

DID PORPHYRY REJECT THE TRANSMIGRATION OF HUMAN SOULS INTO ANIMALS?

In *Hermes* 85 (1957, p. 414–435) Prof. Heinrich Dörrie contributed substantially to our understanding of the intricacies of the theory of transmigration in the later Platonic tradition. There remain, however, some obscurities in the tradition which might be worth airing again. What I should like to suggest here is that the picture is not a black and white one for or against transmigration of human souls into animals, but that from Porphyry onwards a compromise was being worked out by which the major difficulty of making a rational soul become an irrational soul was avoided whilst still upholding something of Plato's literal meaning. It is in the nature of compromise that it is easily misunderstood. In *Civ. Dei* x 30 Augustine is quite explicit that Porphyry rejected reincarnation of humans into animals – in solos homines humanas animas praecipitari posse sentiret. It is, however, reasonable to entertain caution when dealing with a Christian apologist who has an axe to grind¹).

The doctrine of transmigration does not seem to have greatly worried Plotinus. Evidently it first became a serious problem for Porphyry²). But it was, perhaps, not until Proclus that a compromise solution was fully worked out.

1) E.g. one may note the point scoring when Augustine says that Porphyry was ashamed to draw the consequences of the theory of transmigration – that his mother might be reincarnated as an ass! *Civitas Dei* x 30 Pudit scilicet illud credere ne mater fortasse filium in mulam revoluta vectaret. Compare this with Aeneas Theophrastus (11 Boissonade, PG) περιφρονοῦντες καὶ ἐθυθριῶντες τὸν Πλάτωνος ὄνον . . . and below note 14 on Theophrastus 884A–B (PG).

2) It had presented difficulties to earlier Platonists (cf. Dörrie *art. cit.* 418) eg. Albinus, though the evidence does not prove that Albinus rejected it. See also Lucretius iii 760 Sin animas hominum dicent in corpora semper/ire humana (after previously rejecting the thesis of *unlimited* transmigration). This is evidence that a more limited transmigration was being advocated before Lucretius.

Dörrie is wrong to say that Plutarch rules out reincarnation into animals in *de fac. in orbe lunae* 944 d (*Art. cit.* 418 n. 7), where he merely says that δαίμονες receive human bodies as a punishment. Zeller (111 ii 200) says that there is no mention of animal transmigration in Plutarch. But *de sera num vind.* 565 d and 567 e clearly do mention it. It is true that this comes in a myth. But one must surely

Dörrie argued that both Porphyry and Iamblichus advocated a metaphorical interpretation of the doctrine. But in a long passage of Porphyry quoted by Stobaeus (*Anthol.* I.445 f)³) he seems to be employing both a metaphorical and a literal interpretation of transmigration. I think that Dörrie is wrong in regarding it (*loc. cit.* 415–6) as purely metaphorical. Zeller, whilst admitting its literal meaning, dismisses it rather peremptorily (111.2⁴ 713 „bedient er sich daher auch solcher Ausdrücke, die jene Vorstellung streng genommen voraussetzen würden, so haben sie doch für ihn nur uneigentliche Bedeutung“). Porphyry in *Stob.* 1 446, 4 *μη λάθη θηρίον γενομένη* is surely metaphorical since the process referred to is envisaged as occurring during earthly life. 447, 4–5 also seems to be metaphorical although I have some reservations. The choice of lives *after* death is the context. On the other hand this entire theme may, of course, be interpreted metaphorically. However at 9 he continues *καὶ οὐκέτι ταῦτα μῦθος οὐδὲ ποιήσις, ἀλλὰ ἀλήθεια καὶ φυσικὸς λόγος*. This asseveration may apply to what has gone before. It certainly must apply to what follows so that when in line 19 he refers to transmigration into animals we are correct in interpreting this literally – *εἰς λύκου φύσιν ἢ λέοντος, ὥσπερ ὄργανον ἀμυντικὸν τὸ σῶμα*.

The same double treatment is found in Macrobius *Somn.* 1.ix 4–5. During life a man may change into a beast *quodam modo*. After death he may choose an animal's body for future reincarnation. Mras⁴) has argued that Macrobius must be following Plotinus here rather than Porphyry since the latter rejected transmigration into animals. Courcelle⁵) argues that Porphyry can still be the source for he may have changed his mind since in the Stobaeus passages which we have discussed above he accepts Plotinus' view. But if Porphyry had at least begun to work on the lines later developed by Proclus and, possibly, Iamblichus it is not necessary

accept that it was not totally repugnant to Plutarch. Nor is 567 e a merely passive acceptance of Platonic teaching since in referring to the reshaping of the *souls* (*καμπτομένας βία καὶ μετασηματιζομένας*) he is countering, albeit perhaps at second hand, criticisms such as that of Aristotle (*de anima* 1.3 407b 20–26) that the souls must change to suit the body. cf. also Nemesius 119 f. Matth.

