

# Calcidius on Nature

**Laura Marongiu**

University of Rome Tor Vergata / University of Turin

**Abstract:** This contribution aims to examine Calcidius' account of nature in his translation of and commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, with particular emphasis on the status of nature and its role in the cosmological framework. While Calcidius' uses of *natura* in the translation are broadly consistent with Plato's uses of *physis*, in the commentary he articulates a more robust account of nature as a causal agent and a teleological demiurgic principle, closely mirroring the role assigned to the lesser gods in *Timaeus* 41a–d. Remarkably, although the commentary testifies to an account of nature that goes beyond Plato's, it does not provide evidence to support the hypothesis that Calcidius elevates nature to the status of a separate level of being. This hypothesis is further weakened by comparing Calcidius' stance on nature with Neoplatonist hypostatic models. Finally, and most importantly, I will argue that regardless of the sources that may have had an influence on Calcidius, his introduction of nature as a demiurgic principle and causal agent alongside God is part of his own philosophical agenda and represents a crucial exegetical strategy to effectively rethink Plato's account of cosmogenesis.

**Keywords:** Nature, Calcidius, *Timaeus*, Cosmology, Platonism

## 1. Introduction

In an authoritative paper devoted to nature in ancient Greek thought, Solmsen claims: “Plato would not credit nature (*physis*) itself with the capacity to produce anything valuable. Quite unlike Aristotle, Plato has no confidence in *physis*.<sup>1</sup>” Indeed, Solmsen's judgement reflects an opinion already held in the Platonist tradition (notably expressed by Atticus, fr. 8 des Places) and supported by several Platonic passages: most emblematic is *Laws* X, in which nature is presented as subordinate to the soul and to art, so that its ‘rehabilitation’ can only be achieved by overturning common opinion and recognising that nature is in fact the soul.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, the notion of nature plays

<sup>1</sup> Solmsen (1963, 485). For further elaboration on the comparative evaluation of Plato's and Aristotle's views on nature, see also O'Brien (2012, 24–28).

<sup>2</sup> See Pl., *Leg.* X, 889a–e; 892a–c; cf. also *Leg.* X, 896a–897c; XII, 966e–967d. On Plato's notion of *physis* more generally, see Koch, Männlein-Robert, and Weidtmann 2019; for a focus on *physis* in the *Timaeus*, see Johansen (2004, 69–91) and Broadie (2012, 243–277).



a crucial role in Neoplatonism, and a proper understanding of it is fundamental to any inquiry into Platonist cosmology. Indeed, many of the Neoplatonists' writings reveal a fairly solid account of nature as endowed with specific functions, either located at the lower boundary of the World Soul or even recognised as a separate hypostasis alongside the One, the Intellect, and the World Soul. A fully developed articulation of nature as a fourth hypostasis reaches its apex with Proclus, who perhaps builds on Syrianus and whose account is later echoed by other Neoplatonists such as Ammonius, Philoponus, Simplicius and Damascius.<sup>3</sup> However, the question of whether nature justifies the status of a fourth hypostasis has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate even regarding earlier Platonists, most notably Plotinus. Against this background, I aim to investigate whether and to what extent a conception of nature as a hypostasis can be found in Calcidius, the author of a seminal translation of and commentary on the *Timaeus*, who, according to several scholars, was influenced by Neoplatonist doctrines.<sup>4</sup> To examine this hypothesis, I propose to structure my analysis as follows.

First, I will examine Calcidius' rendering of the occurrences of *physis* in Plato's *Timaeus* and show that the uses of nature in his translation largely correspond to Plato's uses of *physis* in the *Timaeus* (Sect. 2). Next, I will shift the emphasis on Calcidius' commentary and provide a comprehensive overview of the meanings of nature that will allow me to assess the cases in which Calcidius' uses of *natura* are consistent with Plato's *Timaeus* (thus confirming the tendency observed in the translation) and those in which he goes beyond Plato's framework (Sect. 3.1). Narrowing the focus on the latter instances, I will turn to a selection of chapters in which a robust account of nature emerges, where nature is depicted as a causal agent that accounts for the generation of natural works. This will lead me to the question of whether Calcidius regards nature as an independent level of being, i.e., as a kind of hypostasis in Neoplatonic fashion, as it were (Sect. 3.2). To explore this possibility further, I will discuss Neoplatonist passages that may serve as parallels to Calcidius' treatment of nature (Sect. 4). Finally, and most importantly, I will argue that regardless of the specific sources Calcidius may have drawn upon, his introduction of nature as a demiurgic principle and causal agent alongside God is part of his own philosophical agenda and represents a crucial exegetical strategy to effectively address a puzzle in Plato's *Timaeus* (Sect. 5).

## 2. Plato's *Physis* in Calcidius' Translation

The starting point of my analysis of Calcidius' account of nature is the comparison of the occurrences and meanings of *physis* in Plato's *Timaeus* with Calcidius'

---

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion on the status of nature in Neoplatonism, see the chapters collected in Chiaradonna and Trabattini 2009 and Wilberding and Horn 2012. For an overview of the most important Neoplatonist accounts of nature as a hypostasis, see Golitsis 2019. For references and literature on specific authors, see Sect. 4.

<sup>4</sup> For further details, see Sect. 4.

## Calcidius on Nature

rendering in his translation of the dialogue. A systematic overview can be found in the following table.<sup>5</sup>

**TABLE 1:** Occurrences of φύσις in Plato's *Timaeus* and their translation in Calcidius.

| Meanings of nature in the <i>Timaeus</i> |                                                                      | Plato | Calcidius (translation) |                                           |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
|                                          |                                                                      | φύσις | <i>natura</i>           |                                           |
| 1                                        | Occupations assigned according to nature                             | 17c10 | 8.7                     |                                           |
| 2                                        | Friends according to nature                                          | 18a1  | 8.11                    |                                           |
| 3                                        | Nature of the guardians' soul                                        | 18a4  | 8.12                    |                                           |
| 4                                        | Natures of women and men                                             | 18c2  | 9.3                     |                                           |
| 5                                        | Natures of children                                                  | 18d8  | –                       | Cf. 9.14–18                               |
| 6                                        | By nature and by education                                           | 20a1  | 11.10                   |                                           |
| 7                                        | By nature and by education                                           | 20a7  | 11.14                   |                                           |
| 8                                        | Nature of the universe                                               | 27a4  | 19.18                   |                                           |
| 9                                        | Human nature                                                         | 27a6  | –                       | 19.19 <i>genus hominum</i>                |
| 10                                       | Investigation according to the order of nature                       | 29b3  | –                       | Cf. 21.23–22.2                            |
| 11                                       | Human nature                                                         | 29d1  | –                       | Cf. 22.12–14                              |
| 12                                       | Things that are by nature visible                                    | 30b1  | –                       | 23.4–5 <i>eorum quae sentiuntur</i>       |
| 13                                       | By nature as beautiful and best as possible                          | 30b6  | –                       | 23.7–8 <i>cum veneranda illustratione</i> |
| 14                                       | Living things' nature as congener (to the intelligible Living Being) | 31a1  | 23.18                   |                                           |
| 15                                       | Nature of the Same and the Other (World Soul)                        | 35a4  | 27.11                   |                                           |
| 16                                       | Nature of the Same and the Other (World Soul)                        | 35a8  | 27.14                   |                                           |
| 17                                       | Nature of the Same and the Other (World Soul)                        | 36c5  | 28.15                   |                                           |
| 18                                       | Nature of the Same and the Other (World Soul)                        | 37a3  | 29.9                    |                                           |
| 19                                       | Nature of the eternal Living Being                                   | 37d3  | 29.24                   |                                           |
| 20                                       | Eternal nature                                                       | 38b8  | –                       | 30.16 <i>aeuitatis exemplo</i>            |
| 21                                       | Eternal nature                                                       | 39e2  | 32.13                   |                                           |

<sup>5</sup> Note that the list of occurrences of φύσις in Plato's *Timaeus* does not cover the entire dialogue, but only the part translated by Calcidius, namely from *Tim.* 17a to 53c. The text of Plato's *Timaeus* is quoted according to Burnet, while all references to Calcidius are based on Waszink's edition. Unless otherwise noted, the translations of Plato's *Timaeus* are drawn from Cornford 1997 [1935], while those of Calcidius are drawn from Magee 2016, with modifications.

