

Natural Theology in the Patristic Period

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The centrality of natural theology in this period and its inescapable formation of what succeeds are indicated by the multiple forms it takes throughout its extent in Hellenic, Jewish, and Christian philosophies, religious practices, and theologies. Commonly, the term, as used to refer to an apologetic or instrument presupposed by or leading to revealed religion and theology, makes no distinction between the forms of philosophy. Moreover, when those listed as “philosophers” in our histories touch on theological or religious matter, they are usually treated as if what they wrote was all “natural”, in the sense of coming from inherent human capacity, as opposed to what is inspired or gracious. Packing the natural theology of what we are calling “the Patristic Period” into such crudely undifferentiated lumps moulded by later binary schematizing destroys what it most distinctively accomplished. It not only produced the new language of metaphysics and the supernatural,¹ but also thought through how nature and what is beyond it interpenetrated one another.

The Hellenic, Jewish, and Christian philosophers and theologians of the period, themselves frequently bridging the natural / supernatural divide in their “divine” miracle working or at least consecrated persons, took what was diversely established within Classical Antiquity to build hierarchically connected levels and kinds within wholes. Physical and metaphysical, fate and providence, sensible and supersensible, the immanent and the transcendent, being and non-being—both excessive and deficient in respect to being—, the rational and what was below and above it, the natural and the supernatural, what was in human power and what was a gift from without, profane and holy, what theory could reach and what required practical cooperation with the divine, what was open to all and what required initiation, were all distinguished, sometimes opposed, and always related. In leading humans to the gods and even beyond, after instilling communal, religious and moral virtues, philosophers, often consecrated at least by their lineage as successors handing on sacred traditions, shepherded their disciples not only up the long difficult ladder of philosophy’s hierarchy, but also to what before, accompanying, and beyond this required worldly practice and its frustration, myth, mystery, prayer, magic, inspiration, prophesy, madness, hymn, symbol, theurgy, sacrament, the breaking in of the divine, the violation of the self, and, finally, yielding and silence. Evidently, in these situations, “natural” as well as “theology” became polyvalent.

¹ De Lubac 1946:323–428; Brisson 1999; Harrington 2004:121–123.

I shall not manage to set out and explain all this extravagant diversity, especially because understanding one term requires thinking its pairs. To get some sense of these diverse significations, and recollecting that the study of nature in antiquity may serve as spiritual exercise, the striking use of physics as theological foundation for Epicurean and Stoic ways of life, and how Plato's *Timaeus* as philosophical genesis reaches across religious differences to dominate the Patristic Period, we may begin with the Stoic Middle Platonism of Philo Judaeus and Josephus. With Philo, uniting Plato's and Moses' genesis, and thus connecting God, the cosmos, and the human in the opposite way to the one taken by Lucretius in his *De Rerum Natura*, we encounter most of the forms natural theology took in the period. We discover not only that there is no operation of pure nature abstracted from the divine activity but also that physics leads to theology and that nature, the human, and community depend on gifts given beyond them from above.

PHILO: NATURAL THEOLOGY AS *PHYSIOLOGIA*

Philo, when commenting on a text from Numbers which makes every day a feast, writes that the Law "accommodates itself to the blameless life of righteous men who follow nature" (*Spec.* II.42).² After noting the practice of civil and moral virtue by these righteous Greeks and Barbarians in training for wisdom, he makes them "the best contemplators of nature and everything found in her." So, while their bodies are below, their souls take wing and they know the ethereal powers, "as befits true cosmopolitans." (*Spec.* II.42) The cosmos is the city of these acute physiologues; their associates are the wise in the universal commonwealth ruled by virtue. They themselves keep above passions and do not buckle under the blows of fate.

Physics does not only lead to Stoic *apatheia*, it opens the human to prophecy. According to Philo in another context, connection to the natural elements made the authors of the *Septuagint* open to revelation; they became not translators but "hierophants and prophets." After prayer, to which God assented so that the human race might be led to a better life by using the "philosophical and truly beautiful ordinances" of the Jewish Law, secluded on the island of Pharos with "nothing except the elements of nature: earth, water, air, heaven, the genesis of which was to be the first theme of their sacred revelation—for the production of the cosmos is the principle of the laws—like men inspired, they prophesied...". In consequence, without conferring with one another "they found words corresponding to the things." In arriving at the very realities which had been revealed through Moses, and expressing them in Greek, their minds went along with the purest of spirits, his (*Mos.* II.36-40). The Mosaic Law, understood in union with nature and as both philosophical and revealed, is now available to teach all humankind.

² Generally translations are my own, though those cited are carefully considered.

For Josephus, who depended upon and shared the mentality, Jewish history is written by starting with Genesis as normative *physiologia*: “first we must study the nature of God and, then, having contemplated his works with the eye of reason, we can go on to imitate in our own deeds, so far as possible, the work of God, the best of all models, and endeavour to follow it.” For Josephus, all things told in his history are “in accord with the harmony in the nature of the whole” (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* I.4). God always acts so as to maintain the cosmic order eternally founded in his very nature. Philo not only shows God doing this but also explains how the divine, human, cosmic interconnection is known and maintained.

