

Mateusz Biernaczyk

Political Sciences, Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Wrocław
MateuszBiernaczyk71@interia.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-3751-3825

Plutarch of Chaeronea – the Concept of Principles

Plutarch z Cheronei – koncepcja zasad

ABSTRACT: This article attempts to reconstruct the concept of the principles of the world in Plutarch of Chaeronea. For this purpose, four of his works were analysed: *On the E at Delphi*, *Isis and Osiris*, *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, and *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus*. It was attempted to point out that it is hard to find consistency in the Middle Platonist's theological and cosmological views. One time, following Plato, he writes about the highest efficient cause – transcendent God, whom he calls good, the reason, father and creator of the whole of reality. Another time, he refers to the views of the “Old Academy,” i.e. the concept of the One (*Hen*) and the indefinite Dyad (*aoristos Dyas*) as the highest principles. Moreover, citing Plato, Plutarch mentions the eternal cause responsible for the evil in the created world. However, a characteristic feature of Plutarch's thought is the concept of the transcendent cause of reality as a whole. Not only will that idea and the one of an immanent reason – Logos affect the later Platonists, but it will also inspire the first representatives of Christian philosophy.

KEY WORDS: God, Middle Platonists, theology, transcendence, Plutarch of Chaeronea

ABSTRAKT: W artykule podjęto próbę rekonstrukcji koncepcji zasad Plutarcha z Cheronei. W tym celu przeanalizowano cztery jego dzieła: *O E delfickim*, *O Izydzie i Ozyrysie*, *O zamilknięciu wyroczni* i *O powstaniu duszy w Timajosie*. Starano się wskazać, że trudno jest znaleźć spójność w teologiczno-kosmologicznych poglądach medioplatonika. Raz za Platonem pisze on bowiem o jedynej, najwyższej przyczynie świata – transcendentnym Bogu, którego nazywa dobrym, ojcem i twórcą całokształtu rzeczywistości. Innym razem natomiast odwołuje się do poglądów Starej Akademii, tzn. nauki o Jedni (*Hen*) i nieokreślonej Diadzie (*aoristos Dyas*) jako najwyższych zasadach. Ponadto, powołując się na Platona, Plutarch wzmiankuje o przyczynie odpowiadającej za zło w utworzonym świecie. Jednakże cechą charakterystyczną dla myśli Plutarcha jest nauka o transcendentnej przyczynie całokształtu rzeczywistości. Pogląd ten oraz koncepcja o immanentnym w świecie rozumie – Logosie wpłyną nie

tylko na późniejszych platoników, ale zainspirują również pierwszych przedstawicieli filozofii chrześcijańskiej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Bóg, medioplatonizm, teologia, transcendencja, Plutarch z Cheroni

In *Delta of Metaphysics*, Aristotle presents the definition of the principle of the beginning (ἀρχή). In a brief summary, he concludes that: “The characteristic feature of all the principles – beginnings is that they are the source from which existence, creation or cognition originates. However, some of the principles are internal (ἐνυπαρχουσαι), others external (ἐκτός).”¹ As Stagirit points out, the idea (ἀρχή) is a source – a cause that enables the creation and learning of things. According to him, the *first science* (ἡ πρώτη), which he called theology (θεολογική), deals with the first principles – causes of the whole reality.² In this article, I would like to address this very science and reconstruct the concept of the first principles, which we can find in the writings of Middle Platonist Plutarch of Chaeronea, who lived at the turn of the 1st and 2nd centuries.³ In my work, I will attempt to show the validity of the thesis that the Plutarch’s writings that survived until our times contain no single coherent science regarding the first principles.⁴ Moreover, I would like to emphasise that Middle Platonism is not a uniform trend since we can find different decisions concerning theological and cosmological issues in its representatives’ works.

Many of Plutarch’s works have been preserved to this day. The Lamprias catalogue lists 227 titles of his writings.⁵ Eighty-three of these are considered authentic, nonetheless, as the Dobrochna Dembińska-Siury emphasises, this

¹ Aristotle, *Metafizyka* (Metaphysics), *Księga Delta* (Book of Delta) (V), 1013a, transl. K. Leśniak, Warsaw 2013.

² Cf. ibidem, *Księga Epsilon* (Book of Epsilon) (VI), 1025b–126a.

³ Through referring to Aristotle terminology, I would like to stress that the concepts of principle and theology were not unknown to the then thinkers and were used by Plutarch himself in this sense; cf. Plutarch, *Iris and Osiris* (Περὶ Ἰσίδος καὶ Ὀσιριδος), 382C, transl. A. Pawlaczek, Poznań 2003; cf. also: A. Baron, *Neoplatoniska idea Boga a ewangelizacja* (Neo-Platonic Idea of God and Evangelisation), Krakow 2005, pp. 87–89. *Plato’s Lecture on the Sciences* (Διδασκαλικὸς τῶν Πλάτωνος δογμάτων) originated in Platonic environments of the 2nd century AD (several years after Plutarch died) by Alcinous, who uses the Aristotelian meaning of the concepts of principle (cause) and theology also confirms the vitality of these concepts in the philosophical discourse of those times; cf. Alcinous, *Wykład nauk Platona* (*Didaskalikos*), III 153–154; VIII 162, transl. K. Pawłowski, Krakow 2008.

⁴ Thereby I will engage in a polemic with G. Karamanolis, who claims that Plato, based on Plato’s thought, has created a coherent philosophical system, cf. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/plutarch/> [access: 8.05.2019].

