

Neoplatonist Surprises: The Doctrine of Providence of Plotinus and his Followers both  
Conscious and Unconscious<sup>1</sup>

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We all know the fundamental difference between Plato and Aristotle and between Platonisms and Aristotelianisms—and, in case we forget, we have always Raphael's "School of Athens" to remind us. Aristotle begins with, and makes substantial, the individual particular, the universal is secondary, an abstraction; he concludes with a knowing god, either personal or on the way to personality. Plato, in contrast, makes the universal the primary being and concludes with the "idea of the good" (*Respublica* VI 508e2). Thus, according to the painter of the Stanza della Segnatura, Plato points his finger to the heavens, but Aristotle extends his open hand out over the world below him and its arts and sciences. Yet, if you consult the *Laws*, a different picture starts to form, there "the gods perceive, see, and hear everything, nothing is able to escape them which falls within sense or knowledge" (*Leges* X, 901d) and these gods "are more, not less, careful for small things than for great" (*Leges* X, 900d).

In contrast, Aristotle, although proposing in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the gods take pleasure in intellectual activity and that they favour those humans who most exercise it (*Nico. Eth.* X.viii 1179a28ff.), at best, leaves us with *aporiai* on the divine knowledge and governance of individuals (e.g. *Metaphysica* XII.ix&x). His Peripatetic followers are much more definite. Although, as Alexander of Aphrodisias puts it, fate concerns not the genus but individuals (*De Anima libri mantissa*, XXV, 185.14)<sup>2</sup>, "intellect has itself as its object"; the divine intellects could not know changeable particulars, because "every intellect...comes to be in a way the same as its object" (*Quaestio* 1.25)<sup>3</sup>. Thus, divine providence is for the sake of ordering the change in the sublunar world and for the eternal persistence of its species (*Quaestio* 1.25)<sup>4</sup>. Providence is not for the sake of individuals and it does not intervene to act for or against them (*De Fato* XXX-XXXI).

Moses Maimonides, profiting from a thorough knowledge of the text of Aristotle, and of Peripatetic teachers from Alexander to Averroes, unites Aristotle and the Peripatetic school. He holds that divine providence exercises itself only for the continuity of the sublunar world and to maintain species, but makes an exception in the case of humans. With them, God's providential care is proportional to an individual's intellectual union with the divine intellect (*Guide* III.xvi-xxiii & li). For Maimonides, continuing the Arabic Peripatetic tradition, providence "watches over human individuals according to their perfection and excellence" (*Guide* III.xviii)<sup>5</sup>, binding itself to those who lift themselves towards the divine intellectual overflow, and to the degree and with the same tenacity by which they hold fast to it (*Guide* III.xvii&li). As to the lesser things, he writes:

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<sup>2</sup> In Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Fate*, text, translation and commentary R.W. Sharples (London: Duckworth, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Quaestiones* 1.1-2.15, Ancient Commentators on Aristotle (London: Duckworth, 1992), 83.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>5</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 476.

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 came down in one particular place upon a gnat and killed it by a divine decree and judgment (*Guide* III.xvii, Pines 471).

Neoplatonists, beginning with Plotinus, although using much they learned from Aristotle and Alexander, take up the teaching of the divine Plato. They not only advance his doctrine that the divine providence cares for details and individuals, but they also develop systems, which undergird the doctrine, as well as concepts, which protect it from objections. Just as Alexander defended human freedom against the determinism inherent in the Stoic deification of fate, Neoplatonists protect the reality of human choice against a determinism deduced from divine providence and foreknowledge. Moreover, they preserve the divine perfection against a debasement which would result if the lives of the gods were wrapped up in changing particulars.

In one of his late treatises Plotinus restated the doctrine of Plato with great beauty:

We must conclude that the universal order is forever something of this kind [truly inescapable, truly justice, and wonderful wisdom] from the evidence of what we see in the All, how this order extends to everything, even to the smallest [*μικρότατον*], and the art is wonderful which appears not only in the divine beings but also in the things which one might have supposed providence would have despised for their smallness (III.2.13).<sup>6</sup>

The attachment of the whole Neoplatonic school to this understanding of providence is indicated by the fact that it is carried forward and developed by such figures as Iamblichus and Proclus, Boethius and Dionysius, and that, although completely misunderstanding its source, someone as remote from its origins as Thomas Aquinas is profoundly under its influence. The continuity of the teaching and the effort devoted to maintaining it are evident in the fact that several aspects of the teaching recur, often conveyed in identical phrases, in the texts of these diverse figures. 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;
- 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;

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<sup>6</sup> Generally I follow the translation of A.H. Armstrong in his Loeb Plotinus.

- 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 uniting 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.

An elaboration of the items is impossible in the space of this article. Instead I note just three developments within Neoplatonism which belong to the protection and systematization of Plato's teaching about providence: eternity, perspectivism, and henadic individuality.