Philo was “the first thinker to associate the goodness of Plato’s demiurge with the Judaeo-Christian conception of God the creator.”³ God is the all good and desires to share that goodness as much as possible. He is continually creative (*Leg.* I.18) in an activity with two stages; the first, his image eternally formed in his mind, is *ex nihilo*. The physical world, made according to the incorporeal model, has presuppositions. Philo explains how the cosmos is both created and eternal in language which reminds us of Aristotle, *De Anima* III.5: “in all existing things there must be an active cause, and a passive subject; the active cause is the intellect of the universe, thoroughly unadulterated and thoroughly unmixed, superior to virtue and superior to science, superior even to abstract good or abstract beauty; while the passive subject is something inanimate and incapable of motion by any intrinsic power of its own, but having been set in motion, and fashioned, and endowed with life by the intellect, became transformed into that most perfect work, this cosmos” (*Opif.* 8-9).

The account of the education and offices of Moses, the mediator between God and the cosmos, depends on differentiating between what is innate and belongs to philosophical labour, on the one hand, and what is from without and above, on the other. By the union of both, he acquires the capacities of the philosopher-king, legislator, high priest, and prophet who establishes the cosmic priesthood of Israel. While he receives a complete education, including symbolic philosophy, from all kinds of masters employed from Egypt, the adjacent countries, and Greece, his innate genius meant that he was recollecting rather than learning and was improving upon what his teachers gave (*Mos.* I.18-24). This grounding of his human labours in the nature given to him indicates the principle at work in Philo’s treatment of the unique bridge between the divine and the human, one with both sides. While Philo is careful to differentiate the offices Moses holds and the diverse capacities by which he exercises each, the foundation of them all is both a moment in his history and activities and is also its underlying source, namely, his union with the Divine Logos in the mystical darkness. There is a reciprocity by which in return for his labours, virtues, and giving up all personal possessions, he receives from God. The gift, however, is out of all proportion to the human work and power. Moses, as the friend of God and his heir, is given as

³ Runia 1986:135.

recompense the wealth of the whole earth, sea, and rivers, and of all the other elements and their combinations “therefore, every one of the elements obeyed him as its master, changing the power which it had by nature and submitting to his command” (*Mos.* 155-156). Moses is, of course, a citizen of the cosmos, but far more he has the names of God: “For he also was called the god and king of the whole nation, and he is said to have entered into the darkness where God was, into the unseen, invisible, incorporeal, archetypal essence of all beings. There he beheld things invisible to mortal nature.” He becomes the middle between the divine and the human to be imitated by us (*Mos.* 157-159). When he is about to die, the Father changes Moses from “a double being, composed of soul and body, so that his whole nature is that of a monad without elements, thus transforming him wholly and entirely into a most sun-like mind” (*Mos.* II.288).⁴

This reciprocity is extended to all. Grace and nature are two sides of the same—a principle which will be common also to pagans and Christians in the period, despite some tendencies associated with an aspect of Augustine’s thought. While Philo tells us that the creature should be conscious of his own “nothingness” when approaching his Maker,⁵ God is “one who loves to give”, his gifts are boundless and without end (*Her.* 31). He is the “saviour” of those who cry to him. Philosophy has never been anything else except the desire to see the Existent, his image the Logos, and, after these, his perfect work, the cosmos truly according to our diverse capacities. Moses is given to lead the way (*Confus.* 92-97). Although many forces push us down, none are powerful against the soul suspended from God, who, with a greater strength, draws it to himself (*Abr.* 59).

The human is the image of God, and the human mind stands to the rest in the way that God stands to the cosmos as a whole. They are connected in mutual support through the priesthood. Having presented the dress of the High Priest as visible representation of the cosmos, Philo explains that this is, first, so that by constantly contemplating “the image of the all”, the life of the High Priest will be worthy of the nature of the whole. Second, the cosmos will become his co-ministrant in his sacred rites: “It is very right and fit that he who is consecrated to the service of the Father of the cosmos should bring the Father’s son, the all, to the service of the creator and begetter” (*Spec.* I.95-96). Finally, in contrast to the priests of other nations, the High Priest of the Jews offers his prayers and sacrifices “not only on behalf of the whole human race, but also for the parts of nature: earth, water, air, fire; for he looks upon the cosmos (as indeed it really is) as his country” (*Spec.* I.97).

Philo’s influence was not primarily within his own religious community, where, after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple, although Hellenic Judaism persisted, there was a turn against the kind of identification with Greco-Roman culture of which his corpus was the acme. Nonetheless, Philo shares the common theology out of which the *Wisdom of Solomon*, and great parts of the

⁴ My understanding of Moses in Philo owes much to Parker 2010.

⁵ Language echoed by Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* I.15, 47, 17; cf. Feichtinger 2003:136.

New Testament—most notably the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Pauline corpus, and the Gospels of Luke and John emerge.⁶ This will facilitate his gigantic influence among the Christian Fathers, underestimated because substantially unacknowledged by them. Clement of Alexandria, and the Catechetical School there, continued Philo’s unification of philosophy and scriptural revelation in his home city, and Clement’s works contain massive reiterations of both content and methods. In Alexandria, Origen also came into the heritage and made a hugely important contribution to its dissemination when he carried the Philonic corpus to Palestine when he moved. There, among other uses, his *Life of Moses* came to underlie the ideology of the Byzantine Empire through Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea’s modelling of Constantine on it, and beyond the Christian Empire, even into the understanding of the philosopher-king, legislator, prophet and religious leader in an Islamic philosopher like al-Farabi.⁷ However, no one has traced what we owe to him outside the Fathers with the barest adequacy; not only the Islamic but also the pagan philosophical reception are neglected. Philo’s natural theology certainly massively provided content and method for the philosophical interpretation of Christian scripture generally and of Genesis and Moses especially, which we may indicate by mentioning the works entitled *Hexamaeron* of bishops Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose of Milan, and the multiple interpretations of Genesis by Augustine; there are also the *De Vita Moysis* and *De Hominis Opificio* of Gregory, to mark the most obvious.⁸ John Scottus Eriugena translated Gregory’s *On the Creation of Humankind* and (probably) Basil’s *Hexamaeron* into Latin. Their content passed into his *Periphyseon*.

