

Aquinas, Plato, and Neo-Platonism  
for *The Oxford Handbook to Aquinas*  
edited by Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump  
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1. What Thomas knew and How he knew it

The influences of Plato, and of the wide variety of ancient, Arabic, and medieval Platonisms, on Aquinas must be distinguished from what he knows about them. The first are pervasive, persistent, and ever increasing. The second change markedly as he reads more of the commentaries and treatises of the Hellenic Neo-Platonists and Peripatetics during the last decade of his work.<sup>1</sup> Exemplary of these is William of Moerbeke's translation of Proclus' *Elements of Theology* finished in 1268. It enabled Aquinas to discern that the *Liber de causis* was not—as had been supposed by medieval Latin Peripatetics, including himself—the cap of the Aristotelian system, describing the emanations from the First Principle. Rather, he learned, it was composed of excerpts from the *Elements*—and, unknown to Aquinas, from Plotinus—modified to conform to the needs of Islamic monotheism, just as the *Dionysian Corpus* had modified its Neo-Platonic sources in Christian directions. The *Corpus*, with its quasi-Apostolic origin for Aquinas, was his most authoritative and influential source of Neo-Platonism—a character intensified when conveyed in Paris interlarded with unattributed glosses from Eriugena.<sup>2</sup> The *Elements* confirmed what Aquinas discerned to be Dionysius' Platonic style and way of thinking, when he had explicated *The Divine Names* (1265-1268); his earliest view had been that the Areopagite “mostly followed Aristotle”.<sup>3</sup> Expositing the *Liber* in 1272, involved comparing the *Elements*, the *Dionysian Corpus*, and the *Liber* and reinforced his conviction that the latter agreed on fundamental matters—a similarity partly explained by knowledge of the *Corpus* in the Arabic circles where the *Liber* was confected.<sup>4</sup> In the Arab Peripatetic tradition, where Aquinas' understanding of Aristotle was formed, the Philosopher had absorbed Plotinus and Proclus.<sup>5</sup> In judging Aquinas' Platonism, we must remember how Neo-Platonic his Aristotle was because Aquinas inherited the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle at which the Neo-Platonists and Arabic Peripatetics aimed. Even what are taken to be his most characteristically Aristotelian positions, e.g. intellection by way of abstraction from the sensible, are given their character in that concordance.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the *Dionysian Corpus* and the *Liber*, his most influential early sources of Platonism were Aristotle and Augustine; he probably read almost nothing by Plato except what was quoted by others, e.g. fragments of the *Timaeus* in the commentary by the Platonist Calcidius. For Aquinas, Augustine as well as Dionysius, “followed Plato as far as Catholic faith allowed”.<sup>7</sup> Augustine, who shares with Avicenna—as seen by Aquinas<sup>8</sup>—a doctrine of human knowledge through illumination by intelligible forms, and Dionysius, for whom humans know by turning to the sensible—this is probably why Aquinas initially thought that he was an Aristotelian—are Neo-Platonists in markedly different ways. Aquinas, however, treated philosophical schools as if they were syllogistic arguments in which the “way” of thinking, or “reason”, determined the premises, and thus the conclusions. This framework kept him from reflecting on some of the fundamental differences within the two big groupings—Platonic and Aristotelian—between which he divides most philosophers and their Christian followers. Although, as his many and careful commentaries show, he is a diligent and determined—if sometimes polemical—student of the history of philosophy, this structure is probably the cause of his shifting and somewhat inconsistent categorizations, as well as of his judgments about philosophical thinkers which are often insensitive to important differences.

Aquinas greatly prized the Neo-Platonic, as well as the Peripatetic, commentaries and paraphrases he gradually acquired, because they enabled getting to the Hellenic sources. This retrieval assisted establishing a Neo-Platonised Aristotle, in such matters as the individualization of the Agent Intellect, against the Averroism Thomas polemically ascribed to members of the Faculty of Arts in Paris.<sup>9</sup> Thus, for example, his last expositions of Aristotle have great portions lifted from the two commentaries of Simplicius he possessed in Moerbeke's translations.<sup>10</sup> His later works contain structures and conceptions derived from these, and, in his final accounts of the history of philosophy, he looked at Aristotle, as well as Plato, from the inclusive standpoint of this last great pagan Neoplatonic commentator.<sup>11</sup> The Neoplatonic commentaries of Macrobius and Boethius, among the Latins, and Ammonius, among the Greeks, are also important sources and influences.

