

# God's Care for Human Individuals: What Neoplatonism gives to a Christian Doctrine of Providence

Wayne J. Hankey

## Aquinas against the Peripatetics and with the Neoplatonists

The polemically fierce wars Aquinas fought against the Peripatetics and Latin Averroëists on the questions of the eternity of the world and the individuation of the agent intellect, in which he took no prisoners, are well known. Nonetheless, scholars have only begun to acquire the astonishment appropriate to the spectacle of a theologian devoting a great part of the last years of his life to fighting philosophical battles to forward his Christian purposes, and, in the case of the agent intellect, using philological, historical, and logical means to establish the correct interpretation of Aristotle.<sup>1</sup> Aquinas was determined to establish not only the truth accessible to philosophy, but also that Aristotle himself taught the same. This required him to go back before the Arabic Peripatetics in whose interpretations of Aristotle he had been schooled.<sup>2</sup> This was an enterprise largely made possible by the access Wil-

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<sup>1</sup> See M. D. Jordan, *The Alleged Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas*, The Etienne Gilson Series 15 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1992) and W. J. Hankey, "Why Philosophy Abides for Aquinas," *The Heythrop Journal*, 42:3 (2001): 329–348.

<sup>2</sup> We may compare this with Maimonides' endeavour to show that Aristotle not only did not demonstrate the eternity of the world but also knew that his arguments were only probable. Maimonides maintained that it was Aristotle's Peripatetic followers, for him most prominently Arabic, who made the false claim that the arguments were demonstrative, *Guide of the Perplexed* II.13. At first, Aquinas followed Maimonides in this, but, when expositing the *Physics* and thereafter, judged that Aristotle thought his arguments were demonstrations. Thus, in his exposition of the *Physics*, he reports that "some" try to save Aristotle by proposing that he did not try to prove that motion is eternal. Aquinas rejects this and sets out to show that Aristotle's arguments were not demonstrative (see *In physicorum*, VIII.2 §986 (Marietti, 1965)). I depend upon and usually quote from Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

liam of Moerbeke's translations gave him to hermeneutical methods developed with the Neoplatonic schools and their interpretation of Aristotle's *De Anima*.<sup>3</sup> Because Neoplatonic commentators identified the specific subject of each treatise or dialogue, and because they supposed that the *De Anima* treated the human soul, it was natural for them to interpret it as including the agent and the potential intellects. I want to consider with you another area in which Aquinas, Boethius, and, in a qualified way, Moses Maimonides, joined with the Neoplatonists against the Peripatetics in giving a divine importance to particular beings in the sub-lunar realm. This is in their treatment of providence and the question of whether God cares for individuals in general and for human individuals particularly. At the conclusion of this consideration we shall look at why, contrary to most expectations, the particular has an absolute foundation in Proclean Neoplatonism. For it individuality is founded in the divine origin and is not merely a function of the meeting of form with matter. This characteristic of Proclean Neoplatonism will no doubt be met with applause in places where Blessed Duns Scotus is revered; even if the polytheistic paganism to which it is attached may be less enthusiastically received.

With the not-to-be-regretted passing both of the Leonine neo-scholastic Aquinas and Gilson's anti-Neoplatonic "metaphysics of Exodus," we are used to a tranquil contemplation of Thomas' Middle and Neo-Platonisms. 1) His doctrine of pure being in the tradition either from, or at least including at its origins, the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides*, 2) the remaining, *exitus* and *reditus* structure of his *Summa theologiae*, 3) his siding with the Platonists against the Peripatetics on the kinds of spiritual substances and on the determination of their numbers, 4) in line with Simplicius, his criticism of Aristotle and the Peripatetics on how to interpret Plato, 5) his adoption of a version of the Dionysian negative theology (though signifi-

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<sup>3</sup> On the doctrine see Aquinas, *De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, 10 ad 8; *De Veritate*, 16.3; *ST* 1.79.5; and W. J. Hankey, "Participatio divini luminis, Aquinas' doctrine of the Agent Intellect: Our Capacity for Contemplation," *Dionysius* 22 (2004): 149–178. On the Peripatetics, see H. J. Blumenthal, *Aristotle and Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity. Interpretation of the De Anima* (London: Duckworth, 1996), 17; on the role of the Neoplatonic commentators, see Aquinas, *Expositio Libri Posteriorum*, ed. R.-A. Gauthier, *Fratrum Praedicatorum, Editio altera retractata, Commissio Leonina*: vol. 1, 2 (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1989), 55 and W. J. Hankey, "Thomas' Neoplatonic Histories: His following of Simplicius," *Dionysius* 20 (2002): 153–178; for their doctrine, see "Simplicius," *On Aristotle On the Soul 3.1-5*, trans. H. J. Blumenthal, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 2000), vii, 8, and 220, ll.15–17 and 25–35.

cantly modified),<sup>4</sup> 6) his taking from the same source the Proclean teaching on the way evil exists (or rather does not exist), 7) his working within a relation between the natural—philosophy's realm—and the supernatural realm of religion first sketched by Iamblichus and, 8) what is intimately connected to this, a Plotinian-Porphyrrian-Iamblichian understanding of the hierarchy of the virtues and their existence in the super-human spiritual realms, 9) his reconciliation of Platonic reminiscence and Aristotelian abstraction in the silage of Syrianus, 10) his use of a law of emanation derived from Avicenna to explicate the *exitus* of the persons of the Trinity, and of another, 11) the *Lex divinitatis*, derived from Iamblichus, to govern spiritual mediation, 12) his denial of immediate self-knowledge to the soul stemming from his allegiance to the Proclean principle that only the simple has complete return upon itself, 13) his adoption from Boethius and others the principle that a thing is known according to the mode of the knower, all these come to mind and many others might be added to this list.<sup>5</sup> Still an argument that the irreducibility of particular individuality and God's care for individuals has an absolute foundation in the highest reaches of Neoplatonic systems and that the resulting doctrine of providence is in large part adopted by Christians may be greeted with a little surprise. Let me then forestall some potential criticism by indicating the limits of my enterprise.

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<sup>4</sup> On his modification and how his misconstrual of Dionysius came to be, see my "Misrepresenting Neoplatonism in Contemporary Christian Dionysian Polemic: Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa versus Vladimir Lossky and Jean-Luc Marion," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82:4 (2008): 683–703, 687–690; John D. Jones, "The *Divine Names* in John Sarracen's Translation: Misconstruing Dionysius's Language about God," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82:4 (2008): 661–682; and L. Michael Harrington, "The Drunken *Epibole* of Plotinus and its Reappearance in the Work of Dionysius the Areopagite," *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 117–138.

<sup>5</sup> I have argued for these in my *God in Himself: Aquinas' Doctrine of God as Expounded in the Summa Theologiae*, Oxford Theological Monographs/Oxford Scholarly Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1987]/ 2000) and in a series of articles some of which are cited in the previous notes. Without being exhaustive, I add as most relevant to this paper, W. J. Hankey, "Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus and Isaiah VI.6," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 64 (1997): 59–93; "Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes: More than a Source of the Self," *Augustinian Studies* 32:1 (2001): 65–88; "Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichian and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion, Virtue, and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 59:2 (2003): 193–224; and "Ab uno simplici non est nisi unum: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas' Doctrine of Creation," *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev'd Dr Robert D. Crouse*, eds. Michael Treschow, Willemien Otten and Walter Hannam, Studies in Intellectual History (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 309–333.

I shall not argue in this paper for what would be an impossible direct dependence of Aquinas on Proclus for his doctrine of providence. Moerbeke did not finish translating the *Tria Opuscula* until 1286, and the Commentary on the *Timaeus*, which contains much of his doctrine,<sup>7</sup> had no medieval translation. The *Elements of Theology* contains important aspects of Proclus' teaching on providence, but Thomas' doctrine was established well before he began using it after its translation in 1268; nonetheless, the *Elements* is important for his treatment of the history of the doctrine in his very late treatise *De substantiis separatis*. A line, sometimes delineating community, not identity, of teaching, which is frequently joined with influence, may be drawn from the treatises on Fate and Providence of Plotinus, the letters on the same subjects by Iamblichus, the *De decem dubitationes circa providentia*, the *De providentia et fato* and the *De malorum subsistentia* of Proclus, the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius, the *Guide of the Perplexed* of Maimonides, Book III of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which some (though not Aquinas himself) have entitled "Providence,"<sup>8</sup> the question *de providentia Dei* of the *Summa theologiae* (ST I.22), Thomas' exposition of the *De divinis nominibus*, and his *On Separate Substances*. There are indubitable continuities: e.g. Middle Platonic and Plotinian doctrines are summed up by Iamblichus in formulae used by Proclus and Boethius and quoted by Aquinas, the same criticisms of Epicurean, Stoic, and Peripatetic positions can be found in all the figures I have listed.

Aquinas is indubitably in the tradition. From the beginning of his writing on the subject, Aquinas had the *Guide of the Perplexed*, where both the second and the third Books treat extensively whether God cares for individuals, and other matters directly related to providence, e.g. injustice in the world, the ends of things, as well as importantly connected matters like

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<sup>6</sup> Proclus Diadochus, *Tria Opuscula (De Providentia, Libertate, Malo) latine Guilelmo de Moerbeka vertente et graece ex Isaaci Sebastocratoris aliorumque scriptis collecta*, ed. H. Boese (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960); idem, *On the Existence of Evils*, trans. Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003); idem, *On Providence*, trans. Carlos Steel, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 2007). See Simon Fortier, "Three texts in one? An examination of the title *Procli Diadochi Tria Opuscula*," *Dionysius* 27 (2009): 55–70. My references and quotations from Proclus *On Providence* and *On the Existence of Evils* are from Steel.