The ways Philo and his philosophical sources are taken up illumine how physics, cosmogony, theology, metaphysics, “true gnosticism”, and the vision of those initiated into the mysteries are connected in our period. Thus, for example, Clement in his *Stromata*, when passing to “the *physiologia* truly gnostic”, speaks of those initiated into the mysteries, moving from the lesser to the greater as distinguished in the *Gorgias*.⁹ For him, *physiologia* is a gnosis conformed to the canon of truth, or better, the contemplation belonging to highest degree of initiation into the mysteries (*epopteia*) which reposes on the discussion of cosmogony. From this we are elevated to theology. Appropriately, he says, after philosophical *physiologia*, he will go on to consider the prophetic Genesis (Clement *Stromata* IV.3.2-3).

Basil of Caesarea took up the anagogy in Plato’s *Symposium* which both differentiated and linked the contemplation of physical and intelligible beauties. Above sensible eros, Diotima had spoken of the highest mysteries of revelation and contemplation (*Symposium* 210A). For Basil, someone who for a long time had been among the physiologues but desired to follow the command to seek God’s

⁶ Siegert 2009.

⁷ O’Meara 2003 gives important parts of the history but without tracing Philo’s role in it.

⁸ Runia 2009; Pelikan 1995 and 1997.

⁹ Clement *Stromata* IV.3.1; cf. Plato *Gorgias* 497C and Philo *Sacrif.* 62.

face would go beyond this level of reality to place himself closer to God. The seeker would then be turned to the truly beautiful and desirable, reserved for the pure in heart, and, passing from *physiologia* to the greater beauty beyond nature (*meta physin*), would join those initiated into the supreme contemplation.¹⁰ Determined pagans in this period also made metaphysical contemplation into spiritual exercise. Proclus organised the Academy as a kind of monastery. Its programme of study initiated its members step by step into contemplation within a context of prayer. The philosophy of Plato was “mystagogy”, an “initiation into the holy mysteries themselves...installed, for eternity, in the home of the gods on High.”¹¹ His own *Elements of Theology* may be considered “metaphysics as spiritual exercise.”¹² In this view of philosophy, Plato becomes a theologian, his dialogues sacred scripture to be interpreted appropriately. This helps explain the greater antipathy towards Platonism by the Christian authorities and why it was increasingly passed on by Neoplatonists through commentary on Aristotle’s comparatively more secular writings.

BOETHIUS: THE CONSOLATIONS OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

Two heirs of Proclus, Boethius and his contemporary Dionysius the Areopagite, exhibited none of the polemical antipathy to philosophy which marks Augustine’s deeply ambiguous relation to what enabled his return to his Christian beginnings. When writing out the philosophical concord in Late Antiquity which consoled his imprisonment awaiting execution by torture, the Christian Boethius not only repeated many times and in various ways and metres the contemplation of nature which Philo promised would be efficacious against the blows of fate, but also had Lady Philosophy imitate the *Timaeus* by praying.¹³ At the exact centre of the *Consolation*, in a beautiful poem fashioned from elements of the Platonic genesis, Philosophy prays to the “creator of heaven and earth”. The concord by which the *Consolation* purges, illumines, and converts the prisoner to meet the gaze of God with hope bridges the pagan Christian divide. The *Consolation* makes no explicit reference to anything distinctively Christian, although allusions are plentiful for those who seek, and there is very little or nothing taught by Lady Philosophy which stands against Christian doctrine—the reference of the *Timaeus* to an existence of the world before time is interpreted so that the interminable life of the world does not share God’s simple eternity of motionless infinite possession (*Cons.* V.vi). The prayer converts the prisoner towards that simplicity by turning him from reason which divides what is one (*Cons.* III.ix). He moves to the perspective of the One in which the mind is led through intellectual deduction from unity to goodness to God, so as to explain why “every happy man is a god” (*Cons.* III.x).

¹⁰ Basil *Commentaire sur Isaïe* V.162; cf. Brisson 1999: 38–40.

¹¹ Saffrey 1984:182 quoting Proclus *Theo. Plat.* I.1; cf. Saffrey 1997.

¹² O’Meara 2000: 279–290.

¹³ Plato *Timaeus* 27B-C; Boethius *Cons.* III.ix; cf. I.v, V.ii

Many features of the natural theology of our period appear in the *Consolation*: the study of nature as spiritual exercise; a conciliating synthesis of philosophies; Lady Philosophy's preference for a Platonism which has assimilated Aristotle, together with her use of the cathartic spiritual exercises and techniques for self-care of the Sceptics, Stoics, Epicureans and Cynics, while their philosophies are rejected as partial or false; philosophy's use and need of religious acts, myth, hymn, poetry, rhetoric; allegorical interpretation of myth; arguments for the necessity and possibility of prayer; her medicinal and salvific work; the identity of philosophy and religion; the differentiation of higher and lower forms of apprehension; her anagogy of the fallen soul, so that, ultimately, divine and human intuition meet; the subordination of fate to providence. The last helps us to understand how nature and grace interpenetrate in this period.