|    |                                                                                          |      |       |                                                               |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 22 | Nature of the model                                                                      | 39e7 | –     | Cf. 32.18                                                     |
| 23 | Visible, generated gods                                                                  | 40d4 | –     | 34.11–12 <i>sideribus uisibilibusque diuinis potestatibus</i> |
| 24 | Lesser gods' making of living creatures according to nature                              | 41c4 | 36.5  |                                                               |
| 25 | Nature of the universe                                                                   | 41e2 | 36.20 |                                                               |
| 26 | Human nature                                                                             | 42a2 | 37.1  |                                                               |
| 27 | Nature of women                                                                          | 42b5 | 37.12 |                                                               |
| 28 | Beastly nature                                                                           | 42c4 | –     | Cf. 37.14–15                                                  |
| 29 | Natural figures according to which soul's circles move                                   | 44b4 | 40.9  |                                                               |
| 30 | Natural front of the body                                                                | 45b2 | –     | Cf. 41.9–12                                                   |
| 31 | Nature of the eyelid                                                                     | 45e1 | –     | Cf. 42.8–11                                                   |
| 32 | Intelligent nature's causes                                                              | 46d8 | 43.20 |                                                               |
| 33 | Nature of the universe                                                                   | 47a7 | 44.10 |                                                               |
| 34 | Correctness of reasonings according to nature                                            | 47c2 | –     | Cf. 44.17–23                                                  |
| 35 | Nature of fire, water, air, earth                                                        | 48b4 | 45.19 |                                                               |
| 36 | Nature of the receptacle                                                                 | 49a5 | 46.19 |                                                               |
| 37 | Nature which receives all bodies                                                         | 50b6 | 48.2  |                                                               |
| 38 | By nature as a matrix (ἐκμαγεῖον) for everything                                         | 50c2 | –     | Cf. 48.6–7                                                    |
| 39 | Intermediate nature of the 'offspring'                                                   | 50d4 | 48.16 |                                                               |
| 40 | Contrary or entirely different nature of the things that may come in upon the receptacle | 50e2 | –     | Cf. 48.21–23                                                  |
| 41 | Nature of the receptacle                                                                 | 51b3 | –     | Cf. 49.12–14                                                  |
| 42 | Waking and truly existing nature                                                         | 52b7 | 50.24 |                                                               |
|    |                                                                                          |      |       | <b>+ 40 additional occurrences</b>                            |

As the table shows, Calcidius sticks to the original text in 26 out of 42 cases and translates *physis* as *natura*. In the remaining 16 cases, however, he deviates from the original and chooses an alternative formulation that omits any mention of nature.<sup>6</sup> However, these omissions should not be overestimated as an expression of a philosophically charged intention on Calcidius' part. Indeed, in several other places,

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the translation, Calcidius often quotes or closely paraphrases Plato's text in his commentary and sometimes deviates from his own translation. A helpful overview of the quotations from Plato's *Timaeus* within the commentary is provided by Bakhouché (2011, vol. 1, 27–30). Discussions of Calcidius' approach as a translator are offered by Lemoine (1998, 76–79); Lemoine 2002; Ratkowitsch 1996; Bakhouché (2011, vol. 1, 105–120); Dowson (2023, 232–254; 335–340).

both in the translation and in the commentary, Calcidius explicitly mentions *natura* in connection with the very entities for which he had omitted it, showing that he had no intention of departing from the meanings of *physis* available in Plato's text.<sup>7</sup>

A further asymmetry between Calcidius' translation and Plato's *Timaeus* arises from the fact that Calcidius introduces 40 additional references to *natura* in places where Plato did not originally use the term *physis*. On close inspection, however, this asymmetry proves to be only apparent, as these additional occurrences can be traced back to Plato's meanings of *physis*. Specifically, in about half of the cases Calcidius uses *natura* in relation to things that Plato already explicitly associates with the term *physis*, such as the Same and the Other, the universe, the elements, human beings, children and the soul of the guardians.<sup>8</sup> Although the other instances are less directly connected with Plato's meanings, they are nevertheless consistent with them<sup>9</sup> and do not change the intended meaning of the original text, presenting *natura* in a neutral sense or for clarification.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, the highlighted asymmetries between Plato's *Timaeus* and Calcidius' translation do not represent a real deviation from the original text. We can therefore conclude that Calcidius' uses of *natura* are broadly consistent with Plato's uses of *physis*. With this in mind, let us now turn to Calcidius' approach to the notion of nature in his commentary.

### 3. Nature(s) in Calcidius' Commentary

As noted in the previous section, Calcidius' uses of *natura* in the translation either exactly mirror or remain closely parallel to, and generally consistent with, Plato's uses of *physis*. This tendency is only partially reflected in Calcidius' commentary.

<sup>7</sup> See Calc., *Tim.* 9.21 (nature of children); 46.19 (nature of the receptacle); *Tim.* 37.1 and *In Tim.* chs. 26, 132, 223, 232, 255 (human nature); *Tim.* 30.7, 32.13 and *In Tim.* ch. 106 (nature of eternity); *Tim.* 22.2 and *In Tim.* ch. 330 (nature of the exemplar); ch. 139 (nature of the lesser gods); chs. 196–197 (bestly nature); chs. 246, 248, 345 (on the nature of the eye and eyeballs). The omission of nature in the translation of Pl., *Tim.* 30b1 is not decisive in view of Calcidius' frequent use of *natura* in relation to sensible, corporeal things (see e.g., 21.9 and chs. 24, 222 and 261).

<sup>8</sup> See Calc., *Tim.* 27.18; 29.12; 30.23; 31.10–11; 31.15; 33.13; 40.10 (nature of the Same and/or the Other; see Pl., *Tim.* 35a4, 35a8, 36c5, 37a3); 20.8; 22.9 (nature of the universe, cf. Pl., *Tim.* 41e2); 45.21 (elements; cf. Pl., *Tim.* 48b4, *passim*); 45.8 (human nature; cf. Pl., *Tim.* 27a6, 29d1, 42a2); 9.21 (natural goodness of aptly selected children, cf. Pl., *Tim.* 18d8); 8.12 (nature of the soul of the guardians; cf. Pl., *Tim.* 18a4). Other analogous cases in which Calcidius partly adheres to Plato's meanings are 22.2 (nature of the image and model, cf. Pl., *Tim.* 39e7: τοῦ παραδείγματος [. . .] φύσιν) and 32.13 (nature of eternity and time, cf. Pl., *Tim.* 38b8 and 39e2: διαίωνα [. . .] φύσεως); see also 30.7.

<sup>9</sup> See esp. Calcidius' mentions of the nature of bodies, corporeal and sensible nature in 21.9; 25.16; 27.5; 30.13; 43.14, which are consistent with Plato's use of *physis* in reference to living beings and things that are visible by nature (see Pl., *Tim.* 30b1 and 31a1) or to particular bodies, such as the elements (e.g., 48b4) or the cosmos (27a4; 41e2; 47a7). See also 23.17, where Calcidius describes the "superior intelligible being" as a "nature that is primary and perfect in every way," in line with Plato's use of *physis* in *Tim.* 37d3 and 39e7. Also in line with Plato is Calcidius' description of eternity as a unitary nature (cf. Pl., *Tim.* 38b8 and 39e2).

<sup>10</sup> See Calc., *Tim.* 22.3; 22.19; 22.23; 27.12; 33.10; 34.17; 35.11–12; 36.11; 38.8; 39.19; 46.25; 48.8; 48.24; 49.24; see also 37.7 (where perhaps Calcidius may recover σύμφυτον in Pl., *Tim.* 42a6) and 42.7 (which might echo συμφυές in Pl., *Tim.* 45d5).

There, in addition to several uses of the term *natura* that can be clearly traced back to Plato, there are also passages that strongly suggest that Calcidius goes beyond Plato's framework.<sup>11</sup> Before narrowing the focus on the latter instances, let us first outline the main meanings of *natura* as they appear in Calcidius' commentary.

### 3.1 Overview

In Calcidius' commentary, *natura* appears in a variety of contexts, takes on several meanings and refers to objects with different ontological status.<sup>12</sup> A systematic analysis of these meanings is essential for achieving a philosophically refined definition of nature (see Sect. 3.2 and Sect. 5).<sup>13</sup> First, in line with a widespread opinion among Platonists,<sup>14</sup> Calcidius identifies the study of nature as the subject matter of the *Timaeus* (ch. 119, cf. ch. 107), contrasting the latter with the *Parmenides*, whose disputation is rather "epoptic" (i.e., concerning theological matters, thus appropriate for initiates, ch. 272, cf. ch. 127). The scope of the *Timaeus* also becomes clear through the comparison with the *Republic*: while the latter deals with "justice pertaining to human affairs," the *Timaeus* is concerned with the "inquiry into the equity of nature" (ch. 6). More generally, the study of nature is the subject matter of physics or natural philosophy, which appears in Calcidius' tripartite division of philosophy together with theology and the knowledge of how to employ reasoning (ch. 264, cf. ch. 60). Calcidius consistently uses *natura* to refer to the world and, interestingly, sometimes uses this term to refer to the "nature of the universe"<sup>15</sup>; in some other cases, however, he applies a narrower meaning of nature—equating the "works of nature" and things "according to the law of nature" only with those realities that are subject to temporal generation and corruption (chs. 23, 37, 177). An additional and coherent way of representing natural realities is to emphasise their asymmetry in relation to Ideas, formulated in terms of an image/model relationship (chs. 304, 330, 339; cf. ch. 273). Albeit from a different perspective, this characterisation of natural realities as contrasted to intelligible ones is reinforced in Calcidius' excursus concerning providence and fate, where "natural and corporeal" things are "according to fate," while "divine and intelligible things and those nearest them are according to providence alone" (ch. 145).<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> For insightful reflections on the methodological import of the asymmetries between Calcidius' translation and commentary, see esp. Hoenig (2014, 105–108); Hoenig (2018, 185; 190–94) and Reydam-Schils (2020, 50–51).