<sup>7</sup> See John Phillips, *Order from Disorder: Proclus' Doctrine of Evil and its Roots in Ancient Platonism*, *Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition* (Leiden/ Boston: Brill, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three: Providence, Part I and II*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, Image Books (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956). Aquinas said the subject of book three is "*de ordine creaturarum in ipsum sicut in finem*" (I, 9), which is how providence functions in the tradition at which we are looking.

whether there is an adequate account of the cause of sub lunar particularity and difference in Aristotle (Book II). Maimonides is cited twice in Book III of the *Contra Gentiles*, once he is explicitly used against the voluntarist “*error loquentium in lege Saracenorum*,”<sup>9</sup> which makes everything a direct act of the divine will, and, a second time when, according to the editor, he is the source of an account that providence does not extend to corruptible things.<sup>10</sup> In *de providentia dei*, Aquinas criticises Maimonides for only exempting humans from this carelessness “*propter splendorem intellectus participant*,” but I take the difference between his position and that of Aquinas to be more verbal than substantial.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, also from the beginning of his theological writing, in the *Consolation* of Boethius, the works of Dionysius, and in what, for most of his life, he took to be the pinnacle of Aristotle’s system, the *Liber de causis*, Aquinas had more authoritative sources for Proclean and Plotinian doctrine than Proclus’ treatises themselves would have carried for him.

Nor shall I suppose that Aquinas understood accurately what he knew of Proclus in particular, or of Platonism in general. He did not read the dialogues of Plato, and was first told what Platonists taught by Aristotle, his Peripatetic interpreters, and Augustine. All three of these sources engage simultaneously in taking over both fundamental Platonic doctrines and hypercritical falsifying polemic. Despite how very much more he learns from other sources, Thomas always looks at Platonism through Aristotle’s critical representation of Plato’s doctrine of the forms and cannot take into account Plato’s own criticism of the separation of the forms in his last dialogues.<sup>12</sup> In consequence, what, on the one hand, Thomas actually imbibed of Platonism, and what, on the other hand, he thought the Platonists taught, and how this should be judged, are very far apart.<sup>13</sup> For Aquinas, along with Gilson and

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, *ScG* III.97.15.

<sup>10</sup> Aquinas, *ScG* III.71.11, trans. Bourke, 241.

<sup>11</sup> Aquinas, *ST* 1.22.2 *obj* 5, *corpus*, and *ad* 5. In fact Aquinas does not grant individual immortality for any other sub-lunar beings than humans and affirms that, because of their natural perfection and the dignity of their ends, intellectual and rational creatures are “specially” under God’s providence (*ScG* III.111). The work of providence for other creatures is to preserve their mode of being; this Maimonides also affirms, agreeing with the Peripatetics that the celestial causes procure this. Aquinas holds that God uses secondary causes to look after the details (*minima*); *ScG* III.77.1: “*minimorum autem executio condecet inferiorem virtutem, effectui proportionatam*.” Both also maintain what is essential to the divine operation of providence in this tradition, namely, that it takes place because there is a divine simple intuition of universals and particulars together (*ScG* III.76.3).

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, ed. Fratrum Praedicatorum, Commissio Leonina: vol. 60, D (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1968), cap. 4, D 47, ll. 3–19.

<sup>13</sup> See my “Aquinas and the Platonists,” in *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages: A Doxographic Approach*, ed. Stephen Gersh and Maarten J. F. M. Hoenen, with

many others,<sup>14</sup> the heart of Platonism is falsely turning abstractions into hypostases, and, crucially for what we shall investigate here, Thomas is guilty of conceiving what is above ontology in Proclus ontologically and intellectually. In consequence, for Aquinas, when Proclus makes the One the first principle, he is giving to quantity the place which belongs to pure being. Because the *via Platonicorum* is the way of abstractions, what “Plato” (Aquinas is actually looking at Proclus) called “gods” are only “separate intelligible forms,” separated from knowing as well as from matter and motion. In his *Exposition of the Liber de Causis*, Thomas writes: the “order of gods, that is, of ideal forms has an order among itself corresponding to the order of the universality of forms.”<sup>15</sup> These are fundamentally mistaken views.

As we know, in fact, the Middle and Neo Platonisms have absorbed Aristotle, and thus their universe is better (if not completely) understood as systems of subjectivities and analogies of subjectivities than as hypostatised concepts standing over against sensible substances.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, this misunderstanding endures. As a consequence many still suppose that with Neoplatonism we have the reduction of religion and theology to philosophy, grace and revelation to the power and limits of human reasoning, and the quest for divinization to an ascent of thought towards a negative abstract universal; mystagogy is scientific abstraction.<sup>17</sup> Working within this framework, when expositing the *Divine Names*, Aquinas explains that “the essence of divinity is hidden” for Dionysius by observing that the Platonists placed God as first principle beyond the highest act of being, even beyond being, life and intellect, not, however, beyond the good itself which they laid down as the first principle.”<sup>18</sup> Years later, when explaining the *Liber de causis*, which he compares to the *Elements of Theology* as translated by Moerbeke, as well as to the *Divine Names*, Aquinas uses Proclus to show why the superessential unity of the Platonic Principle is entirely beyond being known. Here

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the assistance of Pieter Th. van Wingerden (Berlin/ New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 279–324.

<sup>14</sup> See Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952) and Vladimir Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: Vrin, 1960), 308–309.

<sup>15</sup> Aquinas, *Super Librum De Causis Expositio*, ed. H.-D. Saffrey, *Textus Philosophici Friburgenses 4/5* (Fribourg/Louvain: Société Philosophique/Éditions E. Nauwelaerts, 1954), prop. 19, p. 106, ll. 5–7.

<sup>16</sup> See Eric Perl, “‘Every Life is a Thought’: The Analogy of Personhood in Neoplatonism,” *Philosophy and Theology* 18 (2006): 143–167.

<sup>17</sup> On some of these see my “Misrepresenting Neoplatonism,” 694–703, and “Neoplatonism and Contemporary French Philosophy,” *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 170, and 178–179.

<sup>18</sup> Aquinas, *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, ed. C. Pera (Turin/ Rome: Marietti, 1950), cap. 13, lect. 3, p. 369, §994.

again he connects the unknowability of God for Dionysius and Proclus.<sup>19</sup> However, Thomas' metaphysical and epistemological principles, and the status he ascribes to Dionysius as Paul's convert on the Areopagus, require that Dionysius be set against the Platonists in this regard. The Platonic first cause is unknowable because it "even exceeds separated being itself." In contrast, "according to the truth of things," a position which always includes Dionysius, "the first cause is above being [only] in so far as it is the very infinite act of being."<sup>20</sup> For Aquinas the Dionysian God must be a form of *esse*. This is another deeply mistaken view, as Eriugena knew.<sup>21</sup>

### **Providence in Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus, Boethius, Maimonides, and Aquinas**

The continuity of the teaching, and the effort devoted to maintaining it, are evident in the fact that there are several aspects of the teaching about providence which recur in the texts of Plotinus, Iamblichus, Boethius, Maimonides,<sup>22</sup> and Aquinas. Sometimes the doctrines are conveyed in identical phrases. They include:

- 1) theodicy, under the form of the question of evil because the existence of evil, especially injustice in the human realm, seems inconsistent with government by a good divine providence;
- 2) criticism of the Epicureans and Stoics, primarily because of atheism or of determinism which excludes the freewill which all regard as necessary to the operation of providence in humans;
- 3) criticism of Aristotle and the Peripatetics, because they do not extend providence to human individuals;

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<sup>19</sup> Aquinas, *Super De causis*, prop. 6, pp. 44–40.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47, lines 8–22.

<sup>21</sup> See Eric Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, SUNY Series in Ancient Greek Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> The recurrence is partly explained because of the connexions between the Peripatetic and Neoplatonic traditions. Maimonides stands in the former; a part of the likeness between his teaching and that of those more wholly in the Neoplatonic tradition than he may be explained by what Plotinus owes to Alexander of Aphrodisias. Through the Arabic philosophers Maimonides had more of Alexander on fate and providence than has come down to us in Greek. For important texts see Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Fate*, text, translation, and commentary R. W. Sharples (London: Duckworth, 1983) and *idem, Quaestiones* 1.1–2.15, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 1992), 83.

- 4) the distinction between a higher providence, on the one hand, and fate, fortune, nature, or government, on the other;
- 5) that fundamental to providence is its operating in each kind of being in a way adapted to each thing's mode and through its inherent teleology;
- 6) that providence extends to individuals;
- 7) that providence employs spiritual beings intermediary between the First and humans;
- 8) that humans are in the middle between the sensible and the intellectual worlds and that this is crucial to how they stand to providence;
- 9) that humans as rational souls have free choice;
- 10) that providence operates in them by their acquisition of virtues or vices;
- 11) that prayer requires human freedom and is essential to the operation of providence;
- 12) that providence combines what happens outside human control (most things) with the free acts of intellectual and rational beings for the good of virtuous humans;
- 13) that providence is a function either of the divine intellect and will, or of the gods as *pro-noia*, above mind;
- 14) that, either as divine intellect or as divinity above intellect, providence is an eternal unchanging intuition, which unites the generic and the individual;
- 15) that the divine providential care for human individuals is ultimately its providing a summons and ways, natural and gracious, to deiformity.

I shall consider these sufficiently to establish that they play at least an analogous role in the doctrine of each of our philosophical theologians. I could not be exhaustive, and shall not attempt this. I aim at pointers or Platonic and Maimonidean "flashes." Concluding, I shall say in what way Proclean Neoplatonism gives an absolute ground to individuality and invite you to consider how this may affect the development of the doctrine of providence.