Plato taught that the divine goodness involved a universal and particular providential care: "The gods perceive, see, and hear everything" (Plato, *Leges* 901D) and these gods "are more, not less, careful for small things than for great" (900D). For Philo, Moses, in agreement with Plato, taught "that God exerts his providence for the benefit of the cosmos" (Philo, *Opif.* 172). Defending the Platonic doctrine requires dealing with the flat out denial essential to Epicurean enlightened religion, and the Peripatetic limitation which denies that providence is for the sake of individuals and intervenes for or against them.¹⁴ Plotinus undertakes this defence, by using Alexander of Aphrodisias' refutation of the Stoic determinism which would make prayer pointless and by employing the Middle Platonic distinction between higher providence and lower fate, which we saw in Philo. He 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" (*Enn.* III.3.5). Iamblichus, for whom the gods contain and employ the material for the sake of human souls altogether descended into it, has a sense for the integrity of nature, how it is connected, and how it serves justice. Because, following Plotinus, physical movements depend upon immaterial intellectual activities, and secondary causes on primary ones, the "divine" Iamblichus writes to a correspondent: "Fate is enmeshed with providence and exists by virtue of the existence of providence".¹⁵ Systematising, the "divine" Proclus, successor of Plato, divides and connects for the sake of anagogy. In the distinction within the order, fate is on the side of movement, multiplicity, and the corporeal, but "providence precedes fate, and everything that comes about according to fate comes about far more according to providence. ... [M]any things escape fate, but nothing providence" (*On Providence* §3). Fate connects things, but providence directs them to the good. "Providence is *per se* god, whereas fate is something divine, but not god" (*On Providence* §14).

Boethius brings all of this into *Philosophy's Consolation*, so that fate and providence become two different perspectives on the same plan: "When this plan is thought of in terms of the purity of God's own understanding, it is called

¹⁴ Alexander of Aphrodisias 1983: XXX-XXXI.

¹⁵ Iamblichus 2009: To Macedonius, On Fate, Fr. 4, p. 23.

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” (*Cons.* IV.vi). Perspective is creative, as Eriugena will demonstrate most thoroughly, but Boethius anticipates some of his principles. Reiterating a theme we encountered in Philo, he works out how, by changing their perspective, by turning from sense and imagination to reason, and from reason to intellect and intuition, humans free themselves from the chains of fate and come under God’s beneficent providence. We become what we know and love; ultimately this will carry us out of ourselves.

For Plotinus, union with the First is a breaking in or a bringing to birth where there is a “sudden reception of a light” compelling the soul “to believe” that “it is from Him, it is Him.” With this arrival of the “true end of the soul,” it “contemplates the light by which it sees,” but it is no longer operating by a power over which it has control. Augustine shared with Plotinus the experience that, when united with the First, the soul moves beyond thinking about itself and discovered that the attempt to grasp its goal results in fall.¹⁶ Thus the soul passes here beyond philosophy into the realm of grace. Despite systematic differences, Proclus has an analogous view of that to which the providence of the gods leads and how it comes. Real freedom for humans requires their help because they possess the virtue we desire. Slavery to them is our greatest freedom, “by serving those who have power over all, we become similar to them, so that we govern the whole world” (*On Providence* §24). Knowledge beyond intellect, divine madness, involves arousing “what is called the ‘one of the soul’ ...and to connect it with the One itself.” Then the soul loves to be quiet and becomes speechless in internal silence. The acme of liberation is “the life of the gods and that of the souls who dance above fate and follow providence” (*On Providence* §§31-34).

These representations of the conclusion beyond philosophy of philosophy’s itinerarium are well beyond anything found in the sober Boethius, but they bring us back to his contemporary who claimed to inherit the fruit of St Paul’s blinding encounter with a heavenly light “beyond the brightness of the sun” (Acts 26.13). Dionysius interpreted this through what descended to him from Philo on Moses in the divine darkness, Plotinus, Proclus and Damascius. *The Mystical Theology* prays for union with the good beyond thought and being for which Plato’s analogy was the sun,¹⁷ a brilliantly shining darkness and a trumpeting silence, where soul and mind are left behind.

Dionysius, concluding beyond negation and affirmation a journey begun with a sensuous affirmative symbolic theology, shows that the Neoplatonism which became the natural theology of the Fathers, and their successors Christian and Islamic, surpasses matter / spirit, body / soul, sense / reason, evil / good dualisms by way of the ineffable First. He, joined in the Latin West by Boethius, is the main source of a Christianised rendition of Proclus’ doctrine of the non-being

¹⁶ Plotinus *Enn.* V.3.17, VI.9.7; VI.9.11; Augustine *Conf.* 7.16.22 & 9.10.24-25; *Trin.* 15.25.

¹⁷ Plato *Republic* 509B-C.

of evil, the one most representative of Neoplatonism, which became the authoritative common teaching of the scholastics. Dionysius reproduces great parts of Proclus *On the Subsistence of Evil* in *On the Divine Names* so literally that it is used to restore the lost Greek text of Proclus' treatise.