3) This passage may be from the *περὶ Στυγός*. Deuse, *Theodoros von Asine* 158 n. 298, would seem to regard the whole of this passage as referring to literal transmigration and accepts the theory that Porphyry later changed his mind.

4) K. Mras “Macrobius’ Kommentar zu Ciceros *Somnium*”, *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 1933 vi Phil.-hist. Kl., 253.

5) *Les Lettres Grecques en Occident de Macrobe à Cassiodore* Paris 1948², 22.

to postulate a change of opinion. Rather the complexity of a new, and probably, imperfect compromise has led to misunderstanding both here and in the other reports and reflections of Porphyry's stance.

Porphyry may, of course, have proposed both a metaphorical *and* a qualified literal interpretation without any serious attempt to reconcile them. Porphyry has sometimes been regarded as a sort of demythologiser. For example Hades for Porphyry (and Plotinus) is said to have meant the earthly body and not a 'real' place to which we may go after death⁶). I have argued elsewhere⁷) that both ideas are employed, both a metaphorical and a real Hades. The same flexibility and delight in alternative interpretations may be seen in the play on 'death' (physical or spiritual)⁸) or in more general terms in the different and often contradictory meanings extracted from Homer in *de Antro Nympharum*. Such flexibility can easily be misinterpreted. Thus Macrobius, who in the *Commentary on Cicero's Somnium Scipionis* draws heavily on Porphyry, seems to go for a metaphorical interpretation of Hades to the exclusion of a real Hades distinct from our normal life on earth. cf. *Somn.* 1, x-xii, ix. 5 and especially x.9-10. These passages Courcelle⁹) compares with fragments of Porphyry's *περὶ Στυγός* preserved in Stobaeus 1.420,6 f., 423,8 f. One of the arguments which Courcelle employs to prove that Macrobius reflects Porphyry (there are still ample reasons for maintaining the connection here between Porphyry and Macrobius though they are not watertight) is that both of them employ an allegorical interpretation of Hades. But this is not true in Porphyry's case. In the first passage he is simply quoting Apollodoros (Macrobius, too, in x.9 refers to earlier *auctores*) and the punishments in Hades which he later describes, though they are *φαντασίαι*, are nevertheless *φαντασίαι* experienced by people *after* their earthly life. In other words Porphyry does not believe literally in the traditional physical punishments of Hades but he does regard wicked souls as really undergoing punishment through their *φαντασίαι* after death. Moreover *Sent.* 29 suggests that the activity of the pneuma with its *φαντασίαι* after death may deal

6) cf. Dörrie in *Entrétiens sur l'antiquité classique* xii *Porphyre* 180.

7) *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition*, 1974 The Hague, 72 ff., 79.

8) *Sent.* ix.

9) *op. cit.* 29 f.

with things more substantial in the material sense than mental images. Porphyry may not always have made his position clear.

Besides Augustine, Aeneas of Gaza and Nemesios provide important evidence for Porphyry's role in this question. But before analysing their contribution it is important to examine the subsequent history of the debate which may have shaped their reports. A compromise solution is fully nuanced in Proclus. Yet even his clear statements on the subject have been misinterpreted. According to Prof. Dörrie when Proclus appears (*in Rem.* II 309, 28 f) to be admitting reincarnation of humans into animals he is not really doing so, but is fully consistent with what Dörrie takes to be his normal doctrine (eg. *in Tim.* III 295) in which reincarnation into an animal means, according to Dörrie, "nicht ein Tier, sondern ein tierischer Mensch". This interpretation seems to me to need clarifying. Does Proclus mean that when a man is reincarnated as a beast 1) he has a beast's body but retains his human soul, or, 2) he has a human body and soul but a beastly disposition? Clearly the second of these is a more radical departure from Plato.

But Proclus certainly means the first. In *in Tim.* III.294, 21 he makes a compromise between two groups – those who interpret metaphorically and speak of *θηριώδεις βίους* and those who understand Plato literally (that the soul *εἰσκήριεσθαι*). But the truth (*ὁ δὲ ἀληθὴς λόγος*) is that the human soul enters (*εἰσκήριεσθαι*) the beast which retains its own *ζωή* on which the human soul rides and to which it is bound by sympathy. When Proclus later makes much of the fact that Plato says *εἰς βίον θήρειον* without mentioning *σῶμα*, his point is not that the whole idea is metaphorical and no animal's *body* is involved but that the human soul does not *directly* enter an animal's body.