### **Turning Evil to Good**

No topic displays better both the continuity and the difference within the line of thinkers at whom we are looking than the question of evil. Justifying evil is essential to Plotinus' late great treatise on providence. Turning evil to good is

the work of providence: “those who make the demand to abolish evil in the All are abolishing providence itself. For what would it be providence of?”<sup>23</sup> His “perplexity about how [injustices] can happen if there is providence,”<sup>24</sup> so that the good are afflicted with evil and the wicked receive good things, will reoccur with all our thinkers. Raising the question as to whether this is because “providence does not reach as far as the earth,”<sup>25</sup> and answering that “this order extends to everything, even to the smallest,”<sup>26</sup> is characteristic of Neoplatonists. For them, without deliberation, this order binds into one necessities, free choices, and chance. Extending to all the figures we are considering are the arguments of Plotinus: 1) that evil does not abolish the fundamental fact that the whole seeks the good, 2) that its elements seek and attain it in different ways, 3) that evil serves the good both in nature and in human lives, 4) that mutually and self-destructive conflict belongs to the character of the divided but they are held together and the conflict guided toward good by the priority of unity, 5) that neither the good nor providence are responsible for evil, 6) that to see everything as oriented to human happiness stems from a mistake in perspective because the human is neither naturally the best thing in the universe nor the end of all things,<sup>27</sup> 7) that we are mostly to blame for the evil which befalls us, and 8) that when we act virtuously, not by, but “according to providence,”<sup>28</sup> we are drawn towards our proper end.

What will not be repeated from Plotinus, except, at least in part, with Maimonides,<sup>29</sup> is his making matter evil and the cause of evil.<sup>30</sup> Such a position is impossible for Iamblichus whose material theurgies are ways the gods who contain matter cooperate with humans as embodied souls in order to draw us to their life; his religion and his metaphysics are in perfect harmony.<sup>31</sup> He and Proclus take up the Aristotelian enterprise of overcoming the

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<sup>23</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.3. [48], 7, ll. 5–7, trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library 442 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). Generally I follow Armstrong’s translations, modifying silently.

<sup>24</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.2. [47], 6, ll. 17–18.

<sup>25</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.2. [47], 8, l. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.2. [47], 13, ll. 18–20.

<sup>27</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.2. [47], 9, ll. 20–21; Maimonides, *Guide* III.13.

<sup>28</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.3. [48], 5, l. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Maimonides, *Guide* III.9. There are very remarkable similarities between the doctrines of Plotinus and Maimonides; mapping them and explaining how they came to be would be very useful.

<sup>30</sup> Only hinted at in Plotinus, *Enn.* III.2. [47], 2, ll. 39–40, but maintained clearly in *Enn.* I.8 [51].

<sup>31</sup> Iamblichus does not consider the nature of evil in his short letters on fate and providence but in the letter “To Macedonius, On Fate” he asks: “Why, then, are deserts apportioned undeservedly?” (Fr. 6), see Iamblichus of Chalcis, *The Letters*, trans. with an Introduction and Notes by John M. Dillon and Wolfgang Polleich-

dualism Plotinus inherits from Plato. The *De malorum subsistentia* of Proclus is explicitly and substantially directed not only against the Plotinian positions that matter is the origin of evil and is evil itself, but also against everything which would give evil substantiality. Indeed, for Proclus, matter is directly caused by the Good. It is not evil, and, as the means of the complete explication of the Good, is, at least indirectly, good.<sup>32</sup> In consequence, the Good can have no contrary and evil no single cause. For Proclus and Dionysius in his wake, even Aristotle's identification of evil with privation is deemed dangerous.<sup>33</sup> We are warned against giving evil strength by magnifying its reality. Evil comes from particular weaknesses, is parasitic on good, and can only get such power as it has from the good.

This doctrine, not that of Plotinus, "became authoritative in the School and is most representative of the Neoplatonic doctrine of evil."<sup>34</sup> Both Books III and IV of the *Consolation* deal with the nature of evil, which, starting from the perspective of the divine simplicity, goodness, and being, is "nothing."<sup>35</sup> Doing evil makes humans powerless and drags them down towards non-being and "the divine nature is such that to it even evils are good, since by a suitable use of them God draws out as a result some good."<sup>36</sup> Thus ill fortune is better than good.<sup>37</sup> Dionysius reproduces great parts of the *De malorum subsistentia* more or less literally.<sup>38</sup> Aquinas derives his Proclean doc-

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ter, *Writings from the Greco-Roman World* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 27. Proclus does not reproduce the arguments of *De malorum subsistentia* in its sister *De providentia*, but, he does answer the question "Why do the good people fare badly, failing to achieve the goals they have set, whereas the bad achieve what they desire" (§53, Steel translation, 66).

<sup>32</sup> For summaries, see Steel, *On the Existence of Evils*, 50–51, note 62; §32, 81; 121, notes 250 & 251; and Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 53–59.

<sup>33</sup> See Steel, *On the Existence of Evils*, 19, 50, §7, 63; §32, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Steel on Proclus, *On the Existence of Evils*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* III.12: "*Malum igitur nihil est.*"

<sup>36</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* IV.6. I generally follow the Loeb Boethius, new edition, 1973.

<sup>37</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* II.8.

<sup>38</sup> Steel both in *On the Existence of Evils*, 4–5 and in C. G. Steel, "Proclus et Denys: l'existence du mal," in *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident, Actes du Colloque International Paris, 21–24 septembre 1994*, éd. Ysabel de Andia, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 151 (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), 89–116 judges that the Dionysian rendition is mediocre and filled with startling misunderstandings. For a contrary approach to the relation of Proclus and Dionysius, see Christian Schäfer, "The Anonymous Naming of Names: Pseudonymity and Philosophical Program in Dionysius the Areopagite," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82 (2008): 561–580.

trine of evil, reiterated in the Book III of the *Contra Gentiles*, from Dionysius. The Areopagite is mingled with Aristotle who is forced into agreement with him. Thus Aquinas concludes that good is the cause of evil; because the privation which constitutes it is in a subject which is good, evil is based (*fundatur*) on the good, and can only be an accidental cause. There is no highest evil which is the cause of evils.<sup>39</sup>

### Providence and Fate

Everyone is willing to denounce Democritus and the Epicureans, because their materialist determinism destroys providence.<sup>40</sup> The Stoics get a more respectful treatment both because refuting them takes much more work and because their fundamental positions are preserved in several ways, not least both in the retention of fate and in the unperturbedness of the wise—even if their critics argue that these cannot be asserted without contradiction. The Peripatetics similarly receive a mixed treatment. Finally the Platonists judge them inadequate on the care of providence for individuals; but, on its mode of operation and on the fact of human and divine freedom from fate, they are essential.

From Plotinus' early treatise "On Destiny" forward, a general pattern emerges. The views of the Epicureans, Stoics and astrological determinists are refuted with the aid of arguments from Alexander of Aphrodisias. This debt to the Peripatetics for their defence of human choice is repaid by accepting their position as a limited truth within a wider and deeply better Platonic framework. Feeling required to deal with questions about fate and providence which Aristotle did not treat, Alexander had left philosophy with hard problems. In order to save human freedom, the contingency of human choices must be maintained, but then, because the form of the object forms the knowing mind, his gods must know the contingent contingently.<sup>41</sup> This would seem to prevent the gods from retaining their characteristics of perfection and foreknowledge. Another doctrine of Aristotle prevents finding a solution to this problem among the Peripatetics: the infinite is measureless both in itself and by the gods (Alexander, *De Fato* XXX). So eternity is endless succession. However, except in the case of Maimonides, and with Aquinas when he is commenting on Dionysius, explicit criticism of the Peripatetics on providence is either indirect and reluctant or confused.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Aquinas, *ScG* III.10–15.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Aquinas, *STI*.22.2 corp. and *ad* 3.

<sup>41</sup> See Sharples' commentary on *De Fato* XXX at 165.

<sup>42</sup> At Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, ed. M. R. Cathala and R.M. Spiazzi (Turin / Rome: Marietti, 1964), 6.3 §§1202–1222, pp. 306–

Proclus' sights are trained on Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Peripatetics when, as part of his endeavour to defend both universal divine *pronoia* and human freedom, Proclus criticises those who hold that: "it is not true that god knows all things in a determinate manner." Instead, "they declare that god himself is undetermined regarding things that happen in an indeterminate way, so that they may preserve what is contingent."<sup>43</sup> Steel judges, however, that the (correct) identification of this position as Peripatetic in the *De Providentia* is a gloss which has been taken into the text.<sup>44</sup> Maimonides is comparatively well informed among mediaevals, perhaps in part because Alexander of Aphrodisias' treatise *On Providence* survived only in an Arabic translation. In any case, Vernon Bourke judges that Maimonides is the source for Aquinas' report of the error that providence does not extend to corruptible things.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, however, Thomas does not identify this position as Peripatetic. Ironically, both in the *Contra Gentiles* and in the *Summa theologiae*, he attributes the error to the Platonists, as reported by "Gregorius Nyssenus." In fact, what he quotes is by a 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop, Nemesius of Emesa. Thus, for Aquinas, what Maimonides knew to be the Peripatetic position, is called "the opinion of Plato." This opinion is spelled out as a three-fold providence. The first of the three is "that of the highest God who cares first and principally for spiritual things and then for the whole world through genera, species, and universal causes. The second is providence for individual things which come to be and pass away, and this care he [Plato] attributes to gods who circle the heavens, i.e. the separate substances who move the heavenly bodies in their cycles."<sup>46</sup>

Aquinas gets the history more nearly correct in his *Exposition of the Divine Names*, which he probably composed during the same period when he was working on the *Summa theologiae*.<sup>47</sup> There, when commenting on Dionysius' comparison between praying and those in a boat who are pulling them-

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308, and 11.8 §2282, pp. 540–541, Aquinas works against extending an argument of Aristotle in respect to the accidental which "might seem to remove something which some posit on philosophical grounds, namely, fate and philosophy" (§1203). Certainly, Aristotle's argument will be used in that way—so, for example, it appears in *Cons.* V with that import—but Aquinas does not think it need have that force (§1203) and Aristotle himself does not ascribe this to it.