⁵ Cf. M. Treu, *Der sogenante Lampriaskatalog der plutarchischen Schriften*, Waldenburg 1873.

number is not complete, since 18 works attributed to Plutarch today are not included in this catalogue, as are 15 others not preserved, but mentioned by indirect sources.⁶

Plutarch's writings address religious, historical and political issues, but above all moral ones. Among his works, we can also find ones, which raise theological and cosmological matters. It is this analysis that I would like to limit myself to in this article. This group includes *On the E at Delphi*, *Isis and Osiris*, *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, and *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus*. I will discuss those writings in the order as mentioned above. I will not follow the chronology of the creation since there is a great difficulty in determining it.⁷ Moreover, I believe that their analysis of such an order will make the Plutarch's idea of the first principles more accessible, thus facilitating its better understanding.

In this article, I will bring closer the common points as well as the differences present in the afore-mentioned Plutarch's texts (the first thesis). I will also refer to the thoughts of the philosopher of Chaeronea that had been rejected by later Middle Platonist philosophers such as Apuleius of Madaura and Alcinous. The above is to allow showing some change in the Middle Platonic thought itself, and thus emphasise that there is no unanimity in the Platonic environment of the 1st and 2nd centuries.⁸

The theological thought of Plutarch as one of the leading representatives of Middle Platonism is crucial since it makes it possible not only to understand this philosophical trend but also observe the form in which Platonism was present in the Roman Empire, and how it influenced the next generations of pagan philosophers and the first representatives of Christian thought.

⁶ Cf. D. Dembińska-Siury, *Literatura filozoficzna za cesarstwa* (Philosophical Literature Under the Empire), [in:] *Literatura Grecji starożytnej* (Literature of Ancient Greece), vol. 2, H. Podbielski (ed.), Lublin 2005, p. 849.

⁷ Cf. *ibidem*.

⁸ When discussing the medieval thought, Italian researcher G. Reale tries to compare the main problems and solutions proposed by this trend in a uniform and synthetic way; cf. G. Reale, *Historia filozofii starożytnej* (History of Ancient Philosophy), vol. 4, transl. E.I. Zieliński, Lublin 1999, pp. 325–437. On the other hand, as I have mentioned before, I intend to show the differences and changes in the views of Middle Platonists, thus avoiding any unauthorised generalization.

On the E at Delphi

In accordance with the above order, I will begin with an analysis of the work titled *On the E at Delphi* (Περὶ τοῦ ΕΙ τοῦ τοῦ ἐν Δελφοῖς). Plutarch addressed this letter to his friend Sarapion and described in it the discussion that had taken place a few years earlier about the letter *E* placed on the fronton of the temple in Delphi.⁹ The discussants wanted to answer the question of why that letter had been placed there. As Plutarch points out: “Certainly not by chance, nor as if by drawing, the only one among the letters has found itself in an honourable place with God and gained the character of a holly votive meant to be watched.”¹⁰ His teacher, Ammonius, spoke after long debates. His speech ended the dialogue, which suggests that it was the most appropriate one. Plutarch, therefore, acts like Plato, who not alone, but through his teacher or another person, presents his views.

Well, I don’t think – says Plutarch with Ammonius’ mouth – that this letter means a number or a place in order, or a coherence or any other of the dependent parts of speech. It is a self-sufficient phrase and statement to God, introducing at the same time the one who speaks into the consciousness of the essence of God.¹¹

As he further stresses, on the temple in Delphi, there is the inscription “get to know yourself” (γνώθι σεαυτὸν), which is interpreted as a greeting from God. When responding *EI*, or “you are,” we emphasize His nature – existence (τὸ εἶναι).¹² “For we – he continues – actually have no part in life, but every mortal being between birth and death represents only a spectre and a blurred and unstable appearance of itself.”¹³

In the further part of the dialogue, Plutarch shows us a variable reality in which everything becomes and nothing is the same, as well as the Divine Reality – constant and unchangeable. In the variable reality in which we live, the leading senses mislead us as we take what appears to us as truly existing.¹⁴ In the second one, however, there is no change, movement or time, due to which

⁹ The discussion recalled by Plutarch probably took place in 67 A.D., when Nero was visiting Delphi; cf. Plutarch, *O E delfickim* (On the E at Delphi), 385 B, [in:] *Moralia II* (Morals II), transl. Z. Abramowiczówna, Warsaw 1988.

¹⁰ Plutarch, *O E delfickim* (On the E at Delphi), op. cit., 385A.

¹¹ Ibidem, 391F–392A.

¹² Cf. ibidem, 392A. In Greek, *EI* is a form of the verb ‘to be’ and means ‘you are.’

¹³ Ibidem, 392A–B.

¹⁴ Cf. ibidem, 392E–F.

we define something as past or future. As Plutarch points out, what exists belongs to the other reality:

God exists (if it must be stated) and does not exist at any time, but in immovable, timeless eternity not knowing deviations, where there is nothing first or later, nothing future or past, nothing older or younger. God, being the only one, fills the only present with an eternal existence. And only this is truly what is like Him: what neither has happened nor will happen; what neither has begun nor will end.¹⁵

Through the mouth of his teacher Ammonius, Plutarch also points out that the invariability of God indicates His unity, so that He cannot be a multiplicity, that is, unlike people He cannot have any parts: “For the deity is not a multiplicity, just as each of us, who are made up of thousands of components resulting from the changes, and we are a collection of various elements mixed disorderly.”¹⁶ Only God, as an absolute unity, is entitled to a true existence.