## 2. Placing Platonism in the History of Philosophy

A great part of Aquinas' last writing was devoted to explicating Aristotle's works—including the *Liber de causis* attributed to him. Aquinas wishes to understand the philosophical schools: their characters, the differences between and within them, their memberships, influences, histories, and the extent to which they are complementary and may be brought into concord. For him Platonism belongs within a providentially ordered progressive development of philosophy, enabling it to serve Christian sacred doctrine. Although he distinguishes between the positions of Plato and "other Platonists" within the progress, still what the Platonists teach has been reduced to a fixed way of thinking like that of other philosophical schools and "no text...points to a difference in the *via*."<sup>12</sup> From the first, he criticises it from within Aristotle's polemical accounts, although, under the influence of Simplicius, he came to think that at least some of Aristotle's opposition was based on misunderstanding Plato's poetic and story-telling style, a misconstrual which was particularly marked among the Peripatetics.<sup>13</sup> Some of the criticisms are, however, confirmed for him by later Neo-Platonists, like Simplicius, who shared with Proclus, Dionysius, and the *Liber* an account of the human soul so completely descended into the realm of becoming that is forced to turn toward the sensible. Aquinas' most knowledgeable and extensive treatments of Platonism are found in his late *On Spiritual Creatures*, *On Separate Substances*, and his exposition of the *Liber*. All show that he has read the commentary of Simplicius on the *Categories* (translation finished in 1266).

What Aquinas reproduced from that commentary enabled him to establish a complementary characterization of Platonism and Aristotelianism, set up in terms of simple oppositions occurring within the schematized progress of reason:

The difference between these two positions stems from this, that some, in order to seek the truth about the nature of things, proceeded from intelligible reasons, and this was the particular characteristic of the Platonists. Some, however, proceeded from sensible things, and this was the particular characteristic of the philosophy of Aristotle, as Simplicius says in his commentary *Upon the Categories*.<sup>14</sup>

The procedure "from intelligible reasons" thinks in terms of the inherent independence of the separate substances. Despite its problems, this approach to reality was not only a necessary step on the way to Aristotle, but also corrects deficient tendencies in the "Aristotelian way" with its procedure "from sensible things."

In *On Separate Substances* Aquinas gives an extended treatment of the history of philosophy, including lists of differences and agreements between Plato and Aristotle,

beginning with “the opinions of the ancients and of Plato.” Because of the continuous flux of bodies and the deception of the senses, the early Physicists had thought it impossible for humans “to know the certain truth of things.”<sup>15</sup> Plato, agreeing with them “that sensible things are always in flux,” and “that the sensitive power does not have certain judgment about reality,”<sup>16</sup> solved the problem of knowledge by positing natures in which the truth would be fixed. These were separated from what fluctuates; by adhering to them our soul knows the truth. “According to this reasoning, because the intellect when knowing the truth apprehends something beyond the matter of sensible things, Plato thought some things existed separately from sensible realities.”<sup>17</sup>

### 3. In what Plato erred, what he got right, and where he corrects Aristotle

Philosophy begins, thus, with two errors which must be overcome. One is the denial that humans can know with certainty. The second is that nothing exists separate from bodies. Theology requires that both errors be overcome, because our understanding that God is a separate substance depends upon demonstrating his existence.<sup>18</sup> In fact, “we discover that God exists, by unbreakable reasons proved by the philosophers.”<sup>19</sup> Plato solved the two errors together. However, the connection between knowledge of the truth and the existence of separate substances is not what Plato took it to be. In order to save knowledge, Plato simply reversed the Physicists, projecting what belongs to our thinking onto an external reality. In common with the Physicists, Plato held that like was known by like. The Physicists, supposing that only bodies existed, determined the knower from the known: “they thought that the form of the object known should be in the knower in the same way that it is in the thing known.” On the contrary: “Plato, having perceived that the intellectual soul is immaterial and knows immaterially, held that the forms of things known exist immaterially.”<sup>20</sup>