<sup>43</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §63, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.*, §90, note 277.

<sup>45</sup> Aquinas, *ScG* III.71.11, trans. Bourke, 241.

<sup>46</sup> Aquinas, *ST.I.22.3*; see *ScG* III, 76.1, and *De substantiis separatis*, cap. 3, where Plato and Aristotle are brought into accord.

<sup>47</sup> On the dates, I follow Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Volume 1, The Person and His Work*, revised edition, translated by Robert Royal (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

selves by a cable towards a rock, he considers the relation between providence and prayer. This interconnection preoccupied Neoplatonists, pagan and Christian, for reasons which will become more and more evident in this paper. Thomas sketches five positions: 1) "those who totally destroyed the providence of God, making all things happen by chance, this was the opinion of the Epicureans," 2) "those who posited the providence of God in respect to incorporeal things and universals, but subtracted divine providence from human affairs, and this was the opinion of some Peripatetics," 3) the opinion of the Stoics, extending divine providence to everything, but making everything happen by necessity, so that all is fated, 4) the opinion of "some Egyptians" which made the providence of God mutable, 5) "the opinion of some Platonists who said that divine providence is immutable but that under it is contained some things which are mutual and contingent events." Here Aquinas judges that only the Platonic position is correct in respect to both prayer and the nature of God. Providence is an immobile chain present everywhere in heaven and on earth enabling us, by prayer, to draw our mutable existence into the divine immutability.<sup>48</sup>

In the *De substantiis separatis*, despite his often mistaken historical judgments, Aquinas sides with the Platonists on providence, and not only makes Aristotle's teaching fit within their doctrine and uses a Neoplatonic solution to the Aristotelian problem with the knowledge of particulars, but also interprets Aristotle through Neoplatonic formulae so as to save him from the conclusions of the Peripatetics. The complexities of his procedure and of how he came to his understanding of the positions of Plato and Aristotle are beyond the scope of this paper. However, his adoption of Neoplatonic concordantist strategies and formulae at the end of his teaching both shows the direction his thought took and confirms my thesis about the tradition in which his doctrine of providence stands.

The distinction between a higher providence and lower fate, nature, or government is inherited by Plotinus from Middle Platonists,<sup>49</sup> and functions in the teaching of all our thinkers except for Maimonides, for whom it cannot work in the same way as the rest because he does not accept a universal providence caring for the *μικρότατον*,<sup>50</sup> *minima*, the details. As to the lesser things, he writes:

But regarding all other animals and, all the more the plants and other things, my opinion is that of Aristotle. For I do not by any means believe that ... the spittle spat by Zayd has moved till it

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<sup>48</sup> Aquinas, *In De divinis nominibus*, cap. 3, p. 75, §§240-243; Eric Perl kindly drew this passage to my attention.

<sup>49</sup> See note by A.H. Armstrong at *Enn.* III.3. [48], 5 (Loeb Plotinus III, 129).

<sup>50</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.2. [47], 13, l. 20.

came down in one particular place upon a gnat and killed it by a divine decree and judgment.<sup>51</sup>

Nonetheless, there is a substantial continuity. Aristotle proposes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the gods take pleasure in intellectual activity and that they favour those humans who most exercise it (Aristotle, *Nico.Eth.* X.viii 1179a28ff.). Alexander has his own version of the freedom of the Stoic wise man; the choice of the good is always open and virtue, which includes prayer, gives freedom from fate which is subordinate to divine providence.<sup>52</sup> The Neoplatonists once again have their own version of these, although freedom is not choice and is dependent on divine grace. The turn of the pious and wise from imagination to the intellectual overflow against the necessities of the corporeal world is given in the *Guide* an effect comparable to the turn from fate among the Neoplatonists.<sup>53</sup> Maimonides writes:

The providence of God, may he be exalted, is constantly watching over those who have obtained this overflow [of the divine intellect] which is permitted to everyone who makes efforts with a view to obtaining it. If a man's thought is free from distraction, if he apprehends Him, may he be exalted, in the right way and rejoices in what he apprehends, that individual can never be afflicted with evil of any kind. For he is with God and God is with him.<sup>54</sup>

A qualification will also have to be made for Aquinas, with him "government" plays the role formerly given to "fate."

In Plotinus, the distinction is given its basic form, the difference between the order as one in the divine mind and as diverse in the multiplicity of things. Plotinus writes:

One thing results from all, and there is one providence; but it is fate beginning from the lower level; the upper is providence alone. For in the intelligible world all things are rational principle and above rational principle; for all are intellect and pure soul.<sup>55</sup>

Iamblichus has a gift for formula. Here he subordinates fate to providence in a way which will endure:

<sup>51</sup> Maimonides, *Guide* III.17, Pines 471.

<sup>52</sup> See Alexander, *De Fato*, XXVII–XXIX, idem, *De Anima libri mantissa* XXIII & XXV (also published in *On Fate* [Sharples] and idem, *Quaestio* 1.4, II in *Quaestiones* [Sharples]).

<sup>53</sup> Maimonides, *Guide* III.22.

<sup>54</sup> Maimonides, *Guide* III.51, Pines 625.

<sup>55</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.3. [48], 5, ll.15–17.

[T]o speak generally, the movements of destiny around the cosmos are assimilated to the immaterial and intellectual activities and circuits, and its order is assimilated to the good order of the intelligible and transcendent realm. And the secondary causes are dependent on the primary causes, and the multiplicity attendant upon generation on the undivided substance, and the whole sum of things subject to Fate is thus connected to the dominance of Providence. In its very substance, then, Fate is enmeshed with Providence, and Fate exists by virtue of the existence of Providence, and it derives its existence from it and within its ambit.<sup>56</sup>

In the distinction within the order, fate is on the side of movement, multiplicity, and the corporeal.

Proclus proceeds in the same way. Providence and fate are both causes of the world and of the things that take place in the world. However, providence precedes fate, and everything that comes about according to fate comes about far more according to providence. The converse, however, is not true ... [M]any things escape fate, but nothing providence.<sup>57</sup>

He gives the doctrine an anagogic character:

Events that fall under fate also fall under providence: they have their interconnection from fate, but their orientation to the good from providence. Thus, the connection will have the good as its end and providence will order fate.<sup>58</sup>

Providence rules the intelligible and the sensible realms, fate the sensible. Thus,

Providence is to be distinguished from fate as god differs from what is divine, [i.e.] divine by participation and not primarily .... Providence is *per se* god, whereas fate is something divine, but not god.<sup>59</sup>

This anticipates the lapidary formula with which Eriugena closed his *De predestinatione dei*: "The predestination of god is god."<sup>60</sup> He was led to this statement, gravely troubling to those for whom he wrote the treatise, by reflecting on Augustine through the logic of Boethius' *Consolation*. Boethius helped Dionysius make Eriugena into a Proclean Christian.

<sup>56</sup> Iamblichus, *To Macedonius, On Fate*, Fr. 4, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §3, 42.

<sup>58</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §13, 47.

<sup>59</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §14, 48.

<sup>60</sup> Eriugena, *De Praed.* E.3.

Boethius produces the doctrine of Iamblichus and Proclus, often in the same words and with images and ratios to help our understanding. Crucially for those who think, as she does, by the law that a thing is known according to the mode of the knower (all our figures, except Plotinus and Maimonides, explicitly attach themselves to this law), Lady Philosophy describes the distinction between providence and fate primarily as a matter of perspective:

The generation of all things, the whole production of all changing natures, whatever is moved in any way, receive their causes, their order, and their forms because they are allotted to them from out of the stability of the divine mind. In the high citadel of its simplicity, the unchanging mind of God establishes a plan for the multitude of things. When this plan is thought in terms of the purity of God's own understanding, it is called Providence. When this same plan is thought of in terms of the manifold different movements which are the life of individual things, it is called Fate by the ancients.<sup>61</sup>

She goes on:

It will easily be understood that Providence or Fate are two very different ways of looking at things if we consider what distinct force our vision gives each of them. For Providence is the very divine reason itself in the highest principle of all, disposing everything, but fate is a disposition inherent in movable things, through which providence binds all things together, each in its own proper ordering.<sup>62</sup>

When we look at reality in terms of Providence, we see what embraces all things, all at once, however different each thing may be, however varied and even opposed their motions. Simultaneity and immediacy are the modes of Providence which always works in the same way, giving itself as completely to each creature as each one is able and willing to receive infinite goodness.<sup>63</sup> When, in contrast, we look at reality in terms of Fate or Fortune, we see a series of different, but interconnected, motions. These constitute each of the individuals of the universe assigned as they are to their own appropriate places and times. Dispersion and difference are the modes of Fate.

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<sup>61</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*; on fate as the immanent order see also Iamblichus, *To Sopater, On Fate*, Fr. 1.

<sup>63</sup> See Dionysius, *The Divine Names* IV.5, and, on the same in Plotinus, Eric Perl, "The Power of All Things: The One as Pure Giving in Plotinus," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71:3 (1997): 301–313.

Lady Philosophy explains this with words she has taken from Iamblichus and Proclus:

Providence and Fate are different, but the one hangs upon the other .... Things which God constructs by his Providence are worked out by Fate in many ways and in time. By whatever means Fate operates, either by certain divine spirits who are servants of Providence, or whether its course is woven together by soul, the whole of nature, the celestial motions of the stars, by angelic power or the diverse skills of daemons, one thing is certain, namely that Providence is the unchangeable simple form of all creation, while Fate is the movable interlacing and temporal ordering of the activities which the divine simplicity has placed in being. Everything which is subject to Fate is also subject to Providence, to which Fate is itself subject. But there are things which, though beneath Providence, are above the chain of Fate. These are things which rise above the course of the movement of Fate in virtue of the stability of their position fixed nearest God.<sup>64</sup>

The practical, one might say the saving, use of this distinction, comes out in the last point and we shall return to it later.