We can conclude from the above findings that God cannot be subject to sensory perception, because He is not material or composed of parts. Therefore, referring to Stoic thought, Plutarch states:

However, this is not even worth listening to about His [God’s – author’s note] changes and transformations, when He would burn with the whole universe, as they say, or thicken and descend again, turning into earth, sea, winds, living beings and experience the hard turns of fate of animals and plants.¹⁷

The philosopher from Chaeronea also points out that God does not annihilate the world, but is the principle that makes it last. The following words confirm that: “On the contrary, God brings together everything that the universe can contain within itself and protects the weakness of the matter that seeks to annihilate.”¹⁸ At the end of the argument, Plutarch returns once again to the words “get to know yourself” (*γνώθι σεαυτόν*) and “you are” (*ΕΙ*), thus stressing the difference between God and man:

Although the phrases “you are” and “get to know yourself” seem to contradict each other to some extent, to a certain extent, they agree. The first one, with

¹⁵ Ibidem, 393A–B.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 393B.

¹⁷ Ibidem, 393D–E.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 394A.

fear and reverence, proclaims God as eternally existing, while the second one is to remind mortals of their nature and their weakness.¹⁹

In conclusion, it should be noted that in the last part of *On the E at Delphi* Plutarch divides the whole reality into a variable (sensual) one in which man lives, and a genuinely existing one – constant, unchangeable, belonging to and defining God. The indicated difference between these two dimensions reveals Plutarch's belief that beyond the emotional sphere, there is also such one in which time, change and materiality do not occur. God belongs to this second one, as an absolute way, an immaterial and perfect oneness without any parts, and a principle of order and harmony in the sensual world.

Isis and Osiris

The issues addressed in *On the E at Delphi* are developed in the work *Isis and Osiris* (*Περί Ισιδος και Οσιριδος*). In this letter, when explaining to his friend, priestess Cleo,²⁰ the Egyptian myth about the god Osiris and the goddess Isis, Plutarch states: “we should – provided it is in human power – study the doctrine of the gods”²¹ since “the pursuit of truth, especially about gods, is a manifestation of the pursuit of the divine, for it includes, as it were, acquisition of knowledge about the Causes of Saints in its study and search.”²² The philosopher of Chaeronea wants to achieve this goal through the cognitive recognition, because only in this way can the nature of the gods be properly represented and properly worshipped: “The follower of Isis is someone who seeks by reason and reflects upon the truth contained in what is shown and fulfilled in the rites of worship of these gods.”²³

Plutarch indicates that the Egyptian myths contain the truth about these sacred issues. And whatever it is, it does not change the fact that the theology

¹⁹ Ibidem, 394C.

²⁰ Cf. Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 364D-E, transl. A. Pawlaczyk, Poznań 2003. The Middle Platonist also dedicates a treatise entitled *On the Virtues of Women* to Cleo. That work was translated by J. Szymańska-Doroszewska into Polish and published in “*Studia Antyczne i Mediewistyczne*” 5/40 (2007), pp. 26–64.

²¹ Plutarch, *O Izydzie i Ozyrysie* (*Isis and Osiris*), op. cit., 351.

²² Ibidem, 352E.

²³ Ibidem, 352C.

of the Egyptians contains wisdom.²⁴ Therefore, when instructing Cleo, the Middle Platonist adds:

So, when you hear what myths the Egyptians tell about the gods, their changes, wanderings, tears and many such cruel events, remember what was said before and do not think that what they describe happened or was done accurately as presented.²⁵

After these preliminary explanations, Plutarch invokes the myth of Osiris and Isis, and their struggles with God Typhon.²⁶ Presenting numerous conflicts and intrigues of the gods, he states:

For if such horrible things are said and acknowledged about the blessed and indestructible nature of the deity, as we understand it to be, according to Aeschylus's words, "it is necessary to spit and cleanse the mouth," I need not remind you of that, Cleo. You yourself do not respect those who have such perverse and barbaric views of the gods.²⁷

By emphasizing the sense of his statement, the philosopher compares a myth to a rainbow which, being a colourful reflection of sunlight and broken in a cloud, returns to the eye. Thus, a myth is only a reflection of truth; it refers our mind to something else, as behind its robe there is a more profound – philosophical – meaning, showing us the principles (causes) of the whole reality.²⁸

Before explaining the Egyptian myth, Plutarch also points out that as per the Persian and Greek religions and Chaldeans' beliefs, there is a cause of good and evil in the world.²⁹ The same is true of the Egyptian beliefs, therefore the

²⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, 354C.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 355B.

²⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, 355D–358E.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 358E.

²⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, 358F–359A. It is worth noting that the philosopher from Chaeronea uses the allegoretic method in his search for the truth of myth. More information about this method used in antiquity, cf. J. Zieliński, *Jerozolima, Ateny, Aleksandria. Greckie źródła pierwszych nurtów filozofii chrześcijańskiej* (Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria: Greek Sources of the First Movements of Christian Philosophy), Wrocław 2000, pp. 94–126; M. Szram, *Duchowy sens liczby w allegorycznej exegizie Aleksandryjskiej (II–V) w.* (The Spiritual Meaning of Numbers in Allegorical Alexandria Exegesis [II–V century]), Lublin 2001; M. Domaradzki, *Filozofia antyczna wobec problemu interpretacji: rozwój alegorezy od przedsokratyków do Aristotelesa* (Philosophy Antique to the Problem of Interpretation: Development of Allegoresis from Pre-Socrats to Aristotle), Poznań 2013.

²⁹ Cf. Plutarch, *O Izydzie i Ozyrysie* (Isis and Osiris), *op. cit.*, 369E–370D.

Middle Platonist, to confirm the validity of the thesis, recalls the testimony of Plato, who in his late work *The Laws* mentions the existence of a good and a bad soul in the world.³⁰ Based on the beliefs of other religions and the authority of Plato and his words, Plutarch moves to explain the myth of Isis and Osiris.