The Platonic reversal of the Physicists is correct because: “the nature of knowledge is opposite to the nature of materiality.”<sup>21</sup> However, by simply changing the direction of the likeness, so that the structure of knowledge is transferred to reality, Plato remained too close to his adversaries. From a Neo-Platonist, Thomas had learned very early that cognition should be considered according to a twofold way: “namely, the mode of the thing known and the mode of the knower, the mode of the thing known is not the mode of the knower, as Boethius says.”<sup>22</sup>

When much later, he compared the *Liber* with the *Elements*, while looking at the *Divine Names* of Dionysius, Aquinas examined Platonism through a work of Proclus and two of its derivatives. He arrived at a very full picture of the many levels of intellectual objects and modes of intellection in the Platonic spiritual cosmos. *On Separate Substances* represents Plato as positing two genera of entities separate from sensible things in accord with two modes of intellectual abstraction, “mathematicals and universals which he called forms or ideas.”

For Aquinas, Platonic hierarchy placed mathematical between the forms and sensibles.<sup>23</sup> At the highest level were entities like the good itself, intellect itself, and life itself—realities like, but, crucially, not identical with those Aquinas rightly regarded as posited in the *Divine Names*. These Dionysian conceptual names are what made Aquinas think of Dionysius as a Platonist, despite his acknowledgement that we know higher things by way of their sensible veils, which made Dionysius seem Aristotelian. Aquinas judged that the Platonic error here involved a false separation of the object from the subject of intellection. The intelligibles were separated from the intellects when the “gods, which is what Plato called the separate intelligible forms,” were separated from knowing.<sup>24</sup> The “order

of gods, that is of ideal forms, has an internal order corresponding to the order of the universality of forms.”<sup>25</sup> This philosophical error has religious consequences. Thus, in this aspect of his teaching on the kinds of separate substances, Aristotle’s parsimony is “more consonant with the Christian faith.” Aristotle does not need separate forms to explain how we know, and Aquinas agreed with him in not positing forms intermediate between God and knowing beings.<sup>26</sup> According to Aquinas, on this, as well as when he refuses to make the first principle unknowable because it is the one-not-being, Dionysius agrees with Aristotle, the *Liber*, and Christian faith against the Platonists as understood through the *Elements*. The Areopagite abolishes the independent subsistence of the good itself, intellect itself, and life itself “for all these things are essentially the very first cause of all things... and thus we posit not many gods but one.”<sup>27</sup> Doubtfully, Aquinas places Dionysius, whom he never contradicts, within the same Neo-Platonic tradition where we locate Aquinas, i.e. within the ontology of pure being, probably originating in Porphyry, rather than within the henological stream, where we put Proclus. Certainly Aquinas’ language here is Platonic: the one God “is itself the infinite to be” in which finite beings participate.<sup>28</sup> However, Aquinas is not yet finished with Platonism in his history; crucially, the Platonic tendency to multiply entities also benefits the truth.

When Aquinas treats Aristotle in *On Separate Substances*, he does not leave his Neo-Platonic framework behind. Echoing a statement he found in Simplicius *Upon the Categories*, he matches what he wrote of the first of the five ways in the *Summa Theologiae*. He judges that Aristotle’s way of reasoning, by way of motion, to the existence of separate substances is “more evident and more certain.”<sup>29</sup> Simplicius, adhering to the Neo-Platonic tradition originating in Iamblichus, to which Proclus and Dionysius also belonged, had judged the Aristotelian way to have a more persuasive necessity in virtue of its relation to sense.<sup>30</sup> It is essential to this “way of motion” that its beginning belongs to the kind of knowing proper to the human place in the hierarchy of cognition. Staying “with what does not depart much from what is evident to sense” gives a greater certainty to our rational knowledge of the existence of separate substances. It shows its limits, however, when determining their kinds and numbers. On this, Aristotle’s position seems “less sufficient than the position of Plato.”<sup>31</sup> Aristotle wanted only “a dual order of separate substances” and tied their numbers to what is required to move the heavens.<sup>32</sup>