In the *Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas quotes Boethius and explains the text:

Boethius says: "Fate is a disposition inherent in movable things, through which providence binds all things together, each in its own proper ordering." In this description of fate "disposition" is put for "ordering," while the phrase "inherent in things" is used to distinguish fate from providence; for the ordering as it is in the divine mind, not yet impressed on things, is "providence"; but inasmuch as it is already unfolded in creatures, it is called "fate." He says "in moveable things" to show that the order of providence does not take away from things their contingency and mutability. In this understanding, to deny fate is to deny divine providence. But, because with unbelievers we ought not even to have names in common, lest from agreement in terminology there be taken an occasion of error, the faithful should not use the name of "fate," not to appear to fall in with those who construe fate wrongly, subjecting all things to the necessity imposed by the stars.<sup>65</sup>

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas quotes Boethius on providence ("the very divine reason itself in the highest principle of all, disposing everything"), a definition immediately preceding the definition of fate he had

<sup>64</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi.

<sup>65</sup> Aquinas, *ScG* III.93.5–6.

quoted a decade earlier in the *Contra Gentiles*.<sup>66</sup> Thomas distinguishes this *ratio* in the divine mind from its working in the things ordered without giving the reason inherent in things a proper name. However, Aquinas subsequently distinguishes “government” as temporal from providence as eternal; government is “disposition and execution.”<sup>67</sup> Differentiating government allows the use of intermediaries and “communicating to creatures the dignity of causing.”<sup>68</sup> At the end of the question on providence, Aquinas rearranges the words of the *Consolation* to give this description of fate in an objection: “it comes forth from the utterances of unmovable providence to bind together human actions and fortunes in an unbreakable chain of causes.” In the reply to the objection, he takes no umbrage at the term “fate” and approves the doctrine because the necessity involved belongs to the “certainty” of providence, not to the mode of the effects themselves, which, when appropriate, retain their contingency.<sup>69</sup> Divine providence also produces necessary things, working Neoplatonically, in the words of Aquinas, “to bring forth every grade of things.”<sup>70</sup>

Neither when quoting Boethius, for whom the ingenuity of daemons plays a role, nor when considering the crucial work of angels in Divine providence or government, does Aquinas give daemons a positive operation. In this he separates himself from the tradition beginning at least with Iamblichus for whom: “when it is natural forces that are the causes, it is a daemon (sc. that presides).”<sup>71</sup> Proclus elaborates their role in the fourth of the *Ten Problems concerning Providence*.<sup>72</sup> There they are among intermediary beings working to establish contact between providence and unstable things. This is not because Aquinas disputes their existence; indeed, he sides on that with Augustine and the Platonists against the Peripatetic followers of Aristotle.<sup>73</sup>

Aquinas is compelled to this deprivation of the daemons because, among Christians, they have become malicious.<sup>74</sup> There is, nonetheless, a loss. While Aquinas makes the fundamental distinctions required for the difference between fate and providence discerned by his predecessors, in the move

<sup>66</sup> Aquinas, *ST I.22.1 corpus*.

<sup>67</sup> Aquinas, *ST I.22.1 ad 2*.

<sup>68</sup> Aquinas, *ST I.22.3 corpus*.

<sup>69</sup> Aquinas, *ST I.22.4 obj 3* and *ad 3*.

<sup>70</sup> Aquinas, *ST I.22.4 corpus*.

<sup>71</sup> Iamblichus, *To Macedonius, On Fate*, Fr. 5, 25.

<sup>72</sup> Proclus, *Dix problèmes concernant la providence*, ed. D. Isaac (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1977), IV.25.

<sup>73</sup> Aquinas, *De Malo* 16.1 resp. See also *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, ed. Fratrum Praedicatorum, Commissio Leonina: vol. 47, pars 1 and 2 (Rome 1969) ii, 4.7, p. 222, ll. 18–32, and *De substantiis separatis*, cap. 1 and cap. 2.

<sup>74</sup> Aquinas, *ScG III.105–110*.

from fate to government, there is a slippage in the direction of immediate divine causation of everything. Thomas Gilby's learned and extraordinarily compact summary of the debate *de Auxiliis* arising out of Thomas' endeavour to hold the necessity in providence apart from the freedom in the things brings out how positions comparable to those of Calvinists developed in the modern Thomist schools.<sup>75</sup> If there be no daemonic realm of fate, despite other intermediaries, a step has been made towards seeing God as immediate cause of everything.

### Beings as End-seeking Activities

Charles Taylor's massive *A Secular Age* argues that part of the impetus within the Christian West to atheistic humanism as the default position is a moral reaction against what he calls the hyper Augustinian early modern notion of providence or predestination as a static divine plan predetermining everything. Subsequently, according to Taylor's account, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, belief in providence became faith that the circumstances and connections of human life were arranged for human flourishing. By the operation of what some imaged as the "invisible hand" of providence, even when seeking our self-interest, indeed, especially when seeking our self-interest, all things would work out for the best.<sup>76</sup> The old virtues of self-denial taught by the saints and philosophers must be rejected. When worldly goods are pursued with rational self-interest, because "private vices conduce to public benefit,"<sup>77</sup> what was once the kingdom of heaven would now be enjoyed in everyday existence.<sup>78</sup> These two modern developments are excluded within the tradition we are exploring. This is because Platonic providence operates in beings as inherently teleological motions. Aquinas designated the subject of the third Book of the *Contra Gentiles* as "the ordering of creatures into God himself as into an end" and a great part of its work is showing 1) that beings are universally end seeking, 2) how this belongs to them differently in accord with the diverse modes of their being, 3) how God is the end for all of them,

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<sup>75</sup> See note f in St Thomas Aquinas, *God's Will and Providence (Ia. 19–26)*, *Summa Theologiae, Volume 5*, ed. and trans. Thomas Gilby (London / New York: Blackfriars, 1967), 104–5.

<sup>76</sup> C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 177: "The crucial thing in the new conception is that our purposes mesh, however divergent they may be in the conscious awareness of each of us."

<sup>77</sup> C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 229.

<sup>78</sup> C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 181: true self-love and social obligations are the same, so we come "to see our society as an 'economy.'"

and 4) how diversely he is the perfection each of them seeks.<sup>79</sup> The argument shows how completely Neoplatonism not only took Aristotle into itself but also surpassed his own characteristic teachings, as, for example, when Plotinus maintained that everything either is contemplation or springs from it.<sup>80</sup> Exhibiting providence as the teleological life of moving things requires that each kind has a place in the universe and that it plays out the role given it according to its own proper mode. Humans are rational. This is why their well-being cannot be achieved apart from knowledge, free acts of the will, and virtue. Providence cannot function for human well-being as an invisible hand operating through our selfish enslavement to *Fortuna*.

The most influential Latin depiction of the essentials of the Neoplatonic doctrine of providence occurs in Book IV of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, in the very chapter of that book from which Aquinas quoted. I shall use it to provide the means of rounding out our treatment and enabling us to reach our concluding reflections. To assist our gaining freedom from the merciless turning of the wheel of fate or fortune, Lady Philosophy draws a picture:

Imagine a set of concentric circles. The inmost one comes closest to the simplicity of the centre, while forming itself a kind of centre around which revolve those which are set outside it. The circle furthest out rotates through a wider orbit. The greater distance a circle is from the indivisible centre point, the greater the space its motion spreads through.<sup>81</sup>

The greater the distance from the centre, the greater is the speed of the change which belongs to the life of a circle. What is caught in the furthest-most circles is subjected to rapid change. In contrast, anything which joins itself to the centre is pulled into its peace and stability.

Having drawn this picture of four moving circles with a common centre, Philosophy reveals that the fixed centre and the rotating circles are images for kinds of life, four kinds of apprehension. The centre corresponds to the vision of God, the seeing by which he intuits everything he makes in one simple view. Thus, the centre is providence. The first moving circle is the activity of the angels and the governing cosmic causes. With their immediate closeness to God, they know and operate by the power of their vision and of his creativity. Below them are the circles formed by soul. The first of these is the human circle constructed by the movement of our changing reasonings and our consequent choices. We make our world by dealing with one thing after another and putting things together, by connecting things into an order

<sup>79</sup> See Aquinas, *ScG* III.16–24.

<sup>80</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.8 [30] and Perl, “Every Life is a Thought.”

<sup>81</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi.

as best we can. Every one of our thinkers expends great effort maintaining that this is the sphere of the (limited) freedom of choice. Outside our proper human circle are the spheres of imagination and of sense which produce animal and plant life. Because humans are partly eating, growing, reproducing bodies, and partly animals who move from place to place interacting with one another, humans are caught up in the movement of the outmost circles. However, because a share of the angelic knowledge, and of God's own creative vision overflows to them, they are also connected to the inmost circle and the stable centre. That humans are in between in this way and can move either towards providence or towards "what the ancients called fate," is an essential of the common doctrine.<sup>82</sup>

When we choose what we make our primary business and on what we fix our love, we come to be moved by it. When we turn to what is below or outside, we become subject to its motion and are enchained by Fortune. So Lady Philosophy tells the prisoner:

That which goes farther from the first knowing becomes enmeshed in ever stronger chains of Fate, and everything is freer from Fate the closer it seeks the centre of all. And if it cleaves to the steadfast mind of God, it is free from movement and so escapes the necessity imposed by Fortune. The relationship between the ever-changing course of Fate and the stable simplicity of Providence corresponds to the relation between human reasoning and divine understanding, between that which is coming into being and that which is, between time and eternity, between the moving circle and the still point in the centre.<sup>83</sup>

### Human Freedom and Divine Help

Whether, as for our thinkers except Maimonides, providence extends to all individuals, not only human ones, or whether they exalt the relative dignity of the human in the cosmos or keep it firmly subordinate to the separate intellects (Aquinas is on one side of the scale in this regard and Plotinus and Maimonides are on the other),<sup>84</sup> the human is crucial to the consideration of providence. The *Consolation* marks itself as a treatise on providence (as well as other things) not only by its last two Books explicitly devoted to the

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<sup>82</sup> See for example Plotinus, *Enn.* III.22. [47], 8 & 9; Iamblichus, *To Macedonius, On Fate*, Fr. 4, Proclus, *De Pron.* 20, 44, & 60; Maimonides, *Guide* III.12.