For Plutarch, the Egyptian Osiris is the same as the Logos,³¹ which is the eternal, unchanging good, and after Plato³² is called the mental element, idea, model, and father of the world as well.³³ That shows that the Middle Platonist considers the Egyptian Osiris as the first principle (ἀρχή) that contributes to the existence of the whole reality. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that this concept of efficient cause does not contradict the findings on God from *On the E at Delphi*, where the philosopher from Chaeronea pointed to the absolute existence, permanence and unity of God. This thought is developed in Isis and Osiris by adding that God is good, has world-forming power and, as a perfectly rational being, is the idea, or model, according to which the whole of reality was created. The natural consequence of showing such nature of God is to highlight His total otherness, that is, transcendence in respect to the world. To explain this, Plutarch writes: “In fact, he is [Osiris – author’s note] extremely distant from the earth, remaining unrecognizable and unseen, unblemished by any creature subjected to destruction and death.”³⁴

Plutarch accepts Isis as the second principle of the world. Being a goddess, is an eternal female element in nature, possessing the ability to take forms – ideas, thus making it possible for things to exist in the world.³⁵ It is identical with matter (ύλη), which, as Plutarch indicates, Plato calls “mother, host, seat and place of birth.”³⁶ The Middle Platonist also points out that this very principle is not bad, as:

although for both elements it is soil and matter, it always turns spontaneously towards a better being, allowing it to be born from it, and to fill its womb with outflows and images that make it rejoice in being pregnant and full (of

³⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, 370F; Platon, *Prawa* (The Laws), 896D, transl. M. Maykowska, Warsaw 1997.

³¹ Cf. Plutarch, *O Izydzie i Ozyrysie* (Isis and Osiris), op. cit., 373B.

³² Cf. *ibidem*, 372E, 373A.

³³ Cf. *ibidem*, 373E (τὸ μὲν νοητὸν καὶ ιδέαν καὶ παράδειγμα καὶ πατέρα); cf. Platon, *Timajos* (Timaeus), 50C–D, transl. P. Siwek, Warsaw, 1986.

³⁴ Plutarch, *O Izydzie i Ozyrysie* (Isis and Osiris), op. cit., 382E–F.

³⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, 372E.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 373E (μητέρα καὶ τιθήνην ἔδραν τε καὶ χώραν γενέσεως); cf. Platon, *Timajo* (Timaeus), 50C–D.

expectations) of the birth. For the origin in the matter is a picture of being, and what is being created is an imitation of being itself.³⁷

The Supreme God – Logos, being an idea, uses this model and influences the matter, thus forming the world – the cosmos (κόσμος) called Horus by Plutarch: “Better and more divine nature consists of three elements: the mental element, the matter and their combination, which the Greeks call the cosmos. (...) Similarly, Osiris can be considered as the first principle, Isis as the receiving (matter) and Horus as the perfect fulfilment.”³⁸

However, for Plutarch, the first principle – God (Osiris) – is not connected with the world. To be precise, the philosopher from Chaeronea mentions Hermes, whom he also calls the Mind (Logos).³⁹ He describes it as a good force in the cosmos, which introduces order into it:

The Mind has brought order to the universe, combined inconsistent and contradictory parts into a coherent whole, and not destroyed the power of destruction, but only weakened it. The power of evil – as Plutarch continues – has become weak and powerless, and has therefore been combined with elements subject to sensations and transformations, becoming the driving force behind quakes and shuddering of the earth, drought and violent currents of air, as well as lightning bolts and thunders.⁴⁰

To explain why Plutarch calls both Osiris and Hermes Logos, two of its aspects should be distinguished. The first one – immanent – is the Logos located in the world and provides it with the order. The second one – transcendent – is the mind of the Supreme God, who, incorporating ideas – world patterns – is the proper model cause in relation to the material cause – the matter – and the one who, through his plan (ideas) enables the immanent Logos – the mental element (Hermes) – to introduce order into the world, thus ‘fighting’ against the cause of disorder, chaos, evil.⁴¹ Arkadiusz Baron also believes that Logos (Hermes) is an ‘emanation’ (ἀπορροή) from the first principle (Osiris). Therefore, we can speak of ‘emanating’ Logos (Hermes) from the Supreme God to

³⁷ Plutarch, *O Izydzie i Ozyrysie* (Isis and Osiris), op. cit., 372F–373A.

³⁸ Ibidem, 374A.

³⁹ Cf. ibidem, 373B.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, 373D.

⁴¹ Cf. J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, Ithaca–New York 1996, pp. 200–202.

‘curb’ the cause of evil.⁴² According to Plutarch, this principle of evil in the world is God Typhon, whose nature makes him an eternal evil soul causing the disorder. The Middle Platonist describes him as the cause of “death, sickness and confusion, as manifested in the wrong seasons and temperatures, as well as solar eclipses and moonlighting.”⁴³

Therefore, the cosmos/world appears as a place where two forces are always fighting each other, responsible for good and evil. However, Plutarch points out that Hermes/Logos has more power than Typhon, so that the world can last. Nonetheless, this advantage does not imply that the weaker power can be annihilated because then the existence of evil in the world could not be explained:

The origin and nature of the cosmos are confused and composed of two opposing forces of unequal power, but the dominion belongs to the better one. Evil is impossible to be damaged. There is a lot of dark power in the flesh and soul of every creature, and evil continually fights against good.⁴⁴

Later Middle Platonist thinkers, like Plutarch, emphasized the eternity, goodness, reasonableness and transcendence of God⁴⁵ and, more clearly than the philosopher from Chaeronea, stressed that ideas – patterns of the world are His thoughts. Alcinous presented the above most emphatically: “The idea of God is His thought.”⁴⁶ Neither in the writings of Alcinous nor of Apuleius can we find the concept of an evil soul that causes and explains evil in the world. Apuleius of Madaura mentions only the heavenly soul (*caelestem animam*), while Alcinous – the world soul (ψυχὴ τοῦ κόσμου), which both fulfil the function of the laws of the world, realizing the idea of the Supreme God.⁴⁷ The name of the chaotic and disordered principle, which at the same time makes this world unstable and changeable, was attributed to the first matter.

