

Tight Neo-Platonist Henology and Slack Christian Ontology: Christianity as an Imperfect Neo-Platonism

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Introduction

ROBERT SOKOLOWSKI says that it is more difficult for Christianity to come to terms with Plato and Platonism than with Aristotle, precisely because Platonism seems closer. It is easy, he says, to distinguish the Christian God from Aristotle's first mover. The possibility of identifying God with the Good and the One beyond being, however, is seductive, and many Christian thinkers have borrowed Platonist expression to articulate Christian belief. Sokolowski is nonetheless certain that what Plato and Plotinus named the One is not the God of the Bible.¹

I think Sokolowski is correct on both counts: the One is not the God of the Bible, but it can be difficult to distinguish them.

I will be concerned in this essay with Platonism in its neo-Platonic form, and with Christianity in the expression it finds in St. Thomas.

Many studies have picked out the relation between St. Thomas and the Platonists, indicating identities and differences.² I want to pick out the

¹ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 50–51.

² Foundational is Robert Henle, S.J., *Saint Thomas and Platonism: A Study of the "Plato" and "Platonici" texts in the Writings of Saint Thomas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), for St. Thomas's own view of his relation to Platonism, and on such discrete topics as participation, human cognition, and the human soul. See the important review of this book, however, by Norris Clarke, "St. Thomas and Platonism," *Thought* 32 (1958): 437–43. For the actual relation of St. Thomas to Platonism, one can begin with Wayne Hankey, "Aquinas and the Platonists," in

difference at a point where St. Thomas seems most of all to be close to neo-Platonism, and that is in St. Thomas's adoption of the *exitus-reditus* pattern for expressing the relation of God to what he produces. As Jean Trouillard says, speaking of Christian and neo-Platonist transcendence, "the same language can mask very different ideas."³ While I do not accept the still common thesis of M.-D. Chenu that this pattern structures the *Summa theologiae* as a whole, as does Wayne Hankey, I do accept Hankey's demonstration of *exitus-reditus* loops or circles within the *Summa*, patterns the detail of which he shows for the *prima pars* in his book *God in Himself*.⁴ The difference I want to draw attention to within the loops has to do with the necessity with which they unfold. Hankey himself has drawn attention to this, to be sure.⁵ My ambition in this essay is to show how this difference is related to quite fundamental metaphysical and theological positions.

Exitus and Reditus in St. Thomas

Let us look at the circles. Hankey takes it that the *Summa* as a whole describes "the Neoplatonic structure of remaining, *exitus*, and *reditus*, by which all things except the One return upon their principle."⁶ Within the great circle, however, there are many smaller circles, those of St.

The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: A Lexicographic Approach, ed. Maarten J. F. M. Hoenen and Stephen Gersh (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 279–324. See also Fran O'Rourke, "Aquinas and Platonism," in *Contemplating Aquinas: On the Varieties of Interpretation*, ed. Fergus Kerr, O.P. (London: SCM Press, 2003), 247–79.

³ Jean Trouillard, *L'Un et l'Âme selon Proclus* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1972), 5.

⁴ Wayne Hankey, *God in Himself: Aquinas' Doctrine of God as Expounded in the Summa Theologiae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and cf., more recently (2003), his "Aquinas' Doctrine of God Between Ontology and Henology," *classics.dal.ca/Files/Dieu_Laval.doc*. See also Jan Aertsen, *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas's Way of Thought* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 44–45, on "circulation" in St. Thomas. For Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P., on the plan of the *Summa*, see *Toward Understanding St. Thomas* (Chicago: Regnery, 1964). For criticism of Chenu's position, see Michel Corbin, *Le chemin de la théologie chez Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974), 788–91, and more recently Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 11–18.

⁵ Wayne Hankey, "Ab Uno Simplici Non Est Nisi Unum: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas's Doctrine of Creation," in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev'd Dr. Robert D. Crouse*, ed. Willemien Otten, Walter Hannam, and Michael Treschow, *Studies in Intellectual History* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 309–33.

⁶ Hankey, "Aquinas' Doctrine of God," 3.