<sup>83</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi.

<sup>84</sup> See Plotinus, *Enn.* III.22. [47], 8 & 9; Maimonides, *Guide* III.12; Aquinas, *S&G* III.21.8, III.9&10.

subject, but also by its beginning with the prisoner's complaint that, although "all other things are governed by reason," "only humans are outside God's care."<sup>85</sup> As parts of their consideration of providence, all our thinkers labour to show that injustice in human affairs does not exclude its rule and that, because we have rational souls, we are in some degree free.<sup>86</sup> As Iamblichus puts it: "the origin of action in us is both independent of Nature and emancipated from the movement of the universe."<sup>87</sup> Proclus continues in the same vein, we must not

deprive the soul of the power of choice, since it has its very being precisely in this, in choosing, avoiding this, running after that, even though, as regards events, our choice is not master of the universe.<sup>88</sup>

So Aquinas speaks for all when, in introducing the question on providence in the *Summa theologiae*, he says that "it cares for all things but especially the ordering of humans to eternal salvation."<sup>89</sup>

Our theologians all look to the gods for help in attaining an end beyond human means, but equally all require humans to do their utmost by the acquisition of virtues. So Plotinus writes:

The divine has come to something other than itself, not to destroy the other but, when a man, for instance, comes to it, it stands over him and sees that he is a man, that is, that he lives by the law of providence, which means doing everything its law says.<sup>90</sup>

How the divine can help us, maintain our freedom, and the order of the universe is mysterious. Iamblichus writes to Poemenius:

The gods, in upholding fate, direct its operation throughout the universe; and this sound direction of theirs brings about sometimes a lessening of evils, sometimes a mitigation of their effects, on occasion even their removal. On this principle, then, Fate is disposed to the benefit of the good, but in this disposing does not reveal itself fully to the disorderly nature of the realm of generation .... This being the case, both the goodness of providence and the freedom of choice of the soul, and all the best elements

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<sup>85</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* I.vi.

<sup>86</sup> See Plotinus, *Enn.* III.23. [48], 2–4; Proclus, *De Prov.* §§57–61; Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi.

<sup>87</sup> Iamblichus, *To Macedonius, On Fate*, Fr. 4, 23–25; for injustice in human life see Fr. 6.

<sup>88</sup> Proclus, *De Prov.* §36, 58.

<sup>89</sup> Aquinas, *ST I.* prologue to QQ. 22–24.

<sup>90</sup> See *Enn.* Plotinus, III.22. [47], 9, ll. 5–9.

of reality are vindicated, kept in being together by the will of the gods.<sup>91</sup>

He is following the teaching of Plotinus here and his doctrine will be picked up by Proclus and Boethius.<sup>92</sup> Boethius intellectualised providence and, though prayer is the centre of the *Consolatio* structurally and thematically, his is a *religio mentis*. Proclus follows Iamblichus both when insisting on our need for what is *exotben* and in the modes of its operation. Having explained that choice is proper to humans, that by it they follow appearances and can do evil, Proclus asserts that they can come also to be governed by will. It is unwaveringly directed to the rational good and is the proper possession of divine beings. Proclus tells us that the willed life depends in us on help from above:

For a willed life is in accordance with the good and it makes what depends on us extremely powerful and it is really godlike: thanks to this life the soul becomes god and governs the whole world, as Plato says.<sup>93</sup>

### Prayer

This need for divine help has brought us to prayer which our authors treat as part of the consideration of providence, both because it is necessary to our being governed by it and because it would be useless if providence were to destroy human freedom. The prisoner in the *Consolation* gives a terrible picture of the consequence of determinism:

The sole intercourse between men and God would be removed ... the only way they can be joined to inaccessible light before they attain what they seek ... Human kind, torn apart and disjoined, would in pieces fall from their origin.<sup>94</sup>

In order to save free will, prayer, and hope, Boethius resorts to the formula that a thing is known according to the mode of the knower. Ammonius, his younger pagan contemporary, used it for the same purpose and ascribed it to *divus Iamblichus*. Aquinas might have seen the formula in his *De Interpretatione*.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Iamblichus, *To Poemenius, On Providence (?)*, Fr. 1, 33. For the mysterious character of this aid see also Proclus, *De Pron.* §§64–65; Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi, ll. 196–200, quoting Homer; and Maimonides, *Guide* III.23, quoting Job.

<sup>92</sup> See Plotinus, *Enn.* III.23. [48], 2–4; and Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi.

<sup>93</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §60, 69.

<sup>94</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* V.iii.

<sup>95</sup> Ammonius, *De Interpretatione* 136.14ff; for the use by Aquinas, see *Commentaire sur le Peri Hermeneias d'Aristote. Traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke, édition critique*

Its roots are earlier in Porphyry's *Sentences*, but Porphyry does not use it as Proclus does, rather he sides with Alexander and the Peripatetics in requiring that god knows things as they are; e.g., indeterminate things indeterminate-ly.<sup>96</sup> Proclus employed it in the *De Providentia* not specifically to enable prayer but to produce exactly the argument Boethius will use (and Aquinas will also need) that the divine knowing neither confers its character on what it knows nor acquires its character from the mode of what it knows. So, after giving the law, Proclus states what the theologians we are considering agree against Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Peripatetics:

Since the gods are superior to all things, they anticipate all things in a superior way, that is, in the manner of their own existence: in a timeless way what exists according to time, ... in an incorporeal way the bodies, in a determinate way what is indeterminate, in a stable way what is unstable, and in an ungenerated way what is generated.<sup>97</sup>

Aquinas has the law and the doctrines which follow from it through Boethius, Dionysius and the *Liber de causis* and employed it to the same end as Proclus had.<sup>98</sup> Through it Boethius can conclude the *Consolation* with this affirmation and exhortation:

Hope and prayers are not placed in God in vain; if they are of the right kind, they must be efficacious .... Lift up your mind to the right hopes, and put forth humble prayers on high.<sup>99</sup>

### The End of Providence, Likeness to God

For Boethius, as for his predecessors and successors in the tradition to which he belongs, prayer is a colloquy between God and humans in virtue of our humility and God's grace.<sup>100</sup> This reminds us of the whole purpose of God's providential care for human individuals. All its means in respect to humans have as their end the drawing of individuals into likeness to God, a deformity or union in which the elevated human self, the state to be achieved, and

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et étude sur l'utilisation du Commentaire dans l'oeuvre de saint Thomas par G. Verbeke, *Corpus Latinum Commentariorum in Aristotelem Graecorum 2* (Louvain/Paris, 1961), cap. 9, 258.

<sup>96</sup> Porphyry, *Sententiae ad Intelligibilia Ducentes*, ed E. Lamberz (Leipzig: Teubner, 1975), c. 10; and Steel's introduction to the Proclus, *De Pron.* 24–25.

<sup>97</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §64, 71; see also *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 124.

<sup>98</sup> For more see my "Aquinas and the Platonists," 320–324.

<sup>99</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* V.vi.

<sup>100</sup> Boethius, *Cons.* V.iii.

God are understood in somewhat different ways by each of our authors. To work through the possibilities is beyond us here but crucial is whether God's providence, as both the end and means, is understood as in Boethius, Maimonides, and Aquinas or as in Proclus. Plotinus seems to be in between, and Iamblichus is on the way to Proclus.

For Boethius, Maimonides, and Aquinas, providence is the activity of God's intellect and will understood as identical with his being. Of this triad Maimonides has the most severe negative theology, so that will and wisdom cannot be divine attributes; nonetheless, the union is intellectual, in virtue of the divine intellectual overflow, and begins in this present life.<sup>101</sup> He writes:

I do not believe that anything is hidden from Him [God], may He be exalted, nor do I attribute to Him a lack of power. But I believe that providence is consequent upon the intellect and attached to it. For providence can only come from an intelligent being, from One who is an intellect perfect with a supreme perfection, than which there is no higher. [Out of its superabundant perfection this intellect overflows without any diminution of itself]. Accordingly everyone with whom something of the intellectual overflow is united will be reached by providence to the extent to which he is reached by the intellect.<sup>102</sup>

He continues in the next chapter quoting scripture and concludes that the texts in Scripture are too many to count expressing "the notion of providence watching over human individuals according to the measure of their perfection and excellence. The philosophers too mention this notion."<sup>103</sup> Philosophers, here, as usual, are the Peripatetics, certainly including al-Farabi. While not reducible to any of those described by Aquinas in his criticism of the Peripatetic position that humans gain felicity by acquiring the separate agent intellect as habit of knowing in this life,<sup>104</sup> Maimonides seems closest to the position Aquinas attributed to Averroes.<sup>105</sup>

Boethius, too, says little about another life but concludes with a contemplation of the simple intuition of God who unmovingly sees and governs the whole complexity of moving things. This is a return to the happy contemplation of the simple goodness of God accomplished in Book III

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<sup>101</sup> Maimonides, *Guide* III.51.

<sup>102</sup> Maimonides, *Guide* III.17, Pines 474.

<sup>103</sup> Maimonides, *Guide* III.18, Pines 476.