⁴² Cf. A. Baron, *Bóg w ujęciu medio-platoników* (God from the point of view of Middle Platonists), [in:] A. Baron, *Neoplatońska idea...*, op. cit., p. 90, footnote 80.

⁴³ Plutarch, *O Izydzie i Ozyrysie*, op. cit., 371B.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 371A.

⁴⁵ Cf. Alkinous, *Wykład nauk Platona (Didaskalikos)*, transl. K. Pawłowski, Krakow 2008, X 164–166; cf. Apuleius of Madaura, *O Platonie i jego nauce* (About Plato and His Teachings), transl. by K. Pawłowski, Warsaw 2002, vol. 1, V 190, X 201–203, XI 204.

⁴⁶ Alcinous, *Wykład nauk Platona (Didaskalikos)*, op. cit., IX 163.

⁴⁷ Cf. ibidem, X 165, XIV 169; cf. Apuleius of Madaura, *O Platonie i jego nauce*, op. cit., vol. 1, IX 199–200.

According to them, it is a disorder without any shapes and qualities, which is susceptible to the formation.⁴⁸

The Obsolescence of Oracles

The next Plutarch's letter dealing with theological issues is the dialogue *The Obsolescence of Oracles* (*Περὶ τῶν ἐκλελοιπότηων χρηστηρίων*). It is addressed to Terentius Priscus, and the action takes place in Delphi.⁴⁹ The oracles, or more precisely their fall – silence, are under discussion, since “the Boeotia, once resounding with oracle's voices, has now been completely abandoned like dry streams, and great sterility in respect of divination has prevailed in this land.”⁵⁰ It is not Plutarch that speaks in the dialogue in the first person but his brother Lamprias, who also appears in *On the E at Delphi* mentioned earlier. However, as Zofia Abramowicz notes:

Plutarch reveals that the brother is his porte-parole when he says “we” when speaking of Delphic priests in § 49 [437a – author's note]. The translator adds that it was him, not Lamprias, who was Apollon's priest. Since the latter speaks the most in the dialogue and the last word belongs to him, we can assume that what we read are Plutarch's views.⁵¹

However, the discussion about the oracle's silence does not have an ultimate settlement, and Lamprias's final words sound: “These are the things – said – I advise you to consider frequently, and I want to do so myself, because they have many difficulties and contradictory assumptions, and the present moment does not allow us to enter all of them. So, for the time being, let us put them aside for later.”⁵² In the dialogue, one can find information about the number of worlds and, more importantly, the concepts of the highest principles of the whole reality, which are essential for theological considerations. Presenting these thoughts with Lamprias's mouth, Plutarch claims that: “I cannot say anything

⁴⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, VIII 162–163; cf. Apuleius, *O Platonie i jego nauce* (About Plato and His Teachings), *op. cit.*, vol. I, V 191–192.

⁴⁹ Cf. Plutarch, *O zamilknięciu wyroczni* (The Obsolescence of Oracles), § 1, 409 e–f, [in:] *Moralia. Wybór pism filozoficzno-moralnych* (Morals. Selection of Philosophical and Moral Writings), transl. Z. Abramowiczówna, Wrocław 1954.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, § 5, 411 e–f.

⁵¹ Z. Abramowiczówna, *Moralia...*, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

⁵² Plutarch, *O zamilknięciu wyroczni*, *op. cit.*, § 52, 438d–e.

more likely at least now (...), but perhaps it is better to show own views than those of others.”⁵³

Plutarch presents the concept of the two highest principles: the One (*ἕν*) and the indefinite Dyad (*ἀόριστος δυάς*). Noting that unchangeable nature, being unity, cannot alone introduce multitude we are observing into the world, and the Middle Platonist also decided to accept the existence of a principle that causes multiplicity, calling it the indefinite Dyad. He characterises both principles as follows:

As far as the two highest principles (the One and the undetermined Dyad) are concerned, the latter, being the element of all disorder and infinite formlessness, is called infinity. While, through defining and embracing the indefinite and immeasurable vacuum of infinity, the nature of the One gives it a shape and a certain ability to accept and adapt to the terms accompanying our judgments on sensual things.⁵⁴

Things in the world can be variously depicted, but as Plutarch points out, the most basic way of describing them is through numbers, and it is in these that he sees the first beings to order and define sensual things: “Then, each of the multiplicities, defined by oneness, becomes a number; and if oneness is removed, the indefinite duality mixes everything once again and introduces disorder, infinity, and immeasurability.”⁵⁵ Plutarch treats numbers as patterns – ideas to identify things in the world. Thus, through the interaction of the One and the Dyad, the creation of the first even and odd numbers is the primary distinction: “The indefinite principle creates an even number, while the more perfect one – an odd number. Among even numbers, there is two first, and from odd numbers, there is three first. Hence five is formed, which has common components with both of them, but by the quantity it is odd.”⁵⁶

The multiplicity appearing in the whole reality must, therefore, have its cause (principle), which, according to Plutarch, is the indefinite Dyad. Things, however, are made up of plurality, but they also have their unity, definition, and form, without being wholly disintegrated into multitudes. The reason for this is the One (*Hen*) that gives the shape and order to the Multiplicity (Dyad). The adoption of these two mutually interacting principles explains

⁵³ Ibidem, § 34, 428b.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, § 35, 428f–429a.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 429a.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 429b.