Plotinus had been clear that defending the Platonic doctrine of providence required dealing with evil and injustice, but his theodicy made matter evil and its cause.¹⁸ Proclus' *De malorum subsistentia* is directed not only against the Plotinian treatment of the nature of evil and its cause, but also against everything which would give evil substantiality. 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. In consequence, the Good can have no contrary and evil no single cause. Proclus, and Dionysius in his wake, warn us 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 goodness.¹⁹ In the *Consolation*, evil is "nothing" (*Cons.* III.xii). Doing evil makes humans powerless and drags them down towards non-being. "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" (*Cons.* IV.vi).

Before leaving the sixth century, a little must be said about a Hellenic concordantist and a Christian who began in that tradition but moved against it for the sake of defending the positions which separated his faith from the philosophical consensus.

THEOLOGICAL CONCORD AND DISSENT: SIMPLICIUS AND THE BEGINNINGS OF DIALECTICAL THEOLOGY

Bringing Plato and Aristotle into concord long predates Boethius. From the beginning of the Platonic school fundamental Aristotelian ideas like activity and potentiality were adopted by Platonists and his criticism of the existence of the forms outside thinking was accepted. We have witnessed the result in Philo. Exchange between Peripatetics and Platonists intensified in our period, and, beyond this, despite reciprocal criticisms and rivalries, the harmony of the two philosophies was asserted and demonstrating it became a Neoplatonic project. Tracing the history of this concordism is outside our purpose and is complicated by the inevitable endeavour of the later enthusiasts to push back the harmony as early as Pythagoras. Nonetheless, a word about motives and results is necessary.

Porphyry is clearly engaged in philosophical harmonization, but, with Iamblichus and those in his wake, the project widens to embrace reconciling revelations, including religious practices and myths, to one another and to philosophy, which is regarded as having revelation at its origins. Thus, for example, Iamblichus writes as if he were an Egyptian priest defending the ancient mysteries and Hierocles of Alexandria turns Homer into a Platonist. Iamblichus

¹⁸ Plotinus *Enn.* III.2.2 and *Enn.* I.8.

¹⁹ Proclus *On the Existence of Evils* §§7-9, §§30-38, §§47-54; Dionysius *On the Divine Names* Chapter 4.

fixes the curriculum of the Platonic schools, giving the sciences of Aristotle an essential, if secondary, place. With Proclus, following Iamblichus, philosophy itself is explicitly only a preparation. It is given a role comparable to that of purifications, rites of ablution and expiation in the Mysteries, so that “philosophy constitutes a preliminary purification and a preparation for self-knowledge and the immediate contemplation of our own essence” (Proclus, *On the First Alcibiades* proem). The motive of the concord is twofold. One aim is to draw all spiritual activities together into a hierarchical and differentiated leading of the soul upward to the gods, thus showing that nothing escapes their mastery. The other is to give authority to the Hellenic tradition as both inclusive and consistent—it is not a morass of contradictory squabbling sects. The primary technique beyond distinguishing, classifying, and hierarchical ordering was that used by Philo, allegorizing, but now this includes texts of philosophy, certainly Plato’s. One influential result, both with the Islamic philosophers and Latin mediaevals, was the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle on creation.

The harmonisers want to draw together the *Timaeus*, and its Demiurge, with Aristotle’s *Physics*, and his Unmoved Mover. To do this they need to reconcile Aristotle’s eternal universe with that in the *Timaeus*, which is generated and corruptible, though perpetual because it is held in being by the divine will. The diverse positions of his Platonic and Peripatetic predecessors are treated by Simplicius. The following is an example of the result:

[T]he truly marvellous Aristotle brings his instruction about the principles of nature to culmination in theology, which is above nature, and proves that the entire corporeal structure of nature is dependent on the incorporeal intellectual good that is above nature and unrelated – here too following Plato. But it was from the very existence of the body of the world that Plato discovered the intellectual god who is the creator of the world. ... Aristotle too proceeds from motion and change and from the subsistence of bodies, which is finite and has extension, to the unmoved, unchangeable, unintermittent cause.²⁰

A little further, when he is showing how both Plato and Aristotle make god the efficient and final cause of creation, Simplicius reveals a source, a determined conciliator and pupil of Proclus. He writes of his teacher, who also taught his adversary, the Monophysite Christian John Philoponus, that: “Ammonius has written an entire book which provides many proofs of the fact that Aristotle considers god to be also the efficient cause of the entire world, and I have here taken over some points sufficiently for my present purposes.”²¹

Simplicius explains how a commentator on Aristotle ought to work. When there are apparent disagreements between Plato and Aristotle, the good exegete

²⁰ Simplicius 2001:1359,5-1359,10.

²¹ Simplicius 2001:1363,8-1363,12.

“must...not convict the philosophers of discordance by looking only at the letter of what [Aristotle] says against Plato; but he must look towards the spirit, and track down the harmony which reigns between them on the majority of points”.²² Commenting on Aristotle’s *On the Heavens*, where Aristotle and his Peripatetic followers are unrelenting in their criticism of Plato, Simplicius complains repeatedly about literalism which does not understand that Plato speaks metaphorically in the manner of theologians. The gods speak through him, his words in the *Timaeus*: “are those of the Creator of all these things, whose thoughts and deeds Plato revealed as a prophet”.²³