A similar formula is used in *in Rem.* 11, 309, 30 f. The human soul does not dwell in (*ἐνοικίξεσθαι*) an animal body but is related (*ἐν σχέσει*) to the animal soul which looks after the appropriate (namely animal) form of body. Note the wording *ἢ δὲ ἐν ἡμῖν πρὸς τὴν ἐν ἐκείνοις ἐν σχέσει γενομένη ψυχοῖ τὸ ἄλογον ἔξωθεν ἐφαστῶσα σχετικῶς*.¹⁰⁾

10) A similar doctrine emerges in Proclus *in Tim.* ii 334–337. Animals have their own individual soul (*ἢ ἐν κατατάξει*) but a rational soul may also attach itself to them 334, 14 *ἔξωθεν σχετικῶς συνοῦσαν*. He notes that their relationship is similar to that of the *δαίμων* (= *νοῦς*) which presides over us (Compare with Iamblichus *de Myst.* 24, 4 *loc. cit. infra*). The Chaldaean Oracles are invoked to show that such a liaison, though it occurs, is *παρὰ φύσιν* and Plato to the same effect when he limits reincarnation into animals to those who have sinned. It is

Proclus seems clear enough but Rohde¹¹) simply says that he denied transmigration of humans into animals. He adds Sallustios and Porphyry to the list. In fact Sallustios has a doctrine very similar to that of Proclus: *Concerning the Gods and the Universe* xx εἰ δὲ εἰς ἄλογα (αἱ μετεμψυχώσεις) ἔξωθεν ἔπονται ὡσπερ καὶ ἡμῖν οἱ εἰληχότες ἡμᾶς δαίμονες. οὐ γὰρ μήποτε λογικῆ ἀλόγου ψυχῆ γένηται. This is not a flat denial, but a qualified statement, the essential point being that a rational soul cannot become an irrational soul. Nock¹²) says this: “Sallust, like Iamblichus, denied that the soul entered animals.” But this is not the whole truth. In *de Myst.* 24, 4 Iamblichus uses a phrase very similar to that of Sallustius – ἔξωθεν δ’ αὐτῶν ἡγεμονεύει. Nock unaccountably gives this passage as evidence that Iamblichus rejected reincarnation into animals¹³), but it concerns the relation of δαίμονες to their bodies. However the idea that they somehow transcended their bodies is one which he, like Sallustios, could have used of the human soul, not to reject reincarnation into animals so much as to explain it whilst safeguarding the rational soul.

Thus the essential idea of Sallustios’ and Proclus’ theory is already found in Iamblichus. It is, I think, reasonable to suppose that he had used it for soul since Sallustios largely builds on Iamblichus. We know from Aeneas of Gaza *Theophrastus* (893 A–B PG 85. 11, 23 Boissonade) that Iamblichus and Porphyry rejected a purely literal interpretation of Platonic reincarnation into animals. The basic problem is that it is impossible for a rational principle to become an irrational one – καὶ ὄλως ἀδύνατον τὸν λόγον εἰς ἀλογίαν μετατίθεσθαι, εἰ μὴ καὶ τὸ ἄλογον φήσουσι ὑφαρπάζειν τοῦ λόγου τὴν φύσιν. And so as a solution they claimed that a man was not reborn as an ass but as an ass-like man – ὀνώδη ἄνθρωπον or λεοντώδη ἄνθρωπον. But is this meant to be purely metaphorical? The following sentence reads: οὐ γὰρ τὴν φύσιν, ἀλλὰ τὴν τῶν σωμάτων μορφήν μεταμπίσχεσθαι, ὡσπερ ἐπὶ τῆς σκηνης οἱ τῆς τραγωδίας ὑποκριταί, οἱ νῦν μὲν τὸν

difficult to say whether the Oracles did accept the doctrine as Proclus may have misinterpreted them. Kroll (*de Orac. Chald.* 62) assumes that he had and that the Oracles rejected transmigration of humans into animals.

11) Rohde *Psyche*² 276 n. 4.

12) A. D. Nock *Sallustius Concerning the Gods and the Universe*, Cambridge 1926, xciii.

13) Nock *ibid.* xciii. Deuse *op. cit.* 158 n. 300 makes the same point as Nock and suggests Iamblichus as Sallustios’ source.

