commentaries, mostly written by—or dependent on other commentaries written by—Neoplatonists.

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<sup>11</sup> Namely, [Runciman 1970](#) and [Fryde 2000](#). On the shortcomings of the latter work, see [Littlewood 2002](#), 1288–1290.

<sup>12</sup> See, most recently, the papers by Dominic O'Meara and Michele Trizio as well as the excursus on Plethon by Stephen Gersh in [Gersh 2014](#).

Plethon's familiarity with several Aristotelian commentaries is evident, if not from the *Laws*, then certainly from Hladký's second group of writings concerning 'perennial philosophy'.<sup>13</sup> It can also be safely assumed *pace* Hladký [179] that he was well acquainted with Porphyry's *Isagoge*. Everybody was.

The upshot of the chapter is that in its structural simplicity and by de-emphasizing, if not negating, the first principle's transcendence, Plethon's system deviates from the Neoplatonic ones in the direction of Middle Platonism [180, 183]. Hladký attributes this primarily to Plethon's reliance 'on the literal meaning of Plato's text' as well as his fervent admiration for the *Chaldaean Oracles* [180]. For obvious (chronological) reasons, he does not discuss the recent suggestion by Stephen Gersh that Plethon's motive for maintaining a critical distance from Proclus may have been his wish 'to excavate a Platonism that is free of later Christian accretions', on the widely held assumption that Proclus was dependent on Ps.-Dionysius [Gersh 2014, 218–219, 221–222].

When Hladký finally turns to the question of Plethon's religious views in part 3, he departs to some extent from the text-based approach promised in the introduction and largely adhered to in the two preceding parts. He begins [189–190] by summarizing four received opinions (or 'usual conclusions') on the subject and goes on [191–267] to consider a number of arguments both for and against each of them that are rarely based on hard facts and mostly lead to conclusions in the modality of possibility. That Hladký introduces these received opinions practically without comment and allows the subsequent discussion to meander without a clear or systematic plan is symptomatic of a certain deficit of meta-discursive elements in his writing that too often leaves readers to figure out for themselves what role a particular argument or series of arguments is supposed to play in the overall scheme of things.

The received opinions (or sets of opinions) are that

- (1) Plethon was influenced by a Jew called Elissaeus, who was an adherent of Suhrawardi;

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<sup>13</sup> E.g., *De differentiis*, where his use of Simplicius' commentary on the *Physics*, Asclepius' commentary on the *Metaphysics*, the anonymous commentaries on *Nicomachean Ethics* 3 and 7, and indeed Thomas Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles*, is in evidence, in addition to several commentaries that cannot be identified with certainty.



- (2) Plethon was the leader of a pagan community in Mistra, for which the *Laws* was written;
- (3) Plethon changed his name and converted to paganism as a result of his experiences in Italy during the council of Ferrara and Florence; and that
- (4) Plethon wrote the *Laws* after his return from Italy in 1439 and, since he must be assumed to have espoused the doctrines presented in it, his *Contra de dogmate latino librum* from the same period, which defends the orthodox view of the procession of the Holy Spirit, must be considered as an exercise in hypocrisy.

Regarding (1), Hladký rightly emphasizes that the source for the personality of Elissaeus (Gennadios Scholarios) is unreliable and points out that those of Plethon's views which it is most tempting to connect with a Suhrawardian influence (notably, the view that the *Chaldaean Oracles* represent the teachings of Zoroaster) may equally well have been inspired by the reading of late antique Greek authors [191–204].

Regarding (2), Hladký shows that no such community is attested by any of Plethon's friends or students and plausibly argues that the existence of such a community is highly unlikely in the historical circumstances [205–233]. He also cautions, on the whole reasonably but sometimes on dubious grounds, against taking Plethon's opponents at their word. He suggests, for instance, following Ernst Feil [1986, 166–167], that one reason for scepticism concerning George of Trebizond's report of a statement by Plethon to the effect that the whole world would soon adopt one and the same religion is that it 'is difficult to find a Greek equivalent for the Latin term "religion (*religio*)"' [229]. While it is true that «θησκευία» seems not to occur in Plethon's extant writings, a simple search of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG) shows that the word was very frequently used as the equivalent of 'religio' (used, for example, for different religions, such as Christianity and Islam, in the singular and in the plural) by such contemporary authors as Gennadios Scholarios,<sup>14</sup> Manuel II, Laonikos Chalkokondyles [quoted in 216n47], John Eugenikos, Bessarion, and indeed in the very acts of the Council of Florence.