Although Boethius was determined both to hand on the translated works of Plato and Aristotle to a barbarian age and to present them as harmonious, his caution about interpreting the *Timaeus* on the eternity of the world hinted that some Christians might have problems with the Neoplatonic conciliation on creation. This is confirmed in Simplicius on the *De Caelo* which is full of mean-spirited polemic against John Philoponus because of his dissent. Whatever the outcome of their disputes at the time, Simplicius’ attacks helped Philoponus by preserving his arguments, thus the reconstruction of his *Against Aristotle on the Eternity of the World* draws all except one of its Greek fragments from Simplicius.²⁴ Philoponus also wrote against Proclus on the same question. However, what is most interesting to us is that Philoponus, who must represent here many others, not only opposed the philosophic consensus on particular matters but began the unravelling of the project as a whole. This makes him, as Moses Maimonides discerned, a leader in a new relation of philosophy to religion, that of dialectical theology. Maimonides, who denounced these “Mutakallimūn” and the “kalam”, sees the dialectical theologians rising first from among Greeks who had adopted Christianity, and then within Islam and Judaism, as unconcerned for philosophical truth in itself and wanting to use philosophical arguments as persuasions to predetermined dogmatic positions.²⁵ Whether or not this is fair to Philoponus whose arguments were entirely philosophical, what Maimonides condemns was not at all the mode of the Carolingian figure who stands at the end of Patristic natural theology, John the Scot, Irish born.

ERIUGENA: PHYSICS AS THE COMPLETE THEOLOGY

Having arrived at Boethius and his sixth-century contemporaries, we have the elements which will enable us to conclude our consideration of theology as physics with its acme, the *Periphyseon* of John Scottus Eriugena. Because, by gathering all within a single system, Eriugena does in Latin what Origen had undertaken six centuries earlier in Alexandria with his *On First Principles*, the first Christian theological system, and because Eriugena’s is a *physiologia*, predating the methods

²² Simplicius 2003:7,30-32)

²³ Simplicius 2006: 106,5-6)

²⁴ Philoponus 1987.

²⁵ Maimonides 1963:l,71.

and divisions of the medieval scholastics, and because Eriugena derives his philosophy almost entirely from the Christian Fathers, he provides a terminus.

Eriugena “reinvented the greater part of the theses of Neoplatonism”²⁶, by his time largely forgotten in the Latin West. His authentic repossession and radical reworking of pagan Platonism illuminates how it served as natural theology. By discovering his Neoplatonic principles mostly in Christian theological writings, Eriugena showed the overwhelming degree to which Patristic Christian theologians had assimilated them. Noting a few outstanding features of his work displays something of what that philosophical theology gave to Christian (and, indeed, to Islamic and Jewish) philosophy and theology. Moreover, his is another concordism with a new dimension exhibiting a further use of philosophy by theologians.

After Boethius, Eriugena was the first to unite the Greek and Latin Platonisms of late Antiquity; this enabled his reconciliation of Latin and Greek Christian theologies. His beginnings are with the Latin Fathers—pre-eminently Augustine, crucially Boethius, and importantly Ambrose. In *Periphyseon* they are contained within a single system with the Greek Fathers of whom he made translations, beginning with the Dionysian corpus. Eriugena’s reconciliation of East and West was accomplished by extending the primarily Plotinian and Porphyrian Platonism of the Latin Fathers in the direction of notions from Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, and Damascius transmitted by the Greeks. As generally when the earlier Platonism of Augustine met the later, most authoritatively conveyed by Dionysius, the later determined systematic structure. It was to it that Eriugena also owed his conceptions both of nature and the supernatural.

Eriugena gave his masterwork a Greek title, *Peri physeōn, Concerning Nature*; it is a *physiologia* (*Peri. IV PL441C*), a term he found in Gregory of Nyssa (*De hom. opif. 1*). Physics includes all, because, as Plato had taught, genesis embraces “what is and what is not” (*Peri. I PL441A*) and the divine superessential nothingness of the Neoplatonists, the infinite fullness beyond all things which are and are not, is the principle of his completely inclusive theology. In his system, nature is completely divided logically, and returns to itself according to the same logic: “first, into that which creates and is not created, second into that which is created and creates, third into that which is created and does not create, fourth, that which neither creates nor is created” (*Peri. I PL441D*). These divisions produce four subjects: 1) God as creator, 2) the primary causes, 3) what is subject to generation in place and time, i.e. the labours of the hexamaeron, including the human—the work of the sixth day—and its Fall. It, as the terminus of the procession, becomes the point of departure for the return into 4) God as end, the final object of investigation. This fundamental Neoplatonic movement he discerned in Dionysius: *monē* (remaining), *proodos* (going-out), *epistrophē*

²⁶ Trouillard 1983, 331.

(return); it enabled a mutual assimilation to one another of philosophical and Biblical structures.

In the pagan Neoplatonists, soul mediates between supersensible and the sensible. Christians tend to give this role to the human. Eriugena found the human as the immediate connection of God and the all in Augustine and radicalised it. Drawing upon Gregory of Nyssa, he came to understand human nature in such a way, that, more than being “that in which all things could be found”, it became “that in which all things are created”.²⁷ The medium through which God creates himself and the universe of beings out of his own nothingness is the human, because, uniquely among beings, it possesses all the forms of knowing and ignorance, including sensation and because the human mind shares the divine nothingness and self-ignorance. There are no absolute objects, because everything is through the diverse human perceptions. As with the Middle and Neo Platonists, the Platonic forms have become not only thoughts, but types of apprehension in various kinds of subject; as Plotinus puts it, “all things come from contemplations and are contemplations” (*Enn.* III.8.7). Like Neoplatonic systems generally, *Periphyseon* is an interplay of diverse subjectivities.