the origin of numbers, and then of mathematical subjects, and, according to Plutarch, solves the problem of the unity and multiplicity in the world. There cannot be only the principle of the unity – invariability as it being something one, inseparable cannot cause multitude, which appears to us in the sensual perception. Therefore: “If there were only pure and uninhibited oneness, nature would know no dispersion at all.”⁵⁷

Plutarch’s concept of two principles (the One and the indefinite Dyad) and the first models of the world of ideals – numbers resembles the views of Plato’s successors: Speusip of Athens and Xenocrates of Chalcedon, thus indicating that their continued unwritten study of Plato (*ἀγραφα δόγματα*) was not unknown to the Middle Platonist.⁵⁸

Not only does the philosopher from Chaeronea present the concept of the highest principles but also his interpretation of Plato’s views on the number of worlds. He claims that the above has reference to five original elements shown in *Timaeus*.⁵⁹ Moreover, believing that they correspond to these individual elements, Plutarch refers to the five highest genera of *Sophist*.⁶⁰ Thus, the earth (cube) belongs to rest because it is characterised by stability and hardness; the moving – fire (regular tetrahedron) as being characterized by mobility; the being – ether (dodecahedron) covering everything else; the difference – water (icosahedron) taking on different properties by mixing with other things; and the identity – air (octahedron) covering and permeating every being.⁶¹ To sum up, the Middle Platonist states: “If nature demands equality in everything, there may be no more or fewer worlds than those patterns, so that each of them will have the position and supreme power in each world as they have in the creation of bodies.”⁶²

In his work, Plutarch also repeatedly mentions the matter, which appears as an eternal principle of the world. Being “shaken” by the five primordial elements it contains, it is ordered by God using numbers, that is, by measure and proportion, created, as mentioned above, through the interaction of the One and the Multiplicity. For he says:

⁵⁷ Ibidem, 429d.

⁵⁸ Cf. J. Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato*, Oxford 2003, pp. 30–155; B. Dembiński, *Późny Platon i stara Akademia* (Late Plato and the Old Academy), Kęty 2010, pp. 109–170.

⁵⁹ Cf. Platon, *Timajos* (Timaeus), op. cit., 55C–D.

⁶⁰ Cf. Platon, *Sofista* (Sophist), 254B–256D, transl. W. Witwicki, Warsaw 1956.

⁶¹ Cf. Plutarch, *O zamilknieniu wyroczeni*, op. cit., § 34, 428c–428d.

⁶² Ibidem, 428c.

For it was not God who separated and dissociated the matter, but it was the matter that split itself and was wandering in a significant disorder into separate particles. However, he took it, ordered it according to measure and proportion, and then placed a rational principle in each particle, as if it were the head and guard, and created as many worlds as there were kinds of primitive bodies.⁶³

As can be seen from the quotation above, God, as stated by Plutarch, is also the guardian of the worlds, assigning to everyone the rational principle that puts them in order.

Bearing in mind the concepts of God and the One presented above, it seems that these two principles need to be identified. For God, like the One, brings clarity and harmony to what still does not have it. In Plutarch's text, however, we do not find clear arguments in favour of this thesis. Thereby, a different interpretation may be considered. Perhaps the Middle Platonist, apart from the principle of multiplicity, one, and the first principle, also assumes another eternal cause – God, who, using the results of the interaction of the One and the Dyad, introduces order into the primordial, disordered material – the matter.

In the light of the analyses conducted so far, the following question should be asked: Are the principles of the One and the Multiplicity presented by Plutarch immanent or transcendent towards the world? It seems that one should not identify the matter with the Dyad, because the Middle Platonist characterises them variously. The matter with an immanent movement caused by the primary elements is ordered by God who, with the help of mathematical objects generated by the interaction of the principles of the One (*Hen*) and Multiplicity (*Dyad*) creates five worlds. Moreover, bearing in mind the sensual world we live in, it must be said that we do not observe beings that are only oneness and only multiplicity in it, because everything, as mentioned above, includes a certain unity and multitude. Therefore, from these quotations and arguments, it is likely that both the One and the indefinite Dyad do not exist in the world but are transcendent to it.

In *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, Plutarch, therefore, presents us with a concept of two transcendent principles: the One (*Hen*) and indefinite Dyad, causing and explaining unity (definiteness) and at the same time multiplicity (disparateness) in the world. This thought does not appear in the previously analysed writings of the Middle Platonist. On the other hand, the concept of the five

⁶³ Ibidem § 37, 430e–f. It should be noted that the created worlds must be connected to each other in some way since, as it follows from the above considerations, Plutarch does not accept the existence of a vacuum.

worlds contradicts the reasoning contained *Isis and Osiris* – the idea of one world (Horus). Similarly, we do not find the concept of the One and Dyad as well as the plurality of worlds in the views of later Middle Platonists.⁶⁴ According to them, the influence of the unchangeable God on the chaotic matter created he multiplicity in the world. However, how can a constant, invariable, being affect anything? Alcinous addressed this issue when he tried to explain by analogy how the untouched God moves everything else. For he wrote: “He moves, while standing still himself, like the sun in relation to the eyesight, when he looks at it, and how the object of desire causes desire, even though it remains unmoved.”⁶⁵

On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus

On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus (Περὶ τῆς ἐν Τιμαίῳ ψυχογονίας) is the last of Plutarch’s works that I would like to analyse in terms of the principles of the world. It is not a dialogue, but a lecture, namely an exegesis of Plato’s text, addressed to his sons, Autobul and Plutarch.⁶⁶ The work aims to explain the concept of the soul shown on the pages of *Timaeus*. However, during his lecture, the philosopher from Chaeronea also refers to other writings of the Athenian, showing the consistency of his views: “For how could a drunken sophist, let alone Plato, be accused of so much disorder and inconsistency in what occupies him most?”⁶⁷

He begins his lecture with the presentation of his position on the issue of the soul and the origins of the world, and then supports it with Plato’s authority.