Ἄλκμαίωνα, νῦν δὲ τὸν Ὀρέστην ὑποκρίνονται. Just as the nature of the actor as *man* remains constant but his external form/body may change, now Orestes, now Alkmaeon, so in transmigration our human nature remains (the same word *φύσιν* as above) whilst we may exchange a human body for an animal one. I cannot see what point Porphyry could have been making here by introducing this contrast between substance and outer form in the context of a statement about reincarnation into animals unless he means that an actual adoption of an animal form is possible. And yet only a few paragraphs later (896 B–C) Aeneas gives a clear report of Proclus' (& Syrianus') compromise which is carefully distinguished from the literal interpretation *and* the interpretation which uses terms such as *ὀνώδης ἄνθρωπος – οὐδ' εἰς ἰκτινώδη ἄνθρωπον ἐκπέμπουσιν. ἄτοπον γὰρ εἰ πλεονεξίας αἰτία γίνεται κόλασις*. The man who behaves like a kite will be re-embodied as a kite-like man, but this is no punishment for it is the same as the very cause of his *πλεονεξία*, behaving like a kite. Proclus avoids this absurdity by linking the man to a kite's body (& soul) *καὶ οὗτος τῆς τιμωρίας ὁ τρόπος*. The conclusion we can draw from this is that in this passage “kite-like” really is metaphorical i.e. refers to disposition only.

The meaning is clear but I still feel a certain disquiet in applying this interpretation to Aeneas' earlier account. Were Iamblichus and Porphyry really as purely metaphorical as this latter passage suggests? It is worth bearing in mind that Aeneas himself may not have been well informed or have adequately understood the views of earlier philosophers. He knows Proclus' solution but in crediting Syrianus and Proclus with introducing the doctrine he is clearly unaware of the precedent of Theodoros, cited by Proclus himself (*In. Rem.* II 309, 28 f.). Theodoros seems to have “solved” the dilemma rather neatly and his application to it of the principle of *σχέσις* seems to have appealed to Proclus. Porphyry and Iamblichus, I think, were probably less precise and unambiguous. Secondly it was in Aeneas' interests to stress the disagreement and hair-splitting of the pagan tradition¹⁴). And thirdly he betrays elsewhere a simplistic misinterpretation of Porphyry¹⁵).

14) Cf. Theophrastus 884A–B (PG). *βούλονται μὲν οἱ ἐξ Ἀκαδημίας πείθειν, ὡς οὐ διαφωνεῖ Πλάτων αὐτὸς ἑαυτῷ νοήματα καὶ ὀνόματα ὡς ἂν ἐθέλωσι μετατιθέντες ὥσπερ οἱ τοὺς χρησμοὺς πρὸς τὴν ἑαυτῶν βούλησιν ἐρμηνεύοντες. Δοκοῦσι δὲ μοι παντελῶς ὑβρίζεσθαι.*

15) *ibid.* 896 B with regard to free will in the context of judgement after death. Some idea of Porphyry's more sophisticated (though perhaps still muddled

The picture presented by Nemesios well expresses the confused knowledge of this debate. Here Porphyry is put in the same camp as Cronios and Theodoros (117, 1 f.) whilst Iamblichus is said to have opposed them and to have written a book *ὅτι οὐκ ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων εἰς ζῶα ἄλογα οὐδὲ ἀπὸ ζῶων ἀλόγων εἰς ἀνθρώπους αἱ μετενσωματώσεις γίνονται*. That could not be the title of a work by Iamblichus since it is highly unlikely that he would have advertised so blatantly such an unplatonic concept¹⁶). If, however, you put this comment into the context of an argument like that of Proclus it is easy to see that it might well have been qualified – a human soul stays outside the animal soul-body complex but is related to it. If my earlier contention that such a view was held by Iamblichus is correct, it is not difficult to see how misunderstandings could easily arise amongst those who wished to make matters black and white. In modern times uncompromising statements that Proclus and Sallustios denied animal reincarnation have been equally misleading. Nemesios' distinction certainly seems to involve the question of transmigration into animals which is connected with a further argument as to whether all souls are rational¹⁷), Iamblichus holding that different ζῶα, have different types of soul. This point had been dealt with previously when

and unsuccessful) handling of this theme may be obtained from the fragments of *περὶ τοῦ ἐφ' ἡμῖν* in Stobaeus *Anth.* ii 163–173.