The notion of a divine self-creation takes up and transmutes another feature of Neoplatonism essential to understanding how nature and grace are related in this period, namely the complementarity of extreme transcendence and immanence. Because the First is beyond thought and being, is nothing, and comes into being only in what derives from it, the First is immanent in the finite without compromise either to its own transcendence or to the existence of beings. Plotinus teaches this (e.g. *Enn.* V.1.7), but it is developed more radically by successors like Iamblichus and Proclus. It enables the incarnational and sacramental aspects of Iamblichian thought where the gods include the material and cooperate in its use so as to draw to themselves humans immersed in genesis—features inherited by Dionysius. Jean Trouillard expositis what characterised Proclus’ universe: “it is traversed by a series of vertical lines, which like rays diverge from the same universal center and refer back to it the furthestmost and the most diverse appearances. These chains tend to absorb the hierarchical ordering of the levels and to link them all directly to the One....Thus, a stone is itself able to participate in the divine power to purify.”²⁸

Eriugena’s first work was commissioned to solve a local theological controversy, originating in a literal reading of Augustine so that he taught double predestination—the doctrine that God wills both the damnation of the reprobate and the salvation of the elect, with the consequent destruction of human free will. In the event, his *On Divine Predestination* increased the theological troubles and made him part of them, nonetheless, it displays important features of natural theology.

²⁷ Zier 1992, 80; cf. Eriugena *Peri.* II PL531AB, III PL733B, *Peri.* IV PL807A V PL893BC.

²⁸ Trouillard 1965:23–25

Following Boethius, Eriugena attempted to maintain divine predestination and grace together with human freedom. Through Boethius, his solution is located at the end of a line of Platonic treatises and commentaries which start from a principle stated by Porphyry that everything is accommodated to the substance of each knower.²⁹ In order to save *both* human freedom *and* divine providence, Iamblichus, Ammonius, Proclus, and Boethius distinguished between the mode of the knower and the mode of the thing known. Eriugena, by emphasising the difference between the eternal mode of the divine being and the temporal mode of the human, concludes that the problem in our reasoning arises when “foreknowledge and predestination are transferred to God by likening him to temporal things” (*Praed.* XI.7 PL393B). When we make this transferral, we place God’s operations within the process of time where they must predetermine our acts in such a way as to make them unfree.

Eriugena rejected double predestination on the strictly philosophical ground that it is inconsistent with the goodness and unity of God. His simplicity is such that predestination and God are one: “the one eternal predestination of God is God”.³⁰ Eriugena insisted that the means by which he had arrived at this flinty solution were essential to theology, asserting that correctly interpreting Scripture requires the liberal arts—for him the rhetorical trivium and the mathematical quadrivium. The theological errors on predestination had grown out of “an ignorance of the liberal arts” and “of the Greek writings in which the interpretation of predestination generates no fog of ambiguity” (*Praed.* XVIII.1 PL430C-D). His determination to interpret Augustine through the Greek Fathers reminds us that their thought never fell into the kind of opposition of nature and grace which emerged out of Augustine’s controversy with Pelagius and had the consequences for the understanding of predestination of which Eriugena was unhappily conscious.

Eriugena also serves to remind us of a theme as old as the apologists of the Apostolic age, Christianity as philosophy, because his conclusion brought his readers back to his first chapter and its assertion that, “true philosophy is true religion and, conversely, true religion is true philosophy. This formula reproduced, but also intensified, Augustine, whom he had just quoted,³¹ so that philosophy and theology form a dialectical unity. The mutual transformation of philosophical ideas and religious images which Eriugena would accomplish in *Periphyseon* was only suggested here, but he was on his way to a “coinherence of *recta ratio* and biblical *auctoritas* that forestalls real conflict between the two and therefore denies any meaningful distinction between philosophy and theology.”³² However, Eriugena is concerned about more here than a hermeneutical procedure; the practice of the liberal arts brings immortality. Eriugena comments that Martianus, one of his few

²⁹ Porphyry 1975:10.

³⁰ Eriugena *Praed.* E.3 PL438C; compare Proclus 2007: §14.

³¹ Eriugena *Praed.* I.1 PL358A; Augustine *De vera religione* V.8.

³² McGinn 1996: 65.

pagan sources, “openly teaches that the study of wisdom makes the soul immortal...all the arts which the rational soul employs are naturally present in all men whether [or not] they make good use of them...and, for this reason, every human soul is made immortal by the study of wisdom which is innate in itself”.³³

This understanding of the study of wisdom, or philosophy, when taken with the interplay between it and religion asserted in *On Divine Predestination*, renders comprehensible his notorious comment: “No one enters heaven unless through philosophy, the seed of splendours”.³⁴ The gloss concerns “a certain woman who speaks of Philosophy”. She has the virtues and the arts at her disposition and brings to mind the *Consolation* of Boethius, which inspired the solution in *On Divine Predestination*.³⁵ In the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy opens the door of heaven in virtue of her capacity to be earthy, human, and heavenly, and even to pierce through the heavens.

Gone with Boethius, Dionysius and Eriugena is the confrontation between Christian and pagan philosophy. For Eriugena, philosophy is neither pagan, as opposed to Christian, nor mundane, as opposed to theology. Dialectic, mystical interpretation, and the itinerarium towards union with God, all belong to its work which is to give us the mind of Christ, for “the perfect human is Christ” (*Peri*. IV PL543B).