<sup>104</sup> Aquinas devotes four chapters of the *Contra Gentiles* (42–45) to describing and refuting the views of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Averroes, and other Peripatetics on knowledge of separate substances in this life.

<sup>105</sup> Aquinas, *ScG* III.41–45.

after Lady Philosophy prayed, a happiness from which the prisoner suffered a fall at the beginning of Book IV caused by the memory of his misery.<sup>106</sup> Aquinas' doctrines in opposition to Alexander, Averroes, and the Peripatetics generally,<sup>107</sup> that we cannot have in this life the felicity proper to humans by means of the knowledge of separate substances, but are summoned, by nature, and given, by grace, a knowledge of the essence of God as our happiness in the life to come, are both developed in Book III of the *Contra Gentiles*.<sup>108</sup>

For Plotinus, providence belongs to *Nous*, "all that comes from intellect is providence," but he also speaks of the gods, "the logos of providence is dear to the gods."<sup>109</sup> That towards which human individuals are drawn in the Platonic quest for conformity with god is both beyond *Nous* and beyond the virtues which life in accordance with providence requires. The human soul and the One belong together because he is the centre around which we turn. Although he does not reach out to us but we to him, because the One constitutes the unity and power by which we are, we are always with the Father, although we forget our presence to him.<sup>110</sup> In Plotinus' last description of illumination by the One,<sup>111</sup> he repeats a doctrine characteristic of his system and reiterated in the treatise on providence, when he tells us that the human self is double. One of our selves is reasoning, having knowledge according to soul: "Another one is up above this man. He knows himself according to Intellect because he has become that intellect; and by that Intellect he thinks himself again, not any longer as a man."<sup>112</sup> When we mount beyond Intellect to the One, the language is denuded of any rational self-elevation.<sup>113</sup> Then Plotinus speaks of belief in a way which suggests that it may have inspired Proclus' teaching on faith.<sup>114</sup> Plotinus says that there is a "sudden reception of a light" which compels the soul "to believe" that "it is from Him, it is Him." There is a breaking in; the illumination "comes." With this arrival

<sup>106</sup> See Boethius, *Cons.* V.vi with III.

<sup>107</sup> Aristotle's own teaching is distinguished from theirs by Thomas.

<sup>108</sup> Aquinas, *ScG* III.25–63.

<sup>109</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III.3. [48], 5, ll.17–24.

<sup>110</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.9. [9], 7–8.

<sup>111</sup> Ham in Plotin, *Traité 49 (V.3)*, Introduction, traduction, commentaire et notes par Bertrand Ham, Les Écrits de Plotin publiés dans l'ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 2000), 17.

<sup>112</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* V.3 [49], 4 ll. 8–12.

<sup>113</sup> See Ham's comments at Plotin, *Traité 49*, 274.

<sup>114</sup> Ph. Hoffmann, "La triade Chaldaïque ερος, αληθεια, πιστις de Proclus à Simplicius," in *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne. Actes du Colloque International de Louvain (13-16 mai 1998) en l'honneur de H. D. Saffrey et L. G. Westerink*, éd. A. P. Segonds et C. Steel, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy De Wulf-Mansion Centre Series I, XXVI (Leuven/ Paris: Leuven University Press/ Les Belles Lettres, 2000), 459–489 at 469.

of the “true end of the soul,” it “contemplates the light by which it sees,” but it is equally no longer operating by a power over which it has control.<sup>115</sup> Pierre Hadot writes of a kind of “explosion of the consciousness ... one has the impression of participating in another.”<sup>116</sup> Moreover, the coming is a gift not given to all.<sup>117</sup>

This kind of description moves Jean-Marc Narbonne to ask if, at the summit, there is: “an abandoning of the territory proper to philosophy.” After conceding that Platonism generally is “a combination of science and revelation,” he concludes that “the Neoplatonists conceive philosophy as a servant duty-bound in respect to a divine vision which, at one and the same time, summons all her efforts and yet does not entirely depend on her. Plotinus is very clear about this.”<sup>118</sup> Philosophy cannot give the end for which she prepares us: “Philosophy in Neoplatonism leads to her own proper self-suppression and must bow before a higher form of experience for which she prepares but for whose strangeness nothing can prepare her, because the One does not come in the way for which we await it.”<sup>119</sup>

Looked at against such a view of Plotinus, Iamblichus is both revolutionary and successor. He depicts the gods as upholding fate and disposing it “to the benefit of the good.”<sup>120</sup> The good and end of the soul “reposes in divine life,”<sup>121</sup> given both in intellectual contemplation and in a sharing of the life of the gods beyond that. We have a destiny in our own power: humans have “the inherent power to choose good and avoid the evil, the one not using this power is utterly unworthy of the privileges given him by nature ... We

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<sup>115</sup> Plotin, *Traité 49, V,3*, Introduction, traduction, commentaire et notes par Pierre Hadot, Les *Écrits de Plotin* publiés dans l'ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 2000), 17 and 29–38; *Enn. V.3*. [49], ll. 28-38.

<sup>116</sup> Hadot in Plotin, *Traité 49*, 48. See also his Plotin, *Traité 38: VI, 7*, Introduction, traduction, commentaire et notes par Pierre Hadot, Les *Écrits de Plotin* publiés dans l'ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 1988).

<sup>117</sup> Hadot in Plotin, *Traité 49*, 45.

<sup>118</sup> Jean-Marc Narbonne, “EPEKEINA THS GNWSEWS, le savoir d’au-delà à savoir chez Plotin et dans la tradition néoplatonicienne,” *Metaphysik und Religion: Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens. Akten des Internationalen Kongresses vom 13.-17. März 2001 in Würzburg*, Herausgegeben von Theo Kobusch und Michel Erler (München – Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2001), 477–490 at 487.

<sup>119</sup> Narbonne, “EPEKEINA,” 488; see J.-M. Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)*, L’âne d’or (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001), 274–275 and Giovanni Catapano, *Epékeina tés philosophias: L’eticità del filosofare in Plotino* (Padova: CLEUP, 1995).

<sup>120</sup> Iamblichus, *To Poemenius, On Providence (?)*, Fr. 1, 33.

<sup>121</sup> Iamblichus, *To Macedonius, On Fate*, Fr. 7, 27.

choose our own destiny and we are our own luck and *daimon*.”<sup>122</sup> Philosophy belongs to the human as human and brings us the pleasures of contemplation Aristotle described.<sup>123</sup> Beyond nature there is supernature,<sup>124</sup> and there is a “divine union and purification” which goes “beyond knowledge.”<sup>125</sup> The gods have bodies.<sup>126</sup> “The primary beings illuminate even the lowest levels, and the immaterial are present immaterially to the material ... earth also has received ... a share in divinity, such as is sufficient for it to be able to receive the gods.”<sup>127</sup> Thus the divine providence not only employs philosophy and its virtues but also supernatural theurgic cooperation with embodied humans: “through beings deprived of knowledge he [the god] reveals thoughts which surpass all knowledge ... and by means of all beings in the cosmos he moves our mind to the truth of things that are, have been, and will be.”<sup>128</sup> Theurgy “renders those who employ prayers ... the familiar consorts of the gods ... it brings us into contact with the demiurge, since it renders us akin to the gods through acts ...”<sup>129</sup> Although the individual soul cannot become divine it can be attached to the gods and move with them.<sup>130</sup>

In developing Iamblichan doctrine into a completely worked out system, Proclus answers questions the Syrian divine left hanging. Providence belongs to the gods:

The term *pro-noia* (pro-vidence or thinking in advance) plainly signifies the activity before the intellect, which must be attributed solely to the Good—for only the Good is more divine than intellect.<sup>131</sup>

Because it is good for all things, providence must come from god, and, indeed, as we have seen already, is god.<sup>132</sup> It is to the gods that providence draws the soul. After sketching the hierarchy rising from reasoning soul to intellection, the monads, and the gods, Proclus describes the anagogy:

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<sup>122</sup> Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003), 3.5, p. 45, ll. 4–16.

<sup>123</sup> Iamblichus, *Protrepticus*, 11.7, p. 88, ll. 1–8.

<sup>124</sup> Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, translated and with introduction and notes by E. Clarke, J. Dillon, J. Hershbell (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), III.25

<sup>125</sup> Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, II.11, 117.

<sup>126</sup> Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, I.17 & V.14.

<sup>127</sup> Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, V.23, 267.

<sup>128</sup> Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, III.17, 165.

<sup>129</sup> Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, V.26, 277.

<sup>130</sup> Iamblichus, *De Anima*, text, translation, and commentary by J. F. Finamore and J. M. Dillon, *Philosophia Antiqua* 92 (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill 2002), §7 and p. 219.

<sup>131</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §7, 44.

<sup>132</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §§13 & 14.

The soul, having abandoned sense perception, ... breaks forth from the vantage-point of its intellectual part into a Bacchic frenzy at the calm and truly mystical intuitions of the hypercosmic gods.<sup>133</sup>

As we have seen, for Proclus, real freedom for humans requires outside help. Picking up from the view developed more and more completely in the tradition from Plotinus through Porphyry to Iamblichus that the virtues exist analogously in the realms above the human (a doctrine of which Aquinas will be an heir),<sup>134</sup> Proclus gives divine grace a role in our acquisition of them:

since even the person who has virtue is only subservient to those capable of providing him with what he desires and increasing it together with him. These are the gods, among whom true virtue is found and from whom comes the virtue in us. And Plato too in some texts calls this willing slavery the greatest freedom. For by serving those who have power over all, we become similar to them, so that we govern the whole world.<sup>135</sup>

Developing the anagogy of the soul, Proclus writes again of the knowledge beyond intellect, divine madness. This involves arousing “what is called the ‘one of the soul’ ... and to connect it with the One itself.”<sup>136</sup> Then it loves to be quiet and will become “speechless and silent in internal silence.”<sup>137</sup> He goes on to describe what I take to be the acme of “life above the world, namely the life of the gods and that of the souls who dance above fate and follow providence.”<sup>138</sup>

When someone actualises what really is the most divine activity of the soul and entrusts himself only to the “flower of the intellect” and brings himself to rest not only from the external motions, but also from the internal, he will become a god as far as this is possible for a soul, and will know only in the way the gods know everything in an ineffable way, each according to their proper one.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §19, 50.