As against these opinions, Thomas asserts that the phenomena associated with demon possession and magic “can in no way be reduced to a corporeal cause.” These phenomena require the kind of explanation “through some intellectual substances” which Thomas associates with the Platonists.<sup>33</sup> He is against a reduction of the phenomena to “the power of the heavenly bodies and of other natural things.” Against “the Peripatetic followers of Aristotle,”<sup>34</sup> Aquinas makes common cause with Augustine, with Plotinus, and the Platonists generally (as represented by Augustine and many others), in asserting the existence of demons which lie outside Aristotle’s two kinds of separate substance. Nonetheless, even here, the Platonists are not entirely right.

Despite the beginning from intelligible reasons, which they supposed themselves to have made, ultimately the Platonists could not escape determining the numbers of the separated intelligible forms from sensible things. For Aquinas, in the tradition of the same post-Plotinian Neo-Platonic understanding of the place and orientation of the human individual soul in which Simplicius and Dionysius also stand, human reasoning in fact begins with the sensible. In consequence, the Platonists cannot avoid reproducing the sensible world in the intelligible realm: “For, since they are not able to arrive at knowledge of such substances except from sensible things, they supposed the former to be of the same species

as the latter, indeed, better, to be their species.”<sup>35</sup> The kinds of sensible things, in fact, determined for them the numbers of the separated universals. That the lower should dictate the kinds or numbers of the higher is always repugnant to Aquinas, whether the culprits are Aristotelians or Platonists. Provided that they do not make the false separation of intellection and its objects, and commit the errors which follow, Plato and his followers are right as against Aristotle. This is because, in principle, the Platonists correctly considered the nature of separated substances and the whole order of intellectual beings according to its own proper reality,<sup>36</sup> and in relation to the First Principle, rather than from below, and thus arrived at more kinds of separate substances, an expansion which served some of the needs of sacred doctrine.

There is much more in *On Separate Substances* concerning their numbers, including an elaborate reasoning which saves verbally opposed positions of both Proclus and Dionysius. Without following this, we can conclude that Thomas writes the history of philosophy by drawing the Platonists and the Aristotelians into a single argument in which they complement and correct each other. The principle of this correction is the Christian faith, which philosophy ultimately serves.

#### 4. Some fundamental Neoplatonic aspects of Thomas’ *Summa theologiae*

Aquinas began the final Book of the *Summa contra Gentiles* with this thoroughly Neo-Platonic assertion:

Because the most perfect unity is found in the highest summit of things, God, and because with each reality so much the more it is one, so much the greater is its power and dignity, it follows that, to the extent that things be further away from the First Principle, so much greater is the diversity and variety found in them. Therefore it is necessary that the process of emanation from God be united within this Principle itself, and be multiplied according to the lowliness of things, where it comes to its end.<sup>37</sup>

According to his own account, in the *Summa theologiae* Aquinas was finally able to give sacred teaching the order in which its proper structure would be intelligible. Thus, in order to get a glimpse at how pervasive Neo-Platonism is in Aquinas, we may suitably conclude with some remarks on how, not only the *Summa theologiae* as a whole, but also particular treatises within it, describe the Neoplatonic structure of remaining, going-out, and return by which all things except the One revert upon their principle.<sup>38</sup>

The first circle within the First Part (Questions 3-11) is constructed when, beginning with simplicity, we arrive back at unity, by way of the going out of the existence of God into all things. The circles succeeding it return to the principle by way of more and more differentiated processions. We have a unification of the Platonic dialectic of the one and the many with Aristotle’s logic of activity as *entelecheia* in a Neo-Platonic hierarchy.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the Neoplatonic figures determine content as well as form.