Regarding (3), Hladký shows that the name 'Plethon' was in fact never publicly used during Plethon's lifetime [235–238].

<sup>14</sup> In his *Grammatica*, he defines it as «ἡ λατρεία καὶ τὸ ὁποιοῦν ἐβέβαια περὶ Θεόν».

As for (4), he remarks that the content of Plethon's treatise on the Holy Spirit is in full agreement with the testimony of fellow anti-Unionists such as Sylvester Syropoulos (whose credibility as a witness Hladký attempts to vindicate [246n26]) and John Eugenikos, not to mention that of Bessarion; and that there is no reason apart from its inconsistency with the doctrines of the *Laws* to question Plethon's sincerity in writing it [239–250].

Not only how to evaluate Plethon's *Contra de dogmate latino librum* but also what to make of his 'paganism' would seem to depend to a large extent on what we think were Plethon's intentions in writing the *Laws*. This affords an occasion for Hladký to return to Plethon's *magnum opus* [251–267]. He suggests (on mostly rather flimsy evidence consisting mainly of general correspondences between the *Laws* and datable works) that the *Laws* was in fact composed over a couple of decades, more precisely from the late 1410s to sometime around 1440, as 'a kind of exercise book' [263] that was 'not intended for publication' [270]. At the end of this chapter [263–267], Hladký discusses Plethon's motives for tampering in his personal copies with such authoritative (not to say sacred) texts as the *Corpus Platonicum*, the *Orphic Hymns*, and the *Hymns* of Proclus. He concludes that this editorial activity on Plethon's part 'was apparently an attempt to get to the original form and meaning of the text as he thought it should be' [267], without clear implications for the question of Plethon's religious convictions.

When the time comes to deliver a final verdict on this question in the concluding chapter of part 3, Hladký draws attention to the fact that the concept of paganism is differently understood from different historical vantage-points [269] and rightly insists on distinguishing between 'a mere admiration' for ancient thought and religion and the outright espousal of ancient religious beliefs—although, one might add, there are probably many intermediary steps and no hard and fast boundary between one and the next. Many thinkers from the Middle Ages onward have admired all manner of manifestations of pagan intellectual culture. The question that has exercised scholars in the case of Plethon, I presume, is whether he overstepped the limits of Christianity. To this there will obviously be different answers provided by different judges in different times.

It is, however, patent, I think, that the doctrines of the *Laws* are impossible to reconcile with any conceivable interpretation of Christianity in Plethon's historical context. To that extent, Gennadios Scholarios appears to have known

what he was doing. Hladký mentions ‘three main divergences that make [Plethon’s] *philosophia perennis* irreconcilable with Christianity’: namely, ‘the absence of the doctrine of the Trinity’ and the presence of the doctrines of the eternity of the world and of reincarnation [273]. To my mind, having benefitted from Hladký’s book, it seems that the most serious theoretical stumbling block would be the idea that the first principle is incapable of not generating the second principle. In addition, I very much doubt whether any contemporary Orthodox or Catholic would consider Plethon’s apparent denial of free will acceptable Christian doctrine—or indeed his polytheism, of which Hladký seems to make too light when he compares it to ‘similar hierarchies of angels and divine beings’ [274].