<sup>12</sup> This is entirely consistent with the very broad semantic range of the Latin term *natura*.

<sup>13</sup> This justifies a survey that the reader might legitimately find pedantic, and for which I apologise in advance.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g., Attic., fr. 1 (des Places); Iambl., fr. 1 (Dillon); Procl., *In Tim.* I, 1.17–24 (Diehl) = I, 1.14–2.2 (Van Riel); Anon. *Prol.* 26.14–16 (Westerink).

<sup>15</sup> See ch. 23 together with chs. 141, 143–144, 147—echoing τοῦ παντὸς φύσιν of *Tim.* 41e2.

<sup>16</sup> This is indirectly confirmed by ch. 158, where Calcidius asserts that "events that affect lifeless things or irrational animals independently of nature or art are all said to happen by chance." On the law of fate ruling over celestial and natural things, see also ch. 177. For a detailed discussion of the excursus on providence and fate (chs. 142–190), see esp. Den Boeft 1970 together with Dillon (1996 [1977] 320–326; 404; 408); Reydam-Schils (1999, 225–243); Reydam-Schils (2020, 99–117); Hoenig (2018, 197–201).

Moreover, the term *natura* is often used for bodies and to qualify their motion, either generally<sup>17</sup> or with specific reference to the elements (chs. 21, 76, 84, 205, 272, 318, 323, 325, 332), their natural motions (chs. 62, 205), their qualities and natural properties (chs. 21, 303, 317, 322), but also in relation to aggregates, ranging from inorganic things (e.g., the nature of stone, ch. 338) to living beings such as animals (e.g. wolves, bees and drones) and humans (e.g., Socrates).<sup>18</sup> As for the human body, the relevant meanings include its natural position (ch. 210), the nature of its parts (e.g., of the eye and eyeballs, chs. 246, 248, 345)<sup>19</sup> and their natural movement (like that of the head, ch. 235), or finally the natural functions of the organs (ch. 231). On a higher level, the nature of the heavens is also at the centre of Calcidius' commentary, including the nature of the heavenly bodies (chs. 78–79), their natural motion and their course (ch. 81–82, 97, 109, 115) as well as the wise nature of the stars and their natural, regular motion (chs. 86, 130, 174).

But *natura* refers not only to certain natural bodies or living beings, but also to much broader classes, such as mortal,<sup>20</sup> terrestrial/celestial<sup>21</sup> and human nature.<sup>22</sup> As for the latter, Calcidius also emphasises its twofold nature (male and female, ch. 191, cf. ch. 195), its weakness (ch. 255), its inferior status to the demons (ch. 132). Indeed, the demons, who are endowed with an angelic *natura* and stand between the terrestrial and heavenly *natures*, are also often addressed in the commentary, although—as Calcidius notes—a precise treatment of the demons goes beyond the study of nature and instead concerns “the first and highest order of contemplation, which is called the *epoptic*.”<sup>23</sup> In addition to demons, the term is also used in relation to lesser gods (ch. 139) and occasionally even in relation to God himself.<sup>24</sup>

Another context in which the notion of nature plays a central role is Calcidius' thorough discussion of the soul. Calcidius not only describes the World Soul as a *natura* that is incorporeal (ch. 99), twofold (esp. chs. 28, 53–54), intermediate (ch. 28), rational (ch. 102) and unitary (ch. 106), but he also repeatedly addresses its

<sup>17</sup> On the nature of bodies, see esp. ch. 24, cf. also the two cursory mentions in chs. 261 and 222, and ch. 273, where the nature of the body is described as image of the Idea (cf. also chs. 304, 330, 339). On the natural motion of bodies, see ch. 61; cf. also ch. 223, where Aristotle's and Peripatetic views on the soul producing natural motion are discussed.

<sup>18</sup> On the nature of living beings in general, see chs. 205, 235, but also ch. 28 (men and animals), ch. 346 (on children), ch. 166 (on humans), ch. 349 (on the “the naturally existent figure belonging to Socrates”), ch. 169 (on the “vainglorious and in some sense wild” nature of Cyrus). On animals, see ch. 216 (bees and drones) and ch. 198 (wolves); cf. also chs. 196–197 (wild and beastly nature).

<sup>19</sup> See also ch. 243, which deals with natural pupils and the natural integrity of vision.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. ch. 201 and ch. 26, where the mortal nature is contrasted to the divine one.

<sup>21</sup> Ch. 131; see also ch. 278 addressing Philo's view of the natures of the heavens and earth.

<sup>22</sup> Chs. 26, 223 and 232.

<sup>23</sup> Ch. 127 (see also ch. 272); on the nature of demons, see chs. 120, 127, 131–132, 137, 255. For more details on the nature of demons and their relationship with angels, see Somfai (2003, 137–141). Relatedly, for a broader discussion of the much-debated issue of Calcidius' affiliation with Christianity, see Ratkowitsch 1996, Hoening (2014, 92–96), and Reydam-Schils (2020, 191–215).

<sup>24</sup> Calcidius defines God as “the Supreme Good ‘beyond all being’ and all nature” (ch. 176); at the same time, he stresses the “goodness” (ch. 255) and the “superiority” of god's nature (ch. 276).

*natures*, namely the Same and the Other.<sup>25</sup> Much attention is also devoted to the higher and lower *nature* of the soul and the distinction between the rational and *natural* power of the soul (chs. 54, 137, 220).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the soul is praised for its *natural* affinity with eternal things (ch. 54) and is described as the “wisest of natures” (ch. 261). Two other crucial features that *by nature* belong to the Soul are self-motion (chs. 57, 225, 263) and the affinity and structural harmony with number, proportion and sound (chs. 50–51, 53, 55, 226, 267). In addition to the World Soul, the individual soul is also given comprehensive consideration, emphasising, for example, its *natural* desire for the good and its unitary and indivisible *nature*.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, the notion of *nature* has enormous significance in Calcidius’ treatise on matter (chs. 268–355). In this section of the commentary, not only fleeting references to the *nature* of matter are omnipresent,<sup>28</sup> but there are also diverse characterisations of what matter is *by nature*. Indeed, nature is *by nature* passible (chs. 268, 351) and devoid of qualities, shape, form, or quantity (esp. chs. 278, 310, 316, 319, 331, 345); at the same time, it is *by nature* desirous of form and clarity (ch. 286) and receptive to all bodily forms (ch. 327), “splendor and adornment” (ch. 331), “beauty and grace” (ch. 354)—being “potentially that which it is not yet” (ch. 309). Accordingly, matter is “not perceived in its proper nature” and is “by its very nature intangible” (ch. 345); moreover, by its nature it is also motionless (ch. 301), although it is endowed with “a certain natural capacity for the reception of motion and rest” (ch. 352). Furthermore, the nature of matter is neither corporeal nor incorporeal (ch. 320) and is ultimately shrouded in darkness (ch. 335, cf. ch. 321). It is worth recalling that Calcidius even proposes a close exegesis of Plato’s use of φύσιν in *Tim.* 49a5, suggesting that by “nature” (*naturam*) Plato refers to the essence (*substantiam*) of matter (ch. 321).

Interestingly, *natura* is not only often mentioned in relation to the notion of matter, but also and simultaneously to that of intelligible form. While the former is described as a “nature which indeed is but is not forever the same,” the “idea,” which is conceived of as the “eternal intellect of the eternal god,” is described as “the *nature* which is truly existent, constant, and forever the same” (ch. 330). In this sense, Calcidius often speaks of the nature “that is the same and forever immutable” (ch. 137), the nature of the “eternal and truly existent realities” (ch. 191) and the intelligible and incorporeal *nature* (chs. 210, 227).

In addition, there are relevant meanings of nature in a mathematical context, in relation to continuous proportion (ch. 17), to the very nature of the unit (ch. 39) and to the seven, which was regarded by the Pythagoreans as “the most natural number” (chs. 35, 37). Some scattered references also concern the epistemological dimension,

<sup>25</sup> Chs. 31, 52–53, 55–56, 58, 102–103, 114–115, 140, 228; further passing mentions can be found in chs. 37, 75, 94, 144.

<sup>26</sup> Note, however, that Calcidius’ use of *naturalis* in ch. 54, 102.19 is probably due to a misreading of φυσική for φητική (cf. ch. 182 together with Waszink (1975 [1962] XLVII and apparatus *ad loc.*).

<sup>27</sup> Chs. e.g., 140, 163, 165, 191, 199, 202, 223–224, 229, 233.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g., chs. 268–269, 273, 286, 308–310, 321–322, 331, 336, 347–348, 351–352. See also the corresponding remarks on the nature of matter in Anaxagoras (ch. 279), Aristotle (chs. 287–288), the Stoics (chs. 289–290, 292, 294) and Numenius (chs. 295–299).

which revolve around the nature of opinion (chs. 165, 207), the senses (chs. 123, 208) or the objects of knowledge (chs. 102, 162). Also worth mentioning are the instances in which “by nature,” as opposed to “incidentally” (chs. 284, 286), “in pure potentiality” (ch. 286) or “with respect to us” (ch. 302), serves as a technical term to render Aristotle’s philosophical vocabulary. The remaining occurrences can be traced back to a wide range of topics and things: from the nature of wounds (ch. 1) to that of principles (chs. 274, 306) and eternity (ch. 106); from “natural breath” and its effect on dreaming (ch. 249) to the references to contingent nature (chs. 160, 162) and to unsleeping or waking nature (ch. 349).