Thomas's treatment of the names of God, of the divine operations, of the Trinity of persons, of creation as a whole, and finally, of salvation. Hankey importantly observes that each circle is differentiated from the one before by "more and more differentiated processions" as we go down the list.⁷ The unfolding of the *prima pars* is the unfolding of an increasingly complex network of relations, rational and real, and of things and natures as we proceed from the divine names to the operations, on to the distinction of persons, and of creatures. We want also, however, to follow things back up, considering the kind of return that is envisaged for the rational creature, and, adding the *tertia*, considering as well the concrete means by which this is achieved. In the ascent, in other words, we have to consider the supernatural character both of the end and therefore perforce of the *via* by which human beings return to God, namely, the incarnate Word. In each case, on each level, we need to focus on: (1) what things are being distinguished on this level, and (2) by what principle or principles these things are distinguished.

Questions 3–11: The Distinction of Names

The circle of the names, from question 3 to question 11, moves from the divine simplicity, which is a denial of composition, through the discussion of the dispersal, as it were, of the divine essence present everywhere (question 8) and every when (question 9), to the divine unity, which is a positive appreciation of the uniqueness of God explicitly recalling this circle's point of departure in the divine simplicity. The distinct names we have for God correspond to no real distinction in God. The names are not synonymous, but the perfections they signify are one and united in God. Thus they all signify one thing, but under diverse aspects, according to different conceptions of the human intellect (q. 13, a. 4). The names, human names for divine things, are of course distinct from one another; "infinite" is not "omnipotent." The things, the aspects, are also distinct one from another in our mind insofar as our understanding of infinity is not the same as our understanding of omnipotence, and so on. In God, however, the realities so named and understood are not distinct at all: the divine infinity is the divine omnipotence is the divine eternity is the divine omnipresence. It is in virtue of one and the same divine perfection that all the names are suited to him; he is universally perfect, as Thomas has it, and "he contains the whole perfection of being in himself" (q. 4, a. 2). So, one must say that the principle of the distinction of names is, in one respect, the plenitude of the divine perfection, and, in

⁷ Ibid.

another respect, the limitation of the human mind, which understands one rich reality only under many penurious aspects.⁸

Questions 14–26: The Distinction of Operations

The discussion of the divine operations moves from understanding (question 14), the most immanent of operations, through will (question 19) and providence (question 22), which are directed to reality *ad extra*, and back to intellection, for beatitude consists in an act of understanding (question 26).

The operations, like the names, are not really distinct, either from one another or from the divine being. God's understanding, his willing, his loving, his providing for his creatures are all one with his being (q. 14, a. 4; q. 19, a. 1). However, as Hankey notes, the first two operations put God in relation to himself, as the principal object of his knowledge and will.⁹ What is the nature of this relation? It is rational, not real, and in both directions. In the very conception—our conception—of the operations of intellect and will, we must understand a duality of operation and object, even if they are not really distinct in God. That is, to think the divine understanding, we must think it understanding something, even if we assert in the next breath that the principal object of God's understanding is himself, and that there is no distinction of his being and operation. God's understanding is himself, and so object and operation turn out to be really the same (q. 14, aa. 2 and 4). So also with his will.

Thomas considers here also the divine power—the divine operation which by definition, as it were, refers to an external effect, an effect composed of the created natures really distinct from the divine nature.¹⁰ Creation has already been anticipated, however, when it was asked whether and how God knows and loves anything other than himself, or even when it was asked how God is related to created duration and place. He knows others in knowing how he can be imitated, and the divine ideas are many only rationally (q. 15, a. 2). And he loves creatures as unto an end in loving himself as the end. Just as when God is said to know and love created things there is a real distinction between object and act, so it

⁸ Already in question 2, article 3, God is named according to the distinct ways in which he can be the cause of created being. According to the fourth way, he is "cause of being, and of goodness, and of whatever other perfection there is." Questions 3 through 11 can therefore be thought to be an elaboration of God known in this way.

⁹ Hankey, *God in Himself*, 97–98, 109.

¹⁰ Power is said to bear on what the will commands at *ST* I, q. 25, a. 1, ad 4; it is understood as referred to what is not God, therefore, and notwithstanding the identity *in re* of *potestas generandi* and *potestas creandi*.

is with the divine power. The distinction, however, is asymmetrical. In all three cases, God, and his understanding, willing, and making, are rationally related to creatures; creatures are really related to God's knowledge, love, and power. The ground of the distinction between God and creatures as known and loved is the divine power, for there are no things other than God for God to know and love unless he makes them.