Hladký’s distinctive contribution to the debate consists in the case that he builds against reading the *Laws* as a straightforward expression of Plethon’s religious views. Some of his arguments to this conclusion are more convincing than others and it is perhaps not entirely clear what they all add up to in the end. It is true, for instance, that the fact that the only complete copy of the *Laws* seems to have been the one burnt by Gennadios Scholarios speaks against any strong evangelical ambition on Plethon’s part and could reasonably be counted as support for the view that the *Laws* was ‘in fact a private writing’ [270], although, as Hladký himself admits, ‘we cannot exclude a possibility that he also used some parts of it in his teaching’ [263]. Still, the question remains as to why private writing should be dismissed as evidence for an author’s ‘real thought’ [271]. Hladký speculates [278] that the *Laws* for Plethon had the same semi-utopian character as Plato’s *Laws* had for the Neoplatonists (or perhaps the same fully utopian character that was ascribed to the *Republic*). The consequence would be that its political guidelines were never meant to be put into practice—which would perhaps not be so surprising, since such guidelines make up only a minor portion of the remains of the *Laws* [161–162]. But, again, it is not clear what this has to do with the question of whether Plethon believed in the religious doctrines presented in the work. Hladký also thinks that ‘the fact that [the *Laws*] was probably composed’ at an earlier date than has previously been assumed detracts from its ‘significance...for determining Gemistos’ religious beliefs’ [280]. Presumably, he means his mature beliefs; but that does not really help the argument, since on the dating that he proposes Plethon would have been between 60 and 80 years old when composing the *Laws*. He further tries to make it plausible that Plethon did not really believe in his own system by adducing parallels

from Renaissance humanists such as Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, and Cyriac of Ancona's letters, and by proposing to 'reclassify' Plethon as a Renaissance humanist rather than a Byzantine philosopher, 'where such a flirting with the Greek pagan past is certainly suspect' [282]. Unfortunately, however, no such reclassification can alter the historical circumstances of Plethon's life and works.

Here and there one senses a certain eagerness on Hladký's part to downplay Plethon's hostility in the *Laws* towards the mores of contemporary Christianity. For instance, his suggestion that Plethon's criticism of certain 'sophistical' doctrines of Creation and the Last Days (including Tribulation as well as Millennium [Alexandre 1858, 260 / TLG 3.43.238–240]) at the very end of the last chapter of the *Laws* should be understood within the context of 'ancient philosophical discussions' [276] is decidedly far-fetched. The same, I think, applies to his interpretation [50] of Plethon's criticism in the first chapter of the *Laws* of celibacy, fasting, self-neglect, and voluntary poverty as targeting ancient Cynics and Pythagoreans (*sic*), rather than contemporary monks, as has usually been thought. As noted above, and acknowledged by Hladký [17], the *Oratio ad Manuelem Palaeologum* leaves no room for doubt about Plethon's disdain for the monastic way of life and its practitioners.

Hladký ends with an intriguing suggestion, first ventured by Kristeller. Could the solution to the puzzle about Plethon's religious views simply be that he 'always maintained a strict separation between his philosophy and Christian theology and never tried to harmonize them'?<sup>15</sup> Who knows? It looks like a desperate solution and one which leaves us with a picture of a deeply conflicted thinker. It may nevertheless be true.

A few words must be said about the language of the book. Clunky and unidiomatic English in academic works is nothing new. And most probably, the discomfort of reading it is a price that members of the global academic community are willing to pay for being relieved of the necessity of learning dozens of languages in order to keep abreast of their respective fields. Still, I think, it must be incumbent on academic publishers, especially those with offices in English-speaking countries, who after all benefit greatly from the position of English as a global academic *lingua franca*, to make a serious effort to reduce that discomfort. In this case, I cannot bring myself to believe

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<sup>15</sup> Kristeller 1972, 97, quoted by Hladký on p. 273: cf. 284.

that Ashgate has lifted a finger to help. There are numerous infelicities and errors of grammar and style on each and every page. Granted, these are usually minor and only rarely of such a kind as to affect the overall sense or challenge reading comprehension; but this only means that they could have been all the more easily rectified.

Does *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon* succeed in its ambition? Only to a limited degree, I am afraid. That the balance between summary and philosophical analysis is so clearly tipped towards the former is particularly regrettable in view of the fact that there already exists in C. M. Woodhouse's *Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes* [1986] an excellent monograph in English on Plethon, which contains paraphrases of most of the relevant works. In comparison to this, the relative lack of structural clarity and the broken English combine to put Hladký's book at a disadvantage. Where Hladký's book is arguably stronger, that is, in the neglected area of philosophical analysis, it is still not always entirely clear and consistent, as I hope to have shown.

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