Based on this overview we are now in a position to draw two conclusions. First, Calcidius’ usage of *natura* is so broad and comprehensive that it seems to potentially cover all possible kinds of beings, not only in the field of natural philosophy, but also in other disciplines; not only in relation to the cosmos, natural bodies and phenomena, but all the way to demonic and divine, psychic and intelligible nature. Second, a comparison of the variety of meanings examined so far with Plato’s uses of *physis* (cf. Table 1) shows that Calcidius’ meanings in most cases either run parallel to those of Plato or coincide with them. There is, however, a notable exception—one that I will discuss in more detail in the following section.

### 3.2 *Nature as a Causal Agent and as a Teleological Principle*

The hiatus between Plato’s notions of *physis* and Calcidius’ account of nature emerges in a selection of chapters in which Calcidius seems to envisage nature as a causal agent and a teleological principle. A key chapter in this respect is ch. 23—undoubtedly one of the most important sections of the commentary for reconstructing Calcidius’ cosmological views. Here Calcidius approaches the crucial question of the origins of the cosmos by introducing three causal agents: God, nature and art that imitates nature.<sup>29</sup>

Omnia enim quae sunt uel dei opera sunt uel naturae uel naturam imitantis hominis artificis. Operum naturalium origo et initium semina sunt, quae facta comprehenduntur uel terrae uisceribus ad frugis arboreae cerealisue prouentum uel genitalium membrorum fecunditate conceptum animalium germen adolentium. Quorum omnium ortus in tempore; par enim et aequaeuum natale naturae ac temporis. Ita naturae opera, quia ortum habent ex eo quo esse coeperunt tempore, finem quoque et occasum intra seriem continuationemque eius sortita sunt, at uero dei operum origo et initium incomprehensibile; nulla est enim certa nota, nullum indicium temporis ex quo esse coeperunt, sola, si forte, causa—et haec ipsa uix intellegitur—cur eorum quid quamue ob causam existat, certum est siquidem nihil a deo factum esse sine causa. Ut igitur illis quae lege naturae procreantur fundamenta sunt semina, ita eorum quae deus instituit fundamenta sunt causae quae sunt perspicuae diuinae prouidentiae. Deus autem ante institutionem temporis et per aeuum—simulacrum est enim tempus aei—causae igitur operum omnium dei

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ar., *Phys.* II 2, 194a21–22 (ἡ τέχνη μιμεῖται τὴν φύσιν). While Calcidius introduces three causal agents, he focuses exclusively on God and nature in the rest of the chapter. For further joined mentions of things by nature and by art, see chs. 158 and 177.

tempore antiquiores, et sicut deus per aeuum, sic etiam causae per aeuum. Quod sequitur, ut quicquid a deo fit, temporarium non sit, quod temporarium non sit nulla temporis lege teneatur. Et tempus immutationem aetatis morbos senectutem occasum inuehit; his ergo omnibus quod a deo instituitur immune est origoque eius causatiua est, non temporaria. Et mundus sensibilis opus dei; origo igitur eius causatiua, non temporaria. Sic mundus sensibilis, licet et corporeus, a deo tamen factus atque institutus, aeternus est.

For everything that exists is a work of god, nature, or man acting as an artisan in imitation of nature. The origin and beginning of natural works are seeds which once formed are taken up either in the bowels of the earth for the production of crops and grain or in the fertility of the genital organs for the conception and germination of living beings endowed with the power of growth. The birth of all such things occurs in time, for the birth of nature is the same as and coeval with that of time; thus the works of nature, since they have their birth from the time when they begin to exist, are also allotted their end and death within its series or continuum. But the origin or beginning of the works of god is incomprehensible, for there is no fixed mark to serve as an indication of the time from which they began to be; only the reason why, the cause in virtue of which, any of them comes to be is certain, in that nothing is created by god without cause [reason]—but this only possibly, as the reason [cause] is barely intelligible in itself. Now, as seeds are the foundation for all that is procreated according to the law of nature, so the causes envisioned by divine providence are the foundation for all that god establishes; but god is prior to the establishment of time and is through eternity, for time is an *image* [37d] of eternity; thus the causes of all god's works are prior to time, and as god is through eternity, so the causes are through eternity as well. And it follows that everything made by god is not temporal, and that that which is not temporal is subject to no law of time; and time introduces the changes associated with aging—sickness, old age, and death; to all of these, then, that which is established by god is immune, and the origin of the latter is causative, not temporal; and the sensible world is the work of god; its origin is therefore causative, not temporal. And so the sensible world, although corporeal, is nevertheless eternal in having been made and established by god. (Calc., *In Tim.* ch. 23, 73.10–74.20)

At the centre of this important chapter is the distinction between temporal and causative generation. While the works of nature, i.e., the things that are subject to generation and corruption, have a temporal beginning, this does not apply to the cosmos if it is regarded as the work of God. For the beginning of the works of God is causative, not temporal, and the statement that the cosmos ‘has been generated’ means that it is ontologically dependent on a higher cause. This chapter, serving as a programmatic manifesto of Calcidius’ commitment to sempiternalism, has rightly attracted much scholarly attention.<sup>30</sup> For the purpose of the present argument, however, the main question I wish to raise is this: Why does Calcidius need to involve nature within this framework?

<sup>30</sup> For a thorough examination of Calcidius’ views on the ‘generation’ of the world and his commitment to sempiternalism, see esp. Baltes (vol. 1, 172–184); Hoenig 2014; Hoenig (2018, 177–194); Reydam-Schils (2020, 49–58).

Surely it is reasonable for him to exploit the powerful image of nature to draw readers' attention to the (much more complex) issue of causal generation. And to this end, arguably, he draws the parallel between the seeds that are the foundation of the works of nature, and the causes envisioned by divine providence, which are the foundations of the works of God (74.10–12).<sup>31</sup> Although this is entirely plausible, there are good reasons to believe that Calcidius also had stronger philosophical reasons for introducing nature—reasons that still need to be specified, however. In this framework, some scholars argue that Calcidius implies nature as a fourth hypostasis.<sup>32</sup> But the passage does not provide evidence for this claim. First, Calcidius does not mention the earlier hypostases, namely Intellect and Soul.<sup>33</sup> Second, his focus is not on levels of being, but rather on the agency of cosmological causes. Indeed, when Calcidius emphasises that God is responsible for the (causative) generation of the sempiternal cosmos, while nature is responsible for the (temporal) generation of perishable things, he does not present nature as a self-sufficient level of being that is ontologically inferior to God. Rather, his aim seems to be to reconcile sempiternalism, as guaranteed by God's causation, with the Platonic principle according to which everything that has come into being must dissolve.<sup>34</sup> The introduction of nature is therefore not just a metaphor used to illustrate causative generation and make it more accessible. Rather, Calcidius allows nature to appear as an agent that plays an actual role in his cosmological framework, without the need to assign it its own ontological status—in other words, without presenting it as a hypostasis.

If this is sound, Calcidius speaks of *natura* in ch. 23 in two ways. On the one hand, when he addresses the temporal beginning of nature, which comes into being together with time (74.3–4, echoing *Tim.* 38b6–7),<sup>35</sup> he refers to the totality of bodies and phenomena that are subject to birth and decay. On the other hand, the notion of the works *of* nature and their contrast with the works of God seems to underlie a stronger account of nature, namely that of a generating, productive principle operating within the cosmos, with a particular emphasis on things that are generated and are perishable – a causal agent subordinate to God but working in tandem with

<sup>31</sup> Calcidius could perhaps be elaborating on *Tim.* 41c8 (σπείρας καὶ ὑπαρξάμενος). An insightful parallel is Apul., *De mund.* 36, 369, who also introduces the seed metaphor into his account of cosmogenesis. Note, however, that Calcidius' perspective is peculiar in that—as we shall see later—he assigns a much stronger role to nature.

<sup>32</sup> This view was defended long ago by Steinheimer (1912, 8), followed by Gersh (1986, vol. 2, 473 and n. 12) and more recently by Bakhouché (2011, vol. 2, 639, n. 79). Steinheimer's position was already criticised by Jones (1918, 195–196) and Theiler (1964 [1930] 22 and n. 1). Further arguments against this position are offered below in this section and in Sect. 4.

<sup>33</sup> The speculative solution proposed by Steinheimer (1912, 8) to circumvent this problem—namely, that the omission of Intellect and Soul is irrelevant, since God can function as a collective term for the three divine hypostases—finds no textual support.

<sup>34</sup> Pl., *Resp.* VIII, 546a2 (γενομένων παντὶ φθορά ἐστιν). It is no coincidence that this principle is explicitly stated at the beginning of ch. 23, namely in the lines that immediately precede the above quotation.