For example, a Proclean conception, that incorporeal substances have complete return upon themselves, enables the *Summa’s* progress from the circle described by simple being returning to itself as unity to the questions on the divine activities of knowing, loving, and power. Creation for Aquinas requires three emanations of two kinds. First, there are the internal emanations or processions within the divine essence which produce real distinctions and relations within the Principle. The two emanations of the eternal Word and Holy Spirit are necessary and natural. Thomas invokes Avicenna on behalf of this necessity in God and

has in mind a principle, frequent among the Neo-Platonised Arabic Peripatetics, “from a simple one nothing except a unity can come.”<sup>40</sup> Equality as a characteristic is especially appropriated to the Word as the first emanation from the Father who is the principle of the Trinitarian processions. Thus, Aquinas writes, once more in a Neo-Platonic mode :

The first thing which proceeds from unity is equality and then multiplicity proceeds. Therefore, from the Father, to whom, according to Augustine, unity is proper, the Son processes, to whom equality is appropriate, and then the creature comes forth to which inequality belongs.<sup>41</sup>

The multiplication of equals is the origin of the other kind of emanation, that of “all being from the universal being”.<sup>42</sup> Throughout his writing, the emanations of divine Persons are the cause and reason of all subsequent emanations.<sup>43</sup> The characteristics of the procession of creatures are contrary to those within the divine essence, but determined by them. This procession is voluntary, because the divine being is necessarily willing. A figure, by which the Neo-Platonists reconciled Plato and Aristotle, the idea of motionless motion as characterising the activity of the perfect, enables Aquinas to call God “living”. A structure, taken from Proclus via Dionysius and the *Liber*, provides the framework for the consideration of all spiritual substances from the soul to the divine; they have essence, power, and act.<sup>44</sup>

God is unknown to us in this present life, but not, as with Proclus, in principle. However, reason understands its own ignorance. By a combination of two Neo-Platonic structures: (1) the relation between the grade of a substance in the hierarchy and its way of knowing, with (2) the systematic analogy between the ways of knowing and the grades of being, Aquinas develops his doctrine of analogy to prevent all our judgments about God being false. The correction of the mode of our knowing of God, by comparing it to the mode of his being, requires that we are simultaneously looking at reality in a human way, and regarding our place in the cosmos from the divine perspective. This capacity to look at ourselves from beyond ourselves is consequent on our participation in the higher knowing of separate substances, a characteristically Neo-Platonic reworking of a reconciled Aristotle and Plato.<sup>45</sup> This participation is as much a fact about the psychological and ontological structure of the cosmos—and thus about the constitution of our nature and how it functions within its hierarchically situated place—as it is something vouchsafed by revelation. In fact, the top down movement of knowing, which Aquinas reserves for revelation in contradistinction from the upward movement of philosophy, belongs to the Neo-Platonic correction of Aristotle.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Hankey, Wayne John (2002a), "Aquinas and the Platonists", in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages: A Doxographic Approach*, ed. Stephen Gersh and Martin Hoenen (Berlin/ New York: de Gruyter), 279-324.

<sup>2</sup> Hankey, Wayne John (2004), "*Participatio divini luminis*, Aquinas' doctrine of the Agent Intellect: Our Capacity for Contemplation", *Dionysius* 22, 165 and Harrington, Larry Michael, ed. (2004), *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris* (Paris/Leuven/Dudley: Peeters).

<sup>3</sup> In Sent, l. 2, d. 14, q. 1, a. 2 and In DNN proemium. Translations are mine.

<sup>4</sup> See on Arabic and earlier translations of the *Corpus*, Treiger, Alexander (2007), "The Arabic Version of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology*, Chapter 1: Introduction, Critical Edition, and Translation", *Le Muséon* 120:3-4, 365-393.

<sup>5</sup> Libera, Alain de (1996), *La querelle des universaux: De Platon à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris: Des travaux), 117.

<sup>6</sup> See Smit, Houston (2001), "Aquinas's Abstractionism", *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10, 85-118 and Hankey 2004.

<sup>7</sup> QDSC 10 ad 8.

<sup>8</sup> SCG 2, 74; ST 1a, q.84, a.4; see Hasse, Dag Nikolaus (2000), *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul, 1160-1300* (London/ Turin: The Warburg Institute / Nino Aragno), 72.