First, therefore, writes Plutarch, I will present the view I have on these matters, trusting in its similarity and explaining, as far as possible, the uniqueness and paradoxes of the lecture. Then I will join an explanation and proof to the words, reconciling them with each other.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Both Alcinous and Apuleius address the existence of one world; cf. Alcinous, *Wykład nauk Platona*, op. cit., XIV 170 – XV 171; cf. Apuleius, *O Platonie i jego nauce*, op. cit., vol. 1, VIII 197–198.

⁶⁵ Alcinous, *Wykład nauk Platona*, op. cit., X 164.

⁶⁶ Plutarch, *O powstaniu duszy w Timajosie* (On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus), 1012b, transl. J. Komorowska, [in:] Plutarch of Chaeronea, *Pisma egzegetyczne* (Exegetical Writings), Krakow 2012.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, 1016a.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, 1014a.

As a preliminary remark, the Middle Platonist recalls the characteristic thesis of Greek philosophy that nothing can come into being from nothing⁶⁹. Thereby, the first principles must be accepted: “For [there is] creation not from non-existence but from which is neither beautiful nor appropriate just as the case with a house, robe or statue.”⁷⁰ Plutarch, after Plato, writes about the first three principles: the God, substance and matter:

Thus, it is better to believe Plato and say that God created the world and to sing that it is the most beautiful thing of all born and that its builder is the most perfect of all causes. While the substance/matter from which it originated is not the resultant, but eternally subsistent, and gave itself to the demiurge to be arranged and ordered as well as conformed as much as possible to it.⁷¹

The philosopher from Chaeronea, therefore, indicates that there was a disorder (*ἀκοσμία*)⁷² before the world was born. It consisted of the first matter, which the Middle Platonist, following Plato, calls the mother (*μήτηρ*) and feeder (*τιθήνη*). It was susceptible to the formation and taking on shapes.⁷³ As he further points out, it was carnal, but without a specific quality and form, so he states:

This all-encompassing material [element] had size, space and size, yet it lacked beauty, shape and measurability of shapes. It received them, after it had been ordered, to give birth to all lands, seas, heavens, stars, bodies and organs of plants and animals.⁷⁴

However, as Plutarch emphasizes, the original disorder (*ἀκοσμία*) also had some chaotic, disordered movement: “the disorder is not without is a body, movement and soul, but it includes a shapeless corporality and a contentless unreasonable and changeable mobility.”⁷⁵ By referring to Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Plutarch considered the eternal soul (*ψυχή*), which was incomprehensible and

⁶⁹ This thesis finds its expression in the philosophy of Anaxagoras of Klazomenaj, cf. Aristotle, *Fizyka* (Physics), transl. K. Leśniak, [in:] Aristotle, *Dzieła Wszystkie* (The Complete Works), vol. 2, Warsaw 1990, vol. 1, 187a.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, 1014b.

⁷¹ Ibidem, 1014a–b; cf. Platon, *Timajos*, op. cit., 29A.

⁷² Cf. ibidem, 1014b.

⁷³ Cf. ibidem, 1015a–e; cf. Platon, *Timajos*, op. cit., 50D–51A.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, 1014c.

⁷⁵ Ibidem, 1014b–c.

indefinite,⁷⁶ as a source of movement. Moreover, with reference to *The Laws*, the Middle Platonist saw the cause of evil in it: “In *The Laws*, he [Plato – author’s note] called it [eternal soul] a necessity, and he said that it was a disordered soul and a perpetrator of evil.”⁷⁷ In summing up, he distinguishes the matter and a disordered soul in the original disorder, and states as follows:

After all, Plato calls the matter a mother and feeder, while the cause of evil is the motion that moves it [i.e. the matter] that arises to a body, and is disorderly and incomprehensible but not heartless. As has already been said, in *The Laws*, it is referred to as the opposite soul and contrary to doing good.⁷⁸

Having presented the matter and a rotten soul, Plutarch turns to discuss the principle of introducing order into the primeval chaos. The reason for this is God, whom he calls the creator (δημιουργός), good (ἀγαθός), father (πατήρ) and mental being (ὄν δὲ δὲ τὸ νοητόν).⁷⁹ As has already been pointed out, God, being good, wanted everything to be conformed to Him as much as possible. For this purpose, he used eternal and unchangeable ideas-models.⁸⁰ The philosopher from Chaeronea characterises the process of shaping the matter as follows:

God, therefore, did not arouse the wretched matter but stabilized the one shaken by an unreasonable cause. Furthermore, he did not provide nature with the principle of change and experience; however, when it remained in various experiences and changes, he took away much of its ambiguity and falsehood using harmony, analogy/proportion and number as tools. Their task is not to provide things with experiences of otherness and difference through movement and change, but rather to make them stable, reliable and similar to what is always the same.⁸¹

It can be seen from the afore-mentioned fragment that Plutarch understands ideas as unchangeable and eternally existing mathematical entities, i.e. numbers and proportions, which introduce determinacy and formality into the chaotic

⁷⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, 1015e; cf. Platon, *Fajdros* (Phadros), 245C–246, transl. W. Witwicki, Warsaw 1958.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 1014e; cf. Platon, *Prawa* (The Laws), 896D.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 1015d–e.

⁷⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, 1015b, 1017a, 1024c.