<sup>35</sup> Notably, when translating *Tim.* 38b6–7, Calcidius remains close to the original and speaks of the coeval origin of time and the world/heavens (30.15 and ch. 101, 152.12–13), but here he departs from Plato's text by implicitly equating οὐρανός with *natura* (74.4).

him. In this perspective, nature is not merely the totality of natural phenomena, but seems to play a very similar role to that assigned to the lesser gods in *Timaeus* 41a–d. In the rest of this section, I will explore more closely this hypothesis.

Now, if we examine the sections of Calcidius' commentary in which the Demiurge addresses the lesser gods, there appears to be no supporting evidence. In fact, a natural context for Calcidius to address the interplay between God and nature presents itself in ch. 139, which deals with the Timaeian passage in which the lesser gods not only fabricate mortal living beings, but do so *according to nature* (κατὰ φύσιν *Tim.* 41c4). Theoretically, Calcidius could have interpreted κατὰ φύσιν as ascribing a role to nature in the activity of the lesser gods. On this occasion, however, he limits himself to depicting God addressing the lower divinities and explaining to them “of what nature they are” (*cuius naturae sint* 179.14). Another appropriate context for the introduction of nature could have been ch. 201, where Calcidius has the “supreme craftsman god” constructing “the element of the *mortal body*” that is divine and sempiternal, and handing over the production of the elements subject to dissolution to the lesser gods. However, despite the potentially appropriate framework, Calcidius limits his discussion to the nature of the lesser gods, eschewing any explicit reference to nature.

However, these two chapters are not Calcidius' last words on nature. In fact, elsewhere in his commentary we find evidence for a view of nature that fulfils the tasks of the lesser gods and is teleologically oriented. A subtle but significant allusion to this role of nature appears in ch. 192, where Calcidius—commenting on *Timaeus* 42a4—presents nature as responsible for devising outlets and fabricating channels to regulate the flow of air and fluids from food and drink in the bodies of mortals. Far from being an inert being, nature appears here as a teleological principle that designs outlets “with an eye to the preservation of the living beings” (215.21) and, in making channels, ensures that they are proportionate to the size and magnitude of what enters the mortal body (215.23–24). Calcidius thus suggests that nature plays a crucial role in facilitating the replenishment of the mortal body by taking on tasks that cannot be performed by the Demiurge himself, who—as mentioned in ch. 201—produces the body not *qua* mortal but *qua* sempiternal. This reading is underpinned by the reference to the Timaeian passages that Calcidius draws on in elaborating his interpretation of *Tim.* 42a4. In particular, his discussion is reminiscent of *Tim.* 77c–81e, which deals with nutrition and respiration. There, the lesser gods are responsible for constructing a complex system of channels that regulate the proper intake and release of nutrients and air, thus ensuring the preservation of the life of the mortal body.<sup>36</sup> Against this background, it is plausible that Calcidius, at least in some contexts, tends to blur the boundaries between the lesser gods and nature by ascribing tasks to nature that are attributed to the lesser gods in the *Timaeus*.

<sup>36</sup> I follow Schroeder 2021, who provides convincing arguments for the relevance of the entire section, up to *Tim.* 81e. For discussions of *Tim.* 77c–79e, see also Cornford (1997 [1935], 304–319), Joubaud (1991, 64–88), Pelavski 2014, Johansen 2020 and Petrucci and Ferrari (2022, CXI, 476–477). See also *Tim.* 41d; 72e–73a and—albeit more implicitly—*Tim.* 91a–d (on reproduction).

A similar conflation of the lesser gods with nature can be observed in ch. 235. In discussing Pl., *Tim.* 44d–45a, Calcidius first introduces the lesser gods (*divinae potestates* 248.4), who attach the rest of the body below the head, in agreement with Plato (θεοί *Tim.* 44d7); but when he explains why the face and gaze are directed forward,<sup>37</sup> he no longer mentions the gods (as in *Tim.* 45a4), but concludes significantly as follows, referring to nature: “the configuration of the body as a whole was ordered accordingly by the provident ingenuity of nature (*provida naturae sollertia*).”<sup>38</sup> Calcidius might be building upon *Tim.* 45b2, where Plato speaks of the part of the body that is *by nature* in front (τὸ κατὰ φύσιν πρόσθεν), combining this remark with Timaeus’ earlier mention of the gods’ causes and forethought (αἰτίας καὶ προνοίας) in the production of the human bodies and souls (44c7). Be that as it may, Calcidius’ emphasis on the provident ingenuity of nature in this context underscores his view that the role of nature corresponds to or mirrors that of the lesser gods.<sup>39</sup>

Other scattered remarks in his treatise on matter confirm Calcidius’ depiction of nature as a demiurgic principle. Noteworthy in this respect is ch. 330, in which the idea is described as “the exemplar for all things brought forth by nature” (*quas natura progeniuit* 324.16). The same point is taken up again in the same way in ch. 339. Here Calcidius outlines the multiple perspectives from which the primary Form can be viewed, namely in relation to us, to God, to Matter, to the Form itself and to the world (332.5–10);<sup>40</sup> in this context, he describes the primary Form “in relation to the world” as “the eternal Exemplar of all the things which nature has brought forth” (*omnium quae natura progeniuit* 332.10; cf. also ch. 304). This definition of form is not new: it echoes Xenocrates’ and finds parallels in other sources, such as Alcinoüs.<sup>41</sup> In the light of this, it is all the more remarkable that Calcidius not merely speaks of ‘things that are in accordance with nature,’ but rather of things brought forth *by* nature. His adaptation of a well-established definition through the introduction of *progeniuit* can be seen as a subtle yet significant deviation, reflecting his intent to ascribe a form of generative power to nature.<sup>42</sup>

This is confirmed in ch. 329, which provides even stronger evidence for the account of nature outlined so far:

<sup>37</sup> Calc., *In Tim.* 248.12–14, cf. Pl., *Tim.* 45a3–b2.

<sup>38</sup> Calc., *In Tim.* 248.11–12.

<sup>39</sup> The provident ingenuity of nature is also addressed in chs. 246–247—where Calcidius, however, does not explicitly insist on nature as a causal agent.

<sup>40</sup> Note the striking proximity to Alcinoüs, *Didask.* 9.1–2; cf. Whittaker and Louis (1990, 97–98) and Dillon (1993, 94–96).

<sup>41</sup> Xen., fr. 14 Isnardi Parente and Dorandi: καθά φησιν ὁ Ξενοκράτης, εἶναι τὴν ἰδέαν θέμενος αἰτίαν παραδειγματικὴν τῶν κατὰ φύσιν αἰεὶ συνεστώτων) = Procl., *In Parm.* IV, 888.13–15 Steel; IV, 888.16–18 Luna and Segonds; Alc., *Didask.* 9.2: Ὅρίζονται δὲ τὴν ἰδέαν παράδειγμα τῶν κατὰ φύσιν αἰώνιον); cf. also previous note.

<sup>42</sup> Some kind of demiurgic power is ascribed to nature by Cicero (*Tim.* 8, translating Pl., *Tim.* 30a), according to Lévy (2003) 102: “So even when he translates the *Timaeus*, Cicero is haunted by the idea, common to Hellenistic philosophers, that Nature provides and decides.” I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

Manet ergo haec in tali fortuna et condicione semper, archetypum quoque exemplum manet in substantia propria, idea scilicet cuiusque existens rei natae, similiter deus opifex per aeuum manet, sed archetyporum exemplorum simulacra, quae silvae obveniunt, non permanent, namque assidue ac sine intermissione mutantur mortis nascendique perpetua successione ob inexcusabilem naturae cuiusdam necessitatem.

Matter, therefore, remains in such a state or condition forever, and the archetypal exemplar too remains in its proper substance, namely, being the idea of each and every reality that comes to be, and the craftsman god similarly remains through eternity, but the images of the archetypal exemplars that engage with matter do not remain, for they forever and continuously change in a perpetual succession of death and birth because of the inescapable necessity of a certain nature. (Calc., *In Tim.* ch. 329, 323.11–16)

This chapter seems to suggest that since matter, the intelligible paradigm and God are unchangeable and ultimately outside of time, another principle is required to explain the continuous processes of birth and decay in the world. This principle is the “certain nature” (*naturae cuiusdam*) mentioned in 323.16, which we can identify as nature in its role as a generative principle.<sup>43</sup> The introduction of nature in this context does not suggest that Calcidius operates within a Neoplatonist hypostatic framework, but that he remains anchored in a cosmological perspective that is close to the Middle Platonist one: nature does not follow the Intellect and the Soul in a hierarchical scheme, but complements the typical Middle Platonist triad God, form and matter.