NATURE AND GRACE

I am placing the discussion of nature and grace in Augustine at the end in the hope that the foregoing will provide context. If we reify nature and grace, separating them ontologically in a medieval scholastic or modern way, Platonic philosophy becomes a preliminary natural theology through which and from which Augustine passed to a Christian life governed by grace. However, in fact, he lived and thought within the patterns we have considered and they prevent such a separation. The Platonism to which he comes, and within which he lives his Christianity, will not allow nature to set itself up against what comes from above and within as the substance and power of its existence. When an attempt is made to establish it independently in this way, Augustine produces the assertions of the nullity of nature and the totality of grace which characterise his anti-Pelagian writings. Plotinus, were he forced to speak in such a framework, would produce something analogous, as his equation of the fall of the human soul and our desire for independence shows. Moreover, he would agree with Augustine that, although this is not our natural, in the sense of proper, position, humans are born into a fallen state.³⁶

Natural theology takes many forms in Augustine. We have already noted that, in his Genesis commentaries, he followed Philo, the Greek Fathers, and

³³ Eriugena 1939:17.12; cf. 171.10.

³⁴ Eriugena 1939:57.15.

³⁵ Crouse 2004: 108–9.

³⁶ Compare Augustine *De Natura et Gratia*: chapters 3, 33, 69, 75; *Conf.* 6.16.16 and Plotinus, *Enn.* V.1.1.

Ambrose in hexamaeral *physiologia*. Indeed, surpassing them, in the *Confessions*, he places the autobiographical account of his Christian return to his Beginning (Books I-IX) within an allegorical interpretation of Genesis (Books XII-XIII). His fall and redemption belong within the cosmic becoming, both are a “running back to you the One” (*Conf.* 12.28.38). In the same work he repeatedly ascends to the metaphysical by way of the physical, most notably when he depicts the natural world as testifying that it was not the object of his love and that God made it (*Conf.* 10.6.9).

The *Confessions* is overall a search for love and Augustine recounts there how he first learned to love God properly. Because, as also later in the crucial conversion to Platonism at the centre of the work, he is taught this love by a pagan, it might seem to belong to natural theology. However, what happens is not theoretical abstraction. Augustine tells us that in reading Cicero’s *Hortensius*, an exhortation to philosophy, his feelings were changed. It changed his experience, religious practice, values, and desires in respect to God himself: “It altered my prayers, and created in me different purposes and desires.” Inflamed by philosophy, Augustine repented his vain hopes; in their place, he writes: “I lusted for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour of the heart.” Now his conversion begins, and he represents it, in language Neoplatonists use, as the return to the divine source: “I began to rise up to return to you” (*Conf.* 3.4.7-8). This philosophical love of God remained religiously determinative for Augustine.

The method of his treatise *On the Trinity* seems to require natural theology in a standard form. It unites philosophical arguments with what comes from the authority of Scripture and the church to arrive at an understanding of faith. However, as when philosophy taught him the true love of God, it is never discarded. The *De Trinitate* is a metaphysical spiritual exercise, a step-by-step deepening of the understanding that we are essentially rational, what this means, what it makes possible, and what it requires. When Augustine finally reaches the consideration of the inner and superior reason and the image of the Trinity which belongs to it, he makes his principle explicit. The image of the Trinity has been impaired by sin but not lost: “Behold! the mind ... remembers itself, understands itself, and loves itself; if we perceive this, we perceive a Trinity, not yet God indeed, but now finally an image of God” (*Trin.* 14.11). If the essential incorporeal rationality of the human soul could be denied, nothing in the whole itinerarium to beatitude in the contemplation of God would work and the ascent itself would have no purpose. On this account, Augustine returns, in the final book of the *De Trinitate* (15.21), to the philosophical refutation of the Sceptics, a project to which he had devoted himself when preparing for baptism, because now he needs a mirror in which to see the divine Trinity. This is natural theology which will not go away.

Augustine’s greatest telling of how Neoplatonism brought him back to God is the fulcrum point of the *Confessions*. Books again, this time Platonic ones, admonished him now to return into himself. They were the means of God’s own guidance. What he saw on that interior journey, described in Plotinus’ language,

finally gave him the positive conception of incorporeal substance which he required to move beyond Scepticism to Christianity. He encountered immutable light. That is to say, unchanging and unchangeable knowing was both the means and the content of the vision he describes. The identity of knowing and being gave true knowledge of the incorporeal, eternal, and immutable God, and, consequently, of himself, as immortal, incorporeal, but mutable soul. He discovers that the divine life is a triad in one substance: “Eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity”. All else is created by God and is therefore good. The Platonic hierarchy of being enables solving the problem of evil in what we recognise as Proclean, rather than in a Manichean or Plotinian, way—it is a consequence of choosing the lesser good against the higher. Augustine also learns that, through His Word, God provides grace sustaining us and drawing us to himself.³⁷

Of course, Augustine also finds differences between Platonism and Christian teaching. However, of the many things he learned from the Platonist books and will retain, one came to define Augustinian reason and certainly determined something essential in his inter personal experience of Christ, namely, the doctrine of illumination. It is pure Platonism but, when, in Book X, he obeys the Delphic “Gnothi seauton”, the idea that he knows and judges through contact with the immutable light above and within enables him to ask: “Truth, when did you ever fail to walk with me, teaching me what to avoid and what to seek after..?” (*Conf.* 10.40.65) Is such a theology only natural?

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³⁷ Augustine *Conf.* 7.8.12-7.15.21.

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