⁸⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, 1022e–1023d. The Middle Platonist does not situate ideas ‘beyond’ God; he probably assumes that they are his thoughts, because the causal cause, as rational, should have a plan for the creation of the world in its mind.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, 1015e.

matter. Thereby, he emphasizes that the world is a structure arranged according to a mathematical formula, which makes it possible to describe it with the language of mathematics.⁸²

While discussing the shape of the primordial soul, the Middle Platonist invokes the idea of the Same (τὰυτόν) and the Other (θατερόν), believing that the principle of the former is the One (ἓν) and the latter is the Dyad (δύαξ): “For each is based on a different principle – the Same according to the One, the Other according to the Dyad.”⁸³ In the soul, the Same and the Other are mixed with appropriate mathematical proportions, and through mutual interaction, they “cause” identity and order (the Same) and difference and multiplicity (the Other). Therefore, we find both differences – multiplicity and identity – unity in the movement of the world:

Also here, in relation to the soul, for the first time they are confused, bound by numbers, proportions and harmonious intervals. And having found itself [there / in it], the Other introduces a difference in the Same, while the Same in the Other order, as it can be seen in the first powers of the soul, that is, in the moving and decisive ones. Simple way in the movement in the sky shows there are visible differences in the identity in the circulation of fixed stars, while the identity in the variation in the planetary alignment⁸⁴. (...) The Same is the idea of what is always the same, while the Other of what is always unlike. And the task of the latter [i.e. the Other] is to separate, change, and make a multiplicity of whatever it touches, while the former – to collect and set together, when for the sake of similarity, they [the affected] take on one of many forms and powers.⁸⁵

Plutarch, therefore, most probably following Plato’s *Sophist*, shows that the five highest genera probably refer to the evil soul (movement), the idea (rest), God (being), the Same (identity) and the Other (difference). How to reconcile the concept of three original causes of the world previously indicated by Plutarch with the science of the One and the Dyad appearing in subsequent parts of *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus*? It seems that to specify this, we should put forward a hypothesis that only one of the first causes mentioned above could have caused the existence of the One and the Dyad. This reason, of course, is the mental being – God. Provided that the above is correct, it must

⁸² Cf. *ibidem*, 1017e–1022c.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 1024d.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 1024d–1024e.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 1025c.

be stated that the principles of the Same and the Other, i.e. the One and the Dyad, are hypostases emanating from the supreme God, and Plutarch describes to us the mental process of the divine creator to explain unity (identity) and multiplicity (difference) in the movement of the soul. Such a hypothesis indicates that he considers certain levels of existence: God (mind) – the One and the Dyad – the Same and the Other resulting in the identities and differences in the original principle of movement – the evil soul. The primordial soul formed by God became the soul of the world (κόσμου ψυχή), i.e. the mind ruling over the merged cosmos.⁸⁶ Summing up the process of ordering the soul, Plutarch states:

In this way, he repeatedly reveals to us that not God creates the entire soul, but that it has an inborn portion of evil within itself, which He [God] organized when with the help of the one He limited the multiplicity so that a substance emerged which contributed the boundary. Moreover, with the help of the Same and the Other, he added the order, change, difference and similarity, and using all of them he created, as far as possible, a mutual community and friendship through numbers and harmony.⁸⁷

The concept of the highest principles presented in *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus* coincides with some of the views expressed in *Isis and Osiris*. The supreme transcendent God (father, creator of the world) is equivalent to Osiris, the matter (mother) to Isis, and the cause of evil in the emerging world (primordial soul) to the Typhon.

As already mentioned, in the writings of Alcinous and Apuleius neither do we find the doctrine of the evil soul (the cause of evil), nor thoughts of the One and the Dyad, as the reasons for multiplicity and unity in the world. Besides, it should be emphasised that in *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus* we speak of one created world, not five as in *The Obsolescence of Oracles*.

Conclusion

As I tried to demonstrate, there is no consistency in the theological-cosmological thought of Plutarch. Sometimes he refers to the science of the One and the Dyad, and another time he writes about one cause of order in the primordial matter. Sometimes he speaks of the creation of five worlds; at other times he

⁸⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, 1014e, 1026c.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 1027a.

mentions only one world. Nevertheless, what is worth emphasising is that his views are characterised by the thought of the transcendent principle that determines the creation of the world(s). He does not only see the cosmos as an immanent cause but also refers to a principle that is different from everything else in the world.

When the world for the Greeks “opened up” to the East, previously unknown religions influenced the views of the then people, who tried to understand and explain what was new. Under the influence of those impulses, Plutarch tried to rationalise religious beliefs through referring to the Greek philosophy of the transcendent principle of the world, Plato’s philosophy, forgotten in the Hellenistic era. Looking into the past, he wished to better understand and explain the present. However, Middle Platonism, the movement he represented, was not uniform. Its later representatives, such as Alcinous and Apuleius, did not write like Plutarch about the eternal cause of evil in the world (the evil soul, Typhon), nor did they continue the doctrine of the One and the indefinite Dyad.⁸⁸ However, the return to the transcendental cause of the world and the thought of immanent understanding (Logos, the soul of the world) in the created cosmos, initiated by the philosopher from Chaeronea, were continued by them, thus influencing the minds of the next generations.

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⁸⁸ It should be noted that the issues of the One and the Dyad, which were not discussed by later Middle Platonists, can be found in the thought of Plotinus living in the third century; cf. A. Woszczyk, *Problem hen i aoristos dyas w Enneadach Plotyna* (The Problem of Hen and Aoristos Dyas in the Enneads by Plotinus), Katowice 2007.

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MATEUSZ BIERNACZYK (M.A.) – PhD student of philosophy at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Wrocław. He deals with and is interested in ancient philosophy. In his PhD thesis currently being drafted, he examines the influence of the Platonists' concept from the 1st and 2nd centuries on the initial trends of Christian thought. In his work, he tries to answer the question posed by Tertullian: *Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? Quid academiae et ecclesiae?* ("What does Athens have in common with Jerusalem? Church and Academy?").