The analysis carried out so far can be deepened by examining passages in the commentary where Calcidius outlines hierarchies that at least might seem reminiscent of the Neoplatonist system of hypostases. Two such sketches can be found in chs. 176–177 and 188.<sup>44</sup> In the former—featuring (i) the “Supreme God who is the Supreme Good ‘beyond all being’ and all nature,” (ii) the second God, corresponding to Intellect and providence, (iii) the second Mind or Intellect, i.e., the World Soul—nature is not mentioned at all. Nature appears, however, in ch. 188: after the enumeration of (i) God, (ii) the second god (corresponding to Intellect), and (iii) the Second Mind (corresponding to the World Soul), Calcidius mentions the rational souls and “the administering powers (*ministras* [. . .] *potestates*) of Nature, Fortune, Chance, and the Demons.” Perhaps one might be tempted to recognise in this hierarchy the influence of certain Neoplatonist accounts in which nature is positioned as a fourth hypostasis after the Soul.<sup>45</sup> However, it is far from obvious

<sup>43</sup> Modifying Magee’s translation, which renders *naturae cuiusdam* as “attaching to each particular nature,” I follow van Winden (1959, 189–190; 193) and take *naturae cuiusdam* as a reference to nature as a causal agent. This translation is not only linguistically sound, but is also more consistent with the immediate context, i.e., the incessant processes of birth and decay, which Calcidius already placed under the law of nature in ch. 23.

<sup>44</sup> For insightful discussions on these important chapters, see Den Boeft (1970, 85–98; 118–22); Gersh (1986, vol. 2, 439–445; 462–467); Bakhouché (2011, vol. 2, 771–775; 781–782); Hoenig (2018, 196–201); Reydams-Schils (2020, 85–98).

<sup>45</sup> See Steinheimer (1912, 31).

that Calcidius' hierarchy reflects an actual hypostatic system,<sup>46</sup> and even if it did, Calcidius' elaboration on nature here is too cursory to support the interpretation of nature as a distinct hypostasis. This is consistent with the omission of nature in the hierarchy outlined in chs. 176–177 and with the inclusion of rational souls, Fortune, Chance, and Demons in ch. 188 in the same enumeration, which weakens the hypothesis of a strict metaphysical hierarchy with nature featuring at the fourth level. Another notable, if fleeting, reference to nature is found in chapter 260 (267.17–21), where Calcidius mentions nature alongside mind, intellect and soul (*mentis intellectui animae naturae*) when enumerating examples of incorporeal entities. Here, too, it seems speculative to conclude from this list that Calcidius advocates a hypostatic system in which nature occupies the fourth position. On the contrary, Calcidius' inclusion of nature in this list is particularly remarkable when one considers that he is commenting on *Tim.* 46c–d, where Plato introduces intelligent causes as opposed to auxiliary ones, and mentions intellect and soul in connection with the former. Certainly, the way Calcidius elaborates on this *Timaean* passage, and in particular his reference to nature in this context, reflects his desire to include nature among the intelligent, teleological causes—but this by no means implies that he views nature as an independent level of being. All in all, both ch. 188 and ch. 260, in which nature is described as a power and an incorporeal entity respectively (213.3 and 267.19–20), support Calcidius' robust account of nature without attesting to its status as a hypostasis.

Taken together, the chapters examined in this section form a coherent account in which nature is neither a hypostasis nor merely the totality of natural phenomena, but can be defined as a causal agent that supplements God's agency by acting teleologically on mortal bodies and exercising demiurgic powers in relation to creatures subject to temporal generation and dissolution.

#### 4. Calcidius and Neoplatonist Models of Nature

The question of whether Calcidius conceives of nature as an independent level of being naturally leads us to the issue of his relationship with Neoplatonist models of nature. This is a thorny issue, especially given that some scholars have identified the Neoplatonists as sources for Calcidius. Against this background, this section will examine some Neoplatonist hypostatic models and emphasise their difference from Calcidius' approach.

Scholars who argue that Calcidius regarded nature as a level of being refer in particular to chs. 23 and 188, emphasising their affinity with a passage from Proclus (*In Tim.* I, 263.2–6 Diehl = II, 85.17–86.2 Van Riel)<sup>47</sup> in which the following unifying causes are mentioned: God, Intellect, Soul, Nature, some art that imitates nature.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> See Reydam-Schils (2020, 88), who points out that “none of the divine agents in Calcidius' account constitute separate levels of an ontological hierarchy.”

<sup>47</sup> See Steinheimer (1912, 8) and Bakhouché (2011, vol. 2, 639, n. 79).

<sup>48</sup> On Proclus' account of nature as a hypostasis, see also the important excursus in *In Tim.* I, 9.25–12.25 (Diehl) = I, 14.7–18.17 (Van Riel); valuable discussions of this digression can be found in Martijn 2010, Lernould 2012 and Marinescu 2023.

While this account might remind us in part of ch. 188 (God, Intellect, World Soul, nature) and ch. 23 (God, nature, art imitating nature), a complete outline like Proclus' does not appear anywhere in Calcidius. It is therefore desirable to examine other Platonists who might have emphasised, albeit in a less explicit and systematic way, the role of nature in a hypostatic framework.

To start with, Plotinus' model offers itself as a possible parallel. This option, however, presents significant challenges. First, it is highly unlikely that Plotinus as a source had a direct influence on Calcidius.<sup>49</sup> Second, it remains controversial whether Plotinus himself regarded nature as a hypostasis.<sup>50</sup> Third, and most importantly, Plotinus' and Calcidius' approaches to nature differ considerably: not only is Plotinus' elaboration far more sophisticated and intricate than Calcidius', but the motivations that might have led him to consider nature as a level of being<sup>51</sup> are fundamentally different from those underlying Calcidius' introduction of nature in the passages discussed in Sect. 3.2.

A more promising avenue might lie in examining Porphyry, whose influence has been acknowledged in various places of Calcidius' commentary, including the chapters discussed in Sect. 3.2.<sup>52</sup> A passage cited as influential on Calcidius' ch. 23 is *Sent.* 12, where Porphyry lists the multiple meanings of life, mentioning nature, soul, intellect, and the Beyond.<sup>53</sup> This outline may be partly reminiscent of Calcidius' hierarchy in ch. 188, but it bears no resemblance to ch. 23. Furthermore, grounding Calcidius' view of nature as a level of being on this Porphyrian parallel is highly problematic, not least because it is far from certain whether *Sent.* 12 genuinely reflect a hypostatic system.<sup>54</sup>

There is, however, another discussion in Porphyry that may have served as background for Calcidius' ch. 23. This is 463F Smith, where Porphyry elaborates on the Aristotelian analogy between nature and art (cf. *Phys.* II 2). While several

<sup>49</sup> Plotinus is not included among the sources of Calcidius, starting from Gercke 1886 and Switalski (1902, 55–113) to Waszink (1975 [1962], XXXV–CVI), Bakhouché (2011, vol. I, 34–41), Hoenig (2018, 163–164) and Reydam-Schils (2020, 163–190). See however Den Boeft (1970, 88–89, 91–92, 94, 98, 131), who argues for a major influence of Plotinus on Calcidius.

<sup>50</sup> On the vexed question of whether Plotinus regarded nature as a fourth hypostasis, see at least Armstrong (1967 [1940] 85–87) and Rist (1967, 92–93); see now Wilberding 2022, who provides a balanced assessment of the issue together with an excellent *status quaestionis* of earlier interpretations.

<sup>51</sup> See esp. Plot., *Enn.* 2.3.18.8–22 and 5.2.1.16–27 together with the literature cited in the previous note.

<sup>52</sup> The influence of Porphyry on Calcidius has been emphasised by several scholars, including Steinheimer 1912; Den Boeft (1970, 131–137); Waszink 1975 [1962]; Waszink (1964, 37–82); Baltes (1976–1978, vol. 1, 177–184). For a sceptical attitude towards Porphyry's influence on Calcidius, see already Jones 1918 and then Dillon (1996 [1977], 403–404), who instead emphasises Calcidius' affiliation to Middle Platonism. Reservations regarding Porphyry as the main source for Calcidius were also expressed by Reydam-Schils (2020, 172–190).

<sup>53</sup> See Gersh (1986, vol. 2, 473, n. 12).

<sup>54</sup> According to Smith (2012, 32), *Sent.* 12 does not provide compelling evidence that Porphyry regarded nature as a hypostasis; he also comes to this conclusion with respect to *Sent.* 8 and 29. *Sent.* 13 is also worth mentioning: although nature is not explicitly mentioned here, an allusion to it can be gleaned by Psellus' reading of this passage (*Phil. min.* I, 46.67–70), which—if reliable—would lead to the assumption that nature was *not* a hypostasis for Porphyry; for more details, see Brisson (2005, 412; 419–421) and Wilberding (2022, 318–319). Be that as it may, the problems underlying *Sent.* 13, such as the gaze and reversion of hypostases, differ from those raised in Calcidius' discussions of nature.

aspects of this fragment remain obscure, its central argument appears to run as follows: if art is teleologically oriented and nature has a higher rank than art, then nature must also have a teleological orientation.<sup>55</sup> Remarkably, this analogy is not at the centre of *In Tim.* ch. 23—where, as we have seen, Calcidius does mention art imitating nature, but then focuses exclusively on God and nature. Yet, even if one assumes that the analogy served as background, it would only emphasise nature’s teleological causality, without implying an equation of nature with a hypostasis.