<sup>9</sup> QDSC 10 ad 8; QDV 16, 3; ST 1a, q.79, a.5; see 'Simplicius' (2000), *On Aristotle On the Soul 3.1-5*, trans. Henry Blumenthal (London: Duckworth), vii, 8, 220, and Hankey, Wayne John (2001), "Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas", *The Heythrop Journal* 42:3, 338.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. In DC 3, 2.

<sup>11</sup> See Hankey, Wayne John (2002b), "Thomas' Neoplatonic Histories: His following of Simplicius", *Dionysius* 20, 153-178.

<sup>12</sup> Henle, Robert John (1956), *Saint Thomas and Platonism. A Study of the Plato and Platonic Texts in the Writings of Saint Thomas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), 447.

<sup>13</sup> In DC 1, 22; In DA 8, 38; In Meta 3, 11; In Phys 1, 15.

<sup>14</sup> QDSC 3.

<sup>15</sup> DSS 1.

<sup>16</sup> QDSC 10 ad 8.

<sup>17</sup> DSS 1.

<sup>18</sup> ST 1a, q. 2, a. 2 sc.

<sup>19</sup> QDV 10, 12; see QDV 14, 9 and ad 9.

<sup>20</sup> ST 1a, q. 84, a. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> In Sent l. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 2; see In BDT, *Expositio Capituli Secundi* and Hankey, Wayne John (1997) "Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus and Isaiah VI.6", *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 64, 87-90.

<sup>23</sup> DSS 1.

<sup>24</sup> DSS 4.

<sup>25</sup> In CA prop. 19.

<sup>26</sup> In CA prop. 10 and prop. 13.

<sup>27</sup> In CA prop. 3; on the ambiguity of Dionysius, see In DNN 5, 1.

<sup>28</sup> In CA prop. 6; see Hankey, Wayne John (2005) "Self and Cosmos in Becoming Deiform: Neoplatonic Paradigms for Reform by Self-Knowledge from Augustine to Aquinas" in *Reforming the Church Before Modernity: Patterns, Problems and Approaches*, ed. Christopher Bellitto and Louis Hamilton (Aldershot: Ashgate), 49-50 and Narbonne, Jean-Marc (2001), *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres) 41-70, 222-44.

<sup>29</sup> DSS 2.

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<sup>30</sup> Simplicius (1971), *Commentaire sur les Catégories d'Aristote*, Traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke, ed. Adrien Pattin, vol. 1 (Louvain: Publications universitaires de Louvain), prologus, 8.

<sup>31</sup> DSS 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> QDM 16, 1.

<sup>35</sup> SCG 2, 92.

<sup>36</sup> DSS 4.

<sup>37</sup> SCG 4, 1, prooemium.

<sup>38</sup> See ST 1a, q.2, prologue and Hankey, Wayne John (1987), *God in Himself, Aquinas' Doctrine of God as Expounded in the Summa Theologiae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), passim.

<sup>39</sup> Hankey, Wayne John (1999), "Theoria versus Poesis: Neoplatonism and Trinitarian Difference in Aquinas", *Modern Theology* 15, 397-408.

<sup>40</sup> QDP 2, 4 and ST 1a, q. 41, a. 2; see Hankey, Wayne John (2007), "Ab uno simplici non est nisi unum: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas' Doctrine of Creation," in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought*, ed. Michael Treschow, Willemien Otten and Walter Hannam (Leiden: Brill), 328–331.

<sup>41</sup> ST 1a, q. 47, a. 2, ad 2.

<sup>42</sup> ST 1a, q. 45, a. 4, ad 1.

<sup>43</sup> Emery, Gilles (1995), *La Trinité Créatrice. Trinité et création dans les commentaires aux Sentences de Thomas d'Aquin et de ses précurseurs Albert le Grand et Bonaventure* (Paris: Vrin), 280.

<sup>44</sup> ST 1a, q. 75, prol.

<sup>45</sup> DSS 4, see Hankey 1987 (165).

<sup>46</sup> Proclus (1963), *Elements of Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eric Robertson Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon), 198-199.