The account of providence in Plato's *Laws* arouses a question about divinity: how is it possible that "the gods perceive, see, and hear everything," and are "careful for small things" but also rest and rejoice in their perfection? Aristotle's notion that there is identity between the form of the knowing mind and the form of the thing known exacerbates the problem. Feeling required to deal with questions about fate and providence which Aristotle did not treat, Alexander leaves us 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>7</sup> How can they then retain the divine characteristics of perfection and foreknowledge? Another doctrine of Aristotle prevents a solution: the infinite is measureless both in itself and by the gods (Alexander, *De Fato* XXX). So eternity is endless succession.

The solution begins to emerge in Plotinus. In treating providence he asserts that Divine Intellect creates and governs without the ratiocination or choice which belong to soul and the human. Divine Mind produces without leaving behind its unperturbed quietness.<sup>8</sup> "All that is divine makes according to its nature; but its nature corresponds to its substance".<sup>9</sup> The motionless motion or perfect activity of the creative and providential Divine Mind, where being is thinking and thinking being, is timeless; this is eternity in the new Platonic sense. It is the simultaneous presence of all things with which Augustine and Boethius have made us familiar.<sup>10</sup> When the perspective of providence is eternity and its mode noetic, the problems left by Alexander are solved.

<sup>7</sup> See Sharple's commentary on *De Fato* XXX at p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead* III.2.2.

<sup>9</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead* III.2.13.

<sup>10</sup> See Roland Teske, "Saint Augustine as Philosopher: The Birth of Christian Metaphysics," *Augustinian Studies* 23 (1992): 7-32. Eriugena is following them both in his *De praedestinatione dei* (especially c. XI.), see R.D. Crouse, 'St. Augustine, Semi-Pelagianism and the *Consolation* of Boethius', *Dionysius* 22 (2004): 95-110.

In his *Sentences*, Porphyry places the Plotinian idea that divine power, nature and essence determine divine knowing within a general law: “All things are in all things but everything is accommodated to the *ousia* of each knower: in the intellect according to *noerôs*, in the soul rationally (*logismôs*) ... .”<sup>11</sup> However, he does not develop it in the way Proclus will do, rather he stays with Alexander and the Peripatetics in requiring that god knows things as they are, e.g. indeterminate things indeterminately.<sup>12</sup> Proclus employed the general law in his *De Providentia* to produce exactly the argument Boethius will use (and Aquinas will also need), showing that the divine knowing neither confers its character on what it knows nor acquires its character from the mode of what it knows. Proclus expresses what the Neoplatonists and their followers like Aquinas agree against 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>13</sup>

Boethius found the law conforming the mode of knowing to the knower in Ammonius on the *Peri Hermeneias*. There, Ammonius, like Boethius in his *Second Commentary on the De Interpretatione* and in the *Consolatio*,<sup>14</sup> is arguing against the notion that divine foreknowledge abolishes the contingent. Ammonius solves the problem by a position which he ascribes to *divus Iamblichus*: “that knowledge is intermediate between the knower and the known, since it is the activity of the knower concerning the known”.<sup>15</sup> Ammonius would have known the doctrine from his teacher, Proclus, in whose works it occurs in several contexts, besides the *De Providentia*, for example, in the *Elements of Theology*. The *Elements* is the source of its multiple occurrences in the *Liber de causis*. Its context at Proposition 8 of the *Liber*, as in Proposition 124 of the *Elements*, is the question of the knowledge by intelligences of what is above and below them. Its form is the general assertion that, because it is a substance, every intelligence knows according to the mode of its own substance. Aquinas, who had learned the doctrine very early from Boethius<sup>16</sup>, towards the end of his life, when commenting on Proposition 10 of the *Liber*, draws Dionysius, Augustine and Proclus into an accord on the matter.

The result of the combination of the Neoplatonic doctrine of eternity and of its perspectivism finds its classic expression in the *Consolatio*:

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<sup>11</sup> Porphyry, *Sententiae ad Intelligibilia Ducentes*, ed. E. Lamberz (Leipzig: Teubner, 1975) c. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Carlos Steel's introduction in *On Providence*, trans. Carlos Steel, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> Proclus, *De Prov.* 64 (Steel), see also *Elements of Theology* Proposition 124.

<sup>14</sup> Boethius, *Consolatio*, V.iv.

<sup>15</sup> Ammonius, *Commentaire sur le Peri Hermeneias*, cap. 9, p. 258, lines 74-78 : *cognitio media est inter cognoscentem et id quod cognoscitur, siquidem est operatio cognoscentis circa quod cognoscitur*. Aquinas knew this translation. He used it in his *Expositio Libri Periermeias*, see *Commentaire sur le Peri Hermeneias d'Aristote. Traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke*, édition critique 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, p. 258.