Further possible evidence for Porphyry’s identification of nature as a level of being could come from a testimony of Proclus:

ὁρθῶς οὖν καὶ ὁ <Πορφύριος> ἔλεγεν, ὅτι τὰ ἄκρα νῦν ὁ Πλάτων ἀφορίζεται, τό τε πρότως αἰεὶ ὄν καὶ τὸ μόνως γενητόν, τὰ δὲ μέσα παρήκεν, οἷον τὸ ὄν ἅμα καὶ γινόμενον, ἢ τὸ γινόμενον καὶ ὄν. ὄν τὸ μὲν ὄν καὶ γινόμενον οἰκεῖόν ἐστι τῷ πλάτει τῶν ψυχῶν, τὸ δὲ ἀνάπαλιν καὶ γινόμενον καὶ ὄν τῇ ἀκρότητι τῶν γενητῶν. τοιαύτη δὲ ἐστὶ καὶ ἡ τοῦ παντὸς φύσις ἢ ζωοποιούσα τὸ πᾶν· καὶ γὰρ αὕτη πάντως ὥς μὲν μεριστὴ περὶ τοῖς σώμασι γενητὴ ἐστίν, ὥς δὲ παντελῶς ἀσώματος ἀγέννητος.

Porphyry (fr. 31) was thus quite correct in asserting that in the present context Plato defines the extremes, namely the always-existent in a primary sense and that which is generated only, but he passes over the intermediates, such as that which is being and at the same time becoming and that which is becoming and also being. Of these the former, that which is being and becoming, is appropriate for the level of the souls, whereas the latter, becoming and being, is appropriate for what is highest in the realm of the generated. Of such a kind is also the Nature of the universe that gives it life. Indeed, because she is divisible throughout the bodies, she is certainly generated, yet because she is completely incorporeal, she is ungenerated. (Procl., *In Tim.* I, 257.2–11 Diehl = II, 77.6–14 Van Riel > Porph., fr. 31 Sodano; trans. by D.T. Runia, and M. Share, modified)

In this passage Proclus agrees with Porphyry in positing “being and becoming” and “becoming and being” between the always-existent in a primary sense and that which is generated. While “being and becoming” pertains to the soul, “becoming and being” is associated with the highest generated entity, namely the “Nature of the universe” (ἡ τοῦ παντὸς φύσις I, 257.8–9 Diehl = II, 77.11–12 Van Riel).<sup>56</sup> Indeed, this passage provides evidence for nature as a hypostasis; yet it is far from clear whether such a view should be attributed to Porphyry himself, since the reference to nature could be an additional gloss by Proclus.<sup>57</sup> What’s more, a decisive argument against linking this account of nature with Calcidius’ view is that it addresses nature as a counterpart to the World Soul—and *not* to God, as Calcidius has it in ch. 23.

<sup>55</sup> For a careful analysis and further elaboration on this fragment, see Adamson 2007.

<sup>56</sup> In contrast to Runia and Share (2008, 102, n. 315), who equate “being and becoming” with the World Soul-hypostasis, and “becoming and being” with the individual World Soul, I agree with Martijn (2010, 150) and Lemoult (2012, 90–91) in taking Proclus as referring to the World Soul and nature respectively.

<sup>57</sup> Sodano 1964 does not include the reference to nature in fr. 31, as he considers it most likely to be an integration by Proclus; cf. Martijn (2010, 150, n. 383).

In brief, the Neoplatonist passages discussed so far do not prove to be effective parallels to Calcidius' view; hence, they cannot substantiate Calcidius' alleged theory of nature as hypostasis. A more fruitful comparison could perhaps come from a Middle Platonist, namely Numenius, to whom Calcidius refers explicitly and approvingly in ch. 295:

Numenius ex Pythagorae magisterio Stoicorum hoc de initiis dogma refellens Pythagorae dogmate, cui concinere dicit dogma Platonium [. . .]; denique Stoicos definitam et limitatam siluam esse natura propria, Pythagoram uero infinitam et sine limite dicere, cumque illi quod natura sit immensum non posse ad modum atque ordinem redigi censeant, Pythagoram solius hanc dei fore uirtutem ac potentiam asserere, ut quod natura efficere nequeat, deus facile possit, ut qui sit omni uirtute potentior atque praestantior, et a quo natura ipsa uires mutuetur.

Numenius the Pythagorean refutes the Stoic theory of first principles with Pythagoras' doctrine with which, he says, Plato's is in accord [. . .]. Finally, [Numenius says] the Stoics say that matter is definite and limited in its own nature, but Pythagoras that it is infinite and unlimited. The Stoics argue that something whose nature is to be unmeasured cannot be brought to limit and order, but Pythagoras asserts that one thing, god, has the capacity and power to do it. What nature cannot bring about, god easily can, since he is more powerful than any capacity, the very source of nature's capacities. (Numen., fr. 52 des Places > Calc., *In Tim.* ch. 295, 297.7–9; 298.3–9; trans. by G. Boys-Stones)

Although the context of this testimony differs from that of Calcidius in ch. 23, there is a noteworthy parallel: both passages present nature as subordinate to God, yet capable of exerting a similar power and agency, albeit on lower level. Speculatively, one might suggest that this Numenian perspective, or—to be cautious—a similar Middle Platonist model, inspired Calcidius' depiction of nature as a causal agent, subordinate to the Demiurge, yet possessing a causal role over things subject to birth and decay. Be that as it may, overall, Calcidius' treatment of nature is much closer to a Middle Platonist than a Neoplatonist framework.

All in all, the examination of models that possibly parallel Calcidius' account of nature or (*a fortiori*) are sources of this account considerably weakens the hypothesis of Calcidius' equation of nature with a hypostasis, thus confirming the conclusions drawn in the previous section. And even if one maintains that Calcidius' conception of nature was Neoplatonist-like, it remains controversial in many cases whether these Neoplatonists themselves understood nature as a true hypostasis. What is even more remarkable, however, is that the theoretical framework into which Calcidius introduces nature differs considerably from that of the Neoplatonists: nature is not described as a distinct level of being in addition to Intellect and Soul, but rather emerges as a causal agent within a cosmological framework centered on God, form and matter.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, the systematic examination of nature in Calcidius' work has shown that in the translation he uses *natura*, staying fairly close to Plato's meanings of *physis*, while in the commentary he articulates a stronger notion of nature which can be defined as follows: a causal agent that acts teleologically and accounts for the processes of birth and decay in the natural world. Calcidius' commentary indeed testifies to an understanding of nature that goes beyond that of Plato. However, the evidence available to us does not prove that Calcidius actually intended to elevate nature to the status of an independent hypostasis. Moreover, unlike Neoplatonists, Calcidius is not primarily concerned with distinguishing nature from the Word Soul, but rather with emphasising the interplay between God and nature on a cosmological level, perhaps building on Numenius.

Be that as it may, regardless of the sources that may have had an influence on Calcidius, his introduction of nature seems to be part of his own agenda. More specifically, by introducing nature as a causal agent and demiurgic principle alongside God, Calcidius ascribes a key role to nature within his cosmological account—a role similar to that assigned to the lesser gods in the *Timaeus*. Nature is, in fact, a principle that acts teleologically on the generation of mortal bodies and a causal agent responsible for generation and destruction occurring within the world. Nature thus enables Calcidius to effectively rethink the *Timaeus* account of the generation of the world in such a way that it can be eternal *and* generated: viewed as the work of God, the cosmos is sempiternal; viewed as the whole of nature's works, it is subject to birth and decay. As a result, the twofold perspective of causative and temporal generation, traced back to God and nature respectively, allows Calcidius to coherently integrate into a sempiternalist framework Plato's principle that everything that has come into being must pass away.<sup>58</sup>

## Bibliography

- ADAMSON, Peter. 2007. "'Porphyrius Arabus' on Nature and Art: 463F Smith in Context." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Supplement 98: 141–163.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-5370.2007.tb02510.x>
- ARMSTRONG, Arthur Hilary. 1967 [1940]. *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus*. Amsterdam: Hakkert. (Unchanged repr. of the ed. Cambridge 1940).
- BAKHOUCHE, Béatrice (ed. and trans.). 2011. *Calcidius. Commentaire au Timée de Platon*. 2 Vols. Paris: Vrin.

<sup>58</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented in April 2024 at the workshop "Cosmos and Creation" in Lisbon, in June 2024 at the ISNS Conference in Dublin, and in November 2024 at the workshop "Schöpfung und kosmische Ordnung" in Cologne. I am very grateful to all audiences for stimulating questions and discussion. I also wish to thank two anonymous readers for their valuable suggestions and remarks. This research is part of the 2021-567-COSMOS project, which has received funding from Fondazione Cariplo.