<sup>134</sup> See my “Political, Psychic, Intellectual, Daimonic, Hierarchical, Cosmic, and Divine: Justice in Aquinas, Al-Fārābī, Dionysius, and Porphyry,” *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 197–218.

<sup>135</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §24, 53.

<sup>136</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §31, 55–56.

<sup>137</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §31, 56.

<sup>138</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §34, 57.

<sup>139</sup> Proclus, *De Pron.* §32, 56.

Thus we reach the henads, the gods who both are providence and its end. It is with them that I wish to conclude this paper, since their role in Proclus allows us to consider the role of individuality at the top of the last great system produced within the pagan stage of Neoplatonism.

### Henads as Divine Individuals

Given the intimate connection between religion and philosophy in Greco-Roman antiquity generally, and in Neoplatonism particularly, recent moves by scholars to re-examine the role of the gods in ancient philosophies must be welcome. Richard Bodéüs, *The Theology of the Living Immortals*,<sup>140</sup> does for the gods of Aristotle what two recent articles in *Dionysius* by Edward Butler attempt for the henads of Proclus.<sup>141</sup> Both authors identify a distortion in the normative treatments of the place of the gods owing to the conscious or unconscious endeavour to make Aristotle and Proclus philosophically acceptable to monotheists. Butler accuses even Jean Trouillard, perhaps the greatest Neoplatonic theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and an enormously sympathetic interpreter of Proclus, of “effacing the henads.”<sup>142</sup> Butler’s argument is of importance to us because he finds in the henads an irreducible individuality at the summit of the Proclean universe. This individuality is effective in the whole because the henads are the principles of the procession of beings and, as we have already discovered, they are providence and give it its occupation with individuals. He writes:

Understanding the essence of henology as lying in individuation rather than in abstract unity grounds procession. The “providence” of the Gods, a pre-thinking (*pro-noein*) of the whole of Being, lies in the supra-essential or “existential” individuality they possess; indeed, it is a direct *consequence* of that individuality, because the latter entails that the whole of Being be pre-positing in each God, lest the universality accorded to Being in relation to *beings* be allowed to usurp the autarchy of each God ....<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Richard Bodéüs, *The Theology of the Living Immortals*, trans. Jan Garrett (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

<sup>141</sup> Edward P. Butler, “Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold,” *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 83–104; and *idem*, “The Gods and Being in Proclus,” *Dionysius* 26 (2008): 93–114.

<sup>142</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 93. For an appreciative correction of the polemical side of Butler’s position, see the convincing Eric Perl, “Neither One Nor Many: God and the Gods in Plotinus, Proclus, and Aquinas,” *Dionysius* 28 (2010): 167–92.

<sup>143</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 103.

Moreover, Butler is confronting a fundamental medieval and contemporary error about Proclus (and Neoplatonism) which we encountered earlier in this paper, namely, that his hierarchy is a system of abstractions. This would subject it to the criticism of negative theology as a cover for atheism mounted by de Lubac, Jean-Luc Marion, and others.<sup>144</sup> In contrast, Butler writes,

only by recognizing the concrete individuality of the henads, not as logical counters, but as *unique individuals* and the real agents of the causality attributed to the One, can the true significance of procession in Proclus be grasped . . . [P]rocession in the primary sense is from one *mode of unity* to another: namely, from the polycentric manifold of autarchic individual henads to the monocentric unity of forms. Distinct organizations belong to the ontic and the supra-essential, and the ontic organization is emergent from the supra-essential through a dialectic immanent to the nature of the henads. The polycentric henadic organization, because it is an organization of unique individuals, is irreducible to ontology for the latter only treats of forms, that is, of universals. The independence of theology (that is, henadology) from ontology in Proclus is thus a matter of its *structural difference*.<sup>145</sup>

Adam Labecki, in a two part study of the “The One and the Many” in Plotinus, reaches the same conclusion, “henology, in uniting theology and pure mathematics, enacts an *inverted* onto-theology whereby being is permitted to appear according to the unfolding of the *theoi*.”<sup>146</sup>

We can only explore a few of the consequences of these studies. Bodéüs notes that for Aristotle, as well as for Plato, philosophical theology does not replace that of the poets.<sup>147</sup> The same need for revealed theology and a *religio* which is not only *mentis* holds for Proclus and is more securely founded systematically than in his gigantic predecessors. The henads reveal and convey their irreducible divine individuality religiously. Thus, Butler argues:

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<sup>144</sup> See my “Jean-Luc Marion’s Dionysian Neoplatonism,” *Perspectives sur le néoplatonisme, International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Actes du colloque de 2006*, édité par Martin Achard, Wayne Hankey, Jean-Marc Narbonne, Collection Zêtésis (Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 2009), 267–280; *idem*, “Misrepresenting Neoplatonism”: 701–703; and *idem*, “Neoplatonism and Contemporary French Philosophy,” *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 161–190 at 178–180.

<sup>145</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 94–5.

<sup>146</sup> Adam Labecki, “The One and the Many: Part II, The Many,” *Dionysius* 25 (2007): 129–52 at 150; “The One and the Many: Part I, The One” appeared in *Dionysius* 24 (2006): 75–98.

<sup>147</sup> Bodéüs, *The Theology of the Living Immortals*, 218, quoted in Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 97, note 19.

The very facticity of myth enables it to function as an instrument of unique, supra-essential divine individuals. The significance of myth in Proclus thus is not of a ladder for the soul to climb up to the truth, to be kicked away after ... “demythologization.” Rather, myth retains its existential excess relative to the universality of the concept, the “superabundance” of the Gods (*El. Theol.* prop. 131) in recognition of which the philosophical system limits itself.<sup>148</sup>

Henadic individuality is also crucial to providential activity. Butler gives an analysis of *Elements*, prop. 120 “Every God in his own existence [*huparxis*] possesses the providence [*pronoëin*] of the universe [*tôn holôn*], and the primary providence is in the Gods.” In a discussion of Stephen Gersh’s connecting of *pronoia* and *pistis*,<sup>149</sup> Butler asserts a *pistis* from above as well as one from below; thus: “*Epistêmê*, which is cognition of the universal, is therefore bounded on both sides by a kind of knowing pertaining exclusively to individuals, and these are the two kinds of *pistis*.”<sup>150</sup> He goes on to ask in what the gods themselves must believe and answers: “It is that to which the universality inherent in their powers and processions, which both pertain to classification, is ultimately referred, namely the individuality of each God, which as irreducible is perceived immediately by each in a founding moment of *pistis*.”<sup>151</sup> In virtue of this content each of them has something to give to being.

If there are consequences of henadic individuality for the procession, it is also important for the providentially directed return of humans towards them, as our last quotation from the *De providentia* indicated. In this context, Butler criticises looking at the Proclean system in terms of “mystical theology,” as well as of “negative theology.” He thinks they are “out of place in a thinker whose theology is fundamentally positive.”<sup>152</sup> He argues that “Mystic union contradicts the manner in which Proclus consistently portrays engaging with the divine as an encounter *between individuals*.”<sup>153</sup> He interprets a text from the *Commentary on the Timaeus* as explaining,

that in the performance of “divine works” it is necessary to withdraw from other pursuits so that “*alone*, one may associate with *the God alone*, and not attempt to join oneself to the One with multiplicity. For such a one would do the opposite, and separate

<sup>148</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 129.

<sup>149</sup> Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena. An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 115–9.

<sup>150</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 101.

<sup>151</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 101.

<sup>152</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 102.

<sup>153</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 102.

himself from the Gods.” Here the opposition of unity and multiplicity evidently applies to the integrity or dispersion of the individual, not to some unity into which individuals would be annihilated, nor is the “unity” of the divine in any way a matter of one God instead of many.<sup>154</sup>

Time prevents my giving you more of the rich fruits of Butler’s work. Instead, I use his description of the return of the human to God in Proclus as an “encounter *between individuals*” as an opportunity to conclude with a quotation from a not-to-be-forgotten classic, André Festugière’s *Personal Religion Among the Greeks*. This Dominican priest, agonised Christian, and gigantic scholar wrote very movingly about Plato’s doctrine of the Good beyond thought and being in the *Republic* and in the *VIIth Letter*:

I am for my part convinced that this is the expression of a personal experience. In sum, the supreme object of knowledge, the final degree of our metaphysical investigations, the term on which all the rest depends, is an object which defies definition, and hence cannot be named. It is the Unknown God.<sup>155</sup>

He goes on:

both in Plato and in his successors ... the *noeton* is certainly the intelligible in the true sense of the word, the object we can comprehend and define. But at the same time it is the object above the intelligible ... which we attain only by mystical contact ... Plato stands at the beginning of the great mystical tradition which, through Plotinus and Proclus, inspired Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena, and which then ... exercised so great an influence in the Middle Ages.<sup>156</sup>

The personal and individual are not alien to religion and philosophy in Neoplatonism. They belong to its deepest origins and greatest heights and they are essentials of its understanding of providence.

—*Dalhousie University*

<sup>154</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being,” 102; the text is *In Tim.* I, 212, 19–26.

<sup>155</sup> A.-J. M. Festugière, *Personal Religion among the Greeks*, Sather Classical Lectures 26 (Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1954), 44. On Festugière, see my *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History*, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006), 163–168.

<sup>156</sup> Festugière, *Personal Religion*, 45.