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, *In Sententiarum*, lib. 1, dist. 38, quest. 1, art. 2, resp.: *scilicet modus rei cognitae et modus cognoscentis, modus quidem rei cognitae non est modus cognitionis, sed modus cognoscentis, ut dicit boetius*. See Aquinas, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, ed. Fratrum Praedicatorum, Commissio Leonina: vol. 50 (Rome/ Paris, 1992) *Expositio Capituli Secundi*, p. 133, lines 25-29.

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>17</sup>

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>18</sup>

With Proclus, we arrive at providence, not as the plan in the stability of God's eternal knowing, but as the operation of the gods as *pro-noia*, above mind. We have come to the divine henads and the individuality at the top of the system, grounding the care of the smallest at the bottom. The Successor of Plato writes:

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>19</sup>

Providence belongs to the gods: “Providence is *per se* god, whereas fate is something divine, but not god.”<sup>20</sup> This anticipates the lapidary formula with which Eriugena closed his *De predestinatione dei*: “The predestination of god is god.”<sup>21</sup>

Because it is good for all things, providence must come from god, and it is to the gods that providence draws the human soul. After sketching the hierarchy rising from reasoning soul to intellection, the monads and the gods, Proclus describes the anagogy:

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>22</sup>

For Proclus, real freedom for humans requires outside help. For Aristotle practical virtues were for humans, not the beings more divine than they (*Nico. Eth.* VI.7), but Alexander qualifies this so that men and gods have not the *same* virtues (*De Fato* XXXVII, 210.11-12). 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

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<sup>17</sup> *Cons.* IV.vi.: *quae diuersa esse facile liquebit si quis utriusque uim mente conspexerit; nam prouidentia est ipsa illa diuina ratio in summo omnium principe constituta quae cuncta disponit, fatum uero inhaerens rebus mobilibus dispositio per quam prouidentia suis quaeque necit ordinibus* (the Latin text here and below is that in the Loeb Boethius, new edition, 1973)

<sup>18</sup> *Cons.* IV.vi: *igitur uti est ad intellectum ratiocinatio, ad id quod est id quod gignitur, ad aeternitatem tempus, ad punctum medium circulus, ita est fati series mobilis ad prouidentiae stabilem simplicitatem.*

<sup>19</sup> Proclus, *De Prov.* §7, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Proclus, *De Prov.* §14, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Eriugena, *De praed.* E.3.

<sup>22</sup> Proclus, *De Prov.* §19, 50.

above the human (a doctrine of which Aquinas will be an heir),<sup>23</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>24</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>25</sup> Then it loves to be quiet and will become “speechless and silent in internal silence.”<sup>26</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>27</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>28</sup>

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>29</sup> does for the gods of Aristotle what two recent articles in *Dionysius* by Edward Butler attempt for the henads of Proclus.<sup>30</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>31</sup> Butler’s argument is of importance to my argument 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 they are providence and give it its occupation with individuals. He writes:

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<sup>23</sup> See my “Political, Psychic, Intellectual, Daimonic, Hierarchical, Cosmic, and Divine: Justice in Aquinas, Al-Fârâbî, Dionysius, and Porphyry,” *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 197–218.

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

<sup>25</sup> Proclus, *De Prov.* §31, 55–56.

<sup>26</sup> Proclus, *De Prov.* §31, 56.

<sup>27</sup> Proclus, *De Prov.* §34, 57.

<sup>28</sup> Proclus, *De Prov.* §32, 56.

<sup>29</sup> English translation Richard Bodéüs, *The Theology of the Living Immortals*, trans. Jan Garrett (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

<sup>30</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>31</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being”: 93.

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-positated in each God, lest the universality accorded to Being in relation to *beings* be allowed to usurp the autarchy of each God...<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Butler is confronting a fundamental medieval and contemporary error about Proclus (and Neoplatonism), 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 Henri de Lubac, Jean-Luc Marion, and others.<sup>33</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>34</sup>

There is too much here for us to explore Butler’s ideas any further, but we must at least note that by the notion of a henadic *pro-noia* Proclus has found a way for the gods to be originative, present, and caring without being distracted and debased by knowing and seeing the smallest details and calculating and arranging their connections and outcomes. By placing their care for us above knowledge and ontology, Proclus has produced the same result as Aquinas and Boethius do by ascribing providence to a divine mind possessing a simultaneous all-encompassing intuition surpassing the difference of individual and genus. He has also probably provided the logic of the Eastern Christian development of the doctrine of God and its logic of the trinity where the divine essence infinitely exceeds its activities (energies). But of this we shall say absolutely nothing.

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<sup>32</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being”: 103.

<sup>33</sup> 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 at 701–703, “Neoplatonism and Contemporary French Philosophy,” *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 161–190 at 178–180, and *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History*, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Butler, “The Gods and Being”: 94–5.