- BALTES, Matthias. 1976–1978. *Die Weltentstehung des Platonischen Timaios nach den antiken Interpreten*. 2 Vols. Leiden: Brill.
- BOYS-STONES, George. 2014. *Numenius. Fragments*. Draft translation.
- BRISSON, Luc (ed.). 2005. *Porphyre. Sentences*. 2 Vols. Paris: Vrin.
- BROADIE, Sarah. 2012. *Nature and Divinity in Plato's Timaeus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BURNET, John (ed.). 1900–1907. *Platonis Opera*. 5 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- CHIARADONNA, Riccardo, and Franco TRABATTONI (eds.). 2009. *Physics and Philosophy of Nature in Greek Neoplatonism*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- CORNFORD, Francis M. 1997 [1935]. *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato Translated with a Running Commentary*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- DEN BOEFT, Jan. 1970. *Calcidius on Fate. His Doctrine and Sources*. Leiden: Brill.
- DES PLACES, Édouard (ed. and trans.). 1973. *Numénius. Fragments*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- DES PLACES, Édouard (ed. and trans.). 1977. *Atticus. Fragments*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- DIEHL, Ernst (ed.). 1903–1906. *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Timaeum commentaria*. 3 Vols. Leipzig: Teubner.
- DILLON, John (ed.). 1973. *Iamblichi Chalcidensis In Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta. Translation and Commentary*. Leiden: Brill.
- DILLON, John (trans.). 1993. *Alcinous. The Handbook of Platonism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- DILLON John. 1996 [1977]. *The Middle Platonists. 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- DOWSON, Christopher J. 2023. *Philosophia Translata. The Development of Latin Philosophical Vocabulary through Translation from Greek. A Case Study Approach*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- GERCKE, Alfred. 1886. “Eine platonische Quelle des Neuplatonismus.” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, 41: 266–291.
- GERSH, Stephen. 1986. *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism. The Latin Tradition*. 2 Vols. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- GOLITSIS, Pantelis. 2019. “Der Begriff der *Physis* im späten Neuplatonismus.” In *Platon und die Physis*. eds. Dietmar Koch, Irmgard Männlein-Robert, and Niels Weidtmann, 241–253. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- HOENIG, Christina. 2014. “*Timaeus Latinus*: Calcidius and the Creation of the Universe.” *Rhizomata* 2: 80–110. <https://doi.org/10.1515/rhiz-2014-0004>
- HOENIG, Christina. 2018. *Plato's Timaeus and the Latin Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ISNARDI PARENTE, Margherita, and Tiziano DORANDI (eds.). 2012. *Senocrate e Ermodoro. Testimonianze e frammenti*. Pisa: Edizioni della Normale.
- JOHANSEN, Thomas Kjeller. 2004. *Plato's Natural Philosophy. A Study of the Timaeus-Critias*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- JOHANSEN, Thomas Kjeller. 2020. “Soul, Life, and Nutrition in the *Timaeus*.” In *Heat, Pneuma, and Soul in Ancient Philosophy and Science*. eds. Hynek Bartoš and Colin Guthrie King, 121–139. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Calcidius on Nature

- JONES, Roger Miller. 1918. "Chalcidius and Neo-Platonism." *Classical Philology* 3: 194–208. <https://doi.org/10.1086/360160>
- JOUBAUD, Catherine. 1991. *Le corps humain dans la philosophie platonicienne. Étude à partir du Timée*. Paris: Vrin.
- KOCH, Dietmar, Irmgard MÄNNLEIN-ROBERT, and Niels WEIDTMANN (eds.). 2019. *Platon und die Physis*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- LEMOINE, Michel. 1998. "Innovations de Cicéron et de Calcidius dans la traduction du *Timée*." In *The Medieval Translator: Traduire au Moyen Age*. Vol. 6. Proceedings of the International Conference of Göttingen (July 22–25, 1996). eds. Roger Ellis, René Tixier, and Bernd Weitemeier, 72–81. Turnhout: Brepols.
- LEMOINE, Michel. 2002. "Du *Timée* de Platon à celui de Calcidius." *ΕΝΩΣΙΣ ΚΑΙ ΦΙΛΙΑ. Unione e amicizia. Omaggio a Francesco Romano*. eds. Maria Barbanti, Giovanna R. Giardina, and Paolo Manganaro, 441–450. Catania: CUECM.
- LERNOULD, Alain. 2012. "Nature in Proclus: From Irrational Immanent Principle to Goddess." In *Neoplatonism and the Philosophy of Nature*. eds. James Wilberding and Christoph Horn, 68–102. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LÉVY, Carlos. 2003. "Cicero and the *Timaeus*." In *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*. ed. Gretchen J. Reydam-Schils, 95–110. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- LUNA, Concetta, and Alain-Philippe SEGONDS (eds.). 2007–2021. *Proclus. Commentaire sur le Parménide de Platon*. 7 Vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- MAGEE, John (trans.). 2016. *Calcidius. On Plato's Timaeus*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MARINESCU, Rareș Ilie. 2023. "Nature as an Instrumental Cause in Proclus." *Apeiron* 56: 673–692. <https://doi.org/10.1515/apeiron-2023-0007>
- MARTIJN, Marije. 2010. *Proclus on Nature. Philosophy of Nature and Its Methods in Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- O'BRIEN, Carl. 2012. "The Middle Platonist Demiurge and Stoic Cosmobiology." *Horizons* 3: 19–39.
- PELAVSKI, Andrés. 2014. "Physiology in Plato's *Timaeus*." *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 60: 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1750270514000086>
- PETRUCCI, Federico Maria (ed. and trans.), and Franco FERRARI (intr.). 2022. *Platone. Timeo*. Milano: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla.
- RATKOWITSCH, Christine. 1996. "Die *Timaios*-Übersetzung des Chalcidius. Ein Plato Christianus." *Philologus* 140: 139–162. <https://doi.org/10.1524/phil.1996.140.1.139>
- REYDAMS-SCHILS, Gretchen. 1999. *Demiurge and Providence. Stoic and Platonist Readings of Plato's Timaeus*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- REYDAMS-SCHILS, Gretchen. 2020. *Calcidius on Plato's Timaeus: Greek Philosophy, Latin Reception and Christian Contexts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- RIST, John M. 1967. *Plotinus. The Road to Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- RUNIA, David T., and Michael SHARE (trans.). 2008. *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*. Vol. II, Book 2: *Proclus on the Causes of the Cosmos and its Creation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- SCHROEDER, Lea Aurelia. 2021. "Replenishment and Maintenance of the Human Body (*Timaeus* 77a–81e)." *Apeiron* 54: 317–346.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/apeiron-2019-0035>
- SMITH, Andrew (ed.). 1993. *Porphyrii Philosophi Fragmenta. Fragmenta Arabica David Wasserstein Interpretante*. Stuttgart/Leipzig: Teubner.
- SMITH, Andrew. 2012. "The Significance of 'Physics' in Porphyry: The Problem of Body and Matter." In *Neoplatonism and the Philosophy of Nature*. eds. James Wilberding and Christoph Horn, 30–43. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SODANO, Angelo Raffaele (ed.). 1964. *Porphyrii in Platonis Timaeum Commentariorum Fragmenta*. Napoli: Istituto della Stampa.
- SOLMSEN, Friedrich. 1963. "Nature as Craftsman in Greek Thought." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24: 473–496. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707979>
- SOMFAI, Anna. 2003. "The Nature of Daemons. A Theological Application of the Concept of Geometrical Proportion in Calcidius' *Commentary to Plato's Timaeus* (40d–41a)." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Ancient Approaches to Plato's *Timaeus*, Supplement 78, 129–142.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-5370.2003.tb02138.x>
- STEEL, Carlos (eds.). 2007–2009. *Procli in Platonis Parmenidem commentaria*. 3 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- STEINHEIMER, Eduard. 1912. *Untersuchungen über die Quellen des Chalcidius*. Aschaffenburg. Würzburg, University Dissertation.
- SWITALSKI, Wladislaus. 1902. *Des Chalcidius Kommentar zu Platos Timaeus: Eine historisch-kritische Untersuchung*. Münster: Aschendorff.
- THEILER, Willy. 1964 [1930]. *Die Vorbereitung des Neuplatonismus*. Berlin: Weidemann (2. Aufl., unveränd. Nachdr. der 1. Aufl.).
- VAN RIEL, Gerd (ed.). 2022–2023. *Procli Diadochi In Platonis Timaeum Commentaria*. 5 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- VAN WINDEN, Jacobus C. M. 1959. *Calcidius on Matter: His Doctrine and Sources. A Chapter in the History of Platonism*. Leiden: Brill.
- WASZINK, Jan Hendrik. 1964. *Studien zum Timaioskommentar des Calcidius*. Leiden: Brill.
- WASZINK, Jan Hendrik. 1975 [1962]. *Timaeus a Calcidio translatus commentarioque instructus*. London: The Warburg Institute; Leiden: Brill.
- WESTERINK, Leendert G. 1962. *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co.
- WHITTAKER, John (ed.), and Pierre LOUIS (trans.). 1990. *Alcinoos. Enseignement des doctrines de Platon*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- WILBERDING, James. 2022. "Nature: Plotinus' Fourth Hypostasis?" In *The New Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*. eds. Lloyd P. Gerson and James Wilberding, 312–337. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- WILBERDING, James, and Christoph HORN (eds.). 2012. *Neoplatonism and the Philosophy of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.