16) Dillon, *Iamblichus Chalcidensis in Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta*, 25 suggests that this is a subtitle of a work mentioned by Damascius *Dub. et Sol* ch. 402, ii 259, 13 Ruelle *περὶ ψυχῆς μεταναστάσεως*. Might it not also be a heading added by an editor who may not fully have grasped Iamblichus' argument or which does not adequately reflect its subtlety? Possible, too, is that he meant that the change from human to animal body is a gradual one. Cf. Proclus in *Tim.* iii 295, 19–23 *οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐναντιωτάτων εἰδῶν τῆς ζωῆς τὰ ἐναντιώτατα σχεῖν*. The descent to an animal is gradual: man → woman (!) → etc. Deuse *op cit.* 160 n. 300 notes the similarity (*εἶδος*) with Nemesios' comment on the "title" of Iamblichus' essay.

17) I am not altogether convinced by Dörrie's argument that there is a consistent relationship between the transmigration question and the extent of the soul's rationality and immortality. Doxographical distinctions like those of Damascius ("Olympiodorus") in *Phaed.* 124, 13–20 can be misleading. As Dörrie rightly notes (p. 41), Proclus and Porphyry refined their position considerably. Cf. *Tim.* iii 234, 6 f. and my discussion in *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition*, 66 f. Such refinements are not easily accommodated in doxographical tags or summaries. It is also important to consider that although Porphyry spoke of the dissolution of the irrational soul after death this applies only to those who have completely purified themselves. The rest – the very ones who are eligible for rebirth and rebirth into animals – retain their irrational souls intact. cf. *Sent.* 29, Porphyry in Stobaeus *Anth.* i 423.

Nemesios, in discussing transmigration, distinguishes three groups 1) those who say there is one form of soul (the rational) and that it passes into plants and the bodies of irrational creatures, 2) those who say that there are two forms, rational and irrational, and 3) those who say that there are as many forms of soul as there are forms of ζῶα (115, 4). Some simplification has taken place in 117, 1 f where the first group probably includes the first two of the earlier passage.

Between these two passages Nemesios makes a different distinction according to which there are those who interpret animal transmigration *κυρίως* – literally – and those who understand it *τροπικῶς* – figuratively. It is difficult to see what is the relationship of this grouping to the others though one might most naturally refer the metaphorical school to Iamblichus. Dörrie¹⁸) has, however, argued that Porphyry was probably the originator of the theory even if Iamblichus (probably Nemesios' source) or Nemesios have obscured his contribution. I would not question that Porphyry and Iamblichus did hold such a view but only whether this is the whole truth about their position.

But why is Nemesios so imprecise in his attribution of the metaphorical mode of interpretation? If Iamblichus really did adopt this approach why does he not say so? Could it be that Nemesios was himself uncertain how this theory was to be reconciled with the other statements of Iamblichus and Porphyry? His apparent confusion here may be compared with Aeneas' certainty based probably on secondary sources, whereas Nemesios had access to original works of Porphyry and probably Iamblichus.

Proclus also distinguishes metaphorical and literal exponents of transmigration into animals. Who are they? My suggestion is that by Proclus' time the situation had become somewhat confused. I doubt whether either Porphyry or Iamblichus stood for a purely metaphorical solution but a trace of it, at least, was incorporated in their views and there may have been others who went the whole way¹⁹). Proclus' twofold classification is, for him, a useful summary of the main elements of the prevalent lack of precision which he wished to override. Is it significant that he

18) *art. cit.* 430.

19) Hierocles? He apparently rejected transmigration of humans into animals cf. Photius *βιβλιοθήκη* 172 b20 ff. (cf also 461 b) *ὁ πλείστος δ' αὐτῶ και μέγας ἀγὼν ἢ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ψυχῶν ἐστὶ προβοιτῆ και μετενσωμάτωσις, τὸν μὲν ἐξ ἀλόγων ζῴων ἢ εἰς ἄλογα μεταγισμὸν οὐκ ἀναδεχόμενος, τὴν δὲ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων εἰς ἀνθρώπους μεταβολὴν σπουδαιολογούμενος.*

does not mention Iamblichus or Porphyry who by other accounts contributed substantially to the debate? Proclus may have omitted the mention of their names because he realised that their views could not so easily be categorised.

The arguments which I have presented certainly do not prove beyond all doubt that Porphyry and Iamblichus did accept transmigration of human souls into animals in some form but they do show that the opposite thesis is not certain either and that their views were probably less clearcut than has hitherto been supposed.

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This article was written before the appearance of Werner Deuse's *Untersuchungen zur mittelplatonischen und neuplatonischen Seelenlehre*, Wiesbaden, 1983. See esp. pp. 129–167 where he argues persuasively that the view of Porphyry, who probably spoke of both literal *and* metaphorical transmigration into animals but harmonised them by the doctrine that man's initial embodiment occurs in two phases or choices (*περὶ τοῦ ἐφ' ἡμῖν* in Stob. II 163 f.), was later distorted or misunderstood. A.S.