The principle of the distinction of operations themselves is, as for the divine names, the divine perfection: there is will in God because there is knowledge (q. 19, a. 1), and there is knowledge in God because he is the most immaterial of all things (q. 14, a. 1), and he is immaterial because perfect (q. 4, a. 1).

Questions 27–43: The Distinction of Persons

The treatment of the Trinity begins with the processions (question 27), finds one return in the notional acts (question 41), which are the processions considered as belonging to the persons, and another end in question 42, where we are returned to the unity of essence. Following Denys and the *Liber de causis* and ultimately Proclus, Thomas distinguishes the essence, powers, and operations of substances. Of a set purpose he has treated the operations before the persons, contrary to the order of the *Sentences*, because the principle of the processions is located in the operations.¹¹ The persons, to be sure, are really distinct. Paradoxically, however, the principles of the processions, which are the divine understanding and the divine love, are not really distinct from one another. Accordingly, as speaking proceeds from understanding, so does the Word proceed from the Father, and in their mutual opposition of speaking-spoken, begetting-begotten, Father and Son are really distinct from one another, but not, of course, from the divine understanding and being. Again, in the way that the beloved is in the lover, so the divine goodness is in the divine love, and in their mutual opposition of “breathing” and “breathed,” Father and Son are really distinct from the Spirit, and vice versa.

Questions 44–119: The Distinction of Creatures

The treatment of creatures begins with the procession of all things from God (question 44), proceeds through the distinction of creatures angelic, corporeal, and human, each considered distinctly, and ends in the unity of the divine government of all things. On this level, we come at last to a distinction of natures, of one created nature from another, and of each from the divine nature. The principle of the distinction is the divine

¹¹ Hankey, *God in Himself*, 27ff.

wisdom (q. 47, a. 1), and the principle of the reality of the distinction is the divine will and power. Accordingly, as the divine wisdom is expressed in the Word, one can of course also say that the second Person is the principle of the distinction of creatures, and as the divine love proceeds in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is the principle of the production of creatures. It is to be remembered, however, that the love of God whence creatures proceed is free. One can say that there is a *convenientia* in the fact that supreme Goodness shares itself with others, and this *convenientia*, as well as the distinction of creatures, is an object of the divine wisdom. Because creatures are no necessary means to God's love and enjoyment of himself, however, they are willed freely.

This freedom embraces both the fact of there being any thing distinct from God, and the array of creatures the divine will chooses.¹² The infinity of the divine being means that it is infinitely imitable and thus not perfectly imitable by any one created and finite nature, however richly endowed. There will therefore be many created natures in the world (q. 47, a. 1). A real world, however, must contain natures that are compossible, and must necessarily be finite as to both the kinds and numbers of kind of creatures (see q. 7, aa. 2 and 4). So there is a choice of kinds. This choice is not arbitrary, and cannot be, for in each case the creature, as an imitation of divine goodness, is good. And that is a sufficient reason of its being chosen (see q. 19, a. 2).

The Prima Secundae

Last, there is the circle of salvation. The nature and end of the divine government of men is considered, beginning with the questions on man's end (questions 1–5 of the *prima secundae*); passing through the consideration of human acts, their intrinsic principles, the divine and indeed supernatural principles of law and grace that enable human acts to bear on the end; and finishing with the merit by which the acts attain the end (question 114).

The distinction of natures necessarily brings with it a distinction of ends, since each nature moves to its own end, its own "happiness" as suited to that end, to which end there is inscribed in each nature a natural desire. Nature, end or proportionate end, natural desire—all these are strictly coordinate with one another.¹³ To say "proportionate end," however, bespeaks an end beyond the proportion of nature. To distinguish between the proportionate end of human nature and the supernatural

¹² See John H. Wright, S.J., *The Order of the Universe in the Theology of St. Thomas* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1957), on the parts and order of the created world.

¹³ For texts, see Aertsen, *Nature and Creature*, 342–50.

end of human nature is to report the fact of Christian hope over against the world of Aristotelian nature, as its foil. Again, every nature is by itself, “naturally,” in potency to its end, as to its characteristic (typical, specific, determinate) end. This is played off against “obediential potency,” the potency whereby a creature is in potency to a supernatural end, supposing God has so ordained things.¹⁴

The principle by which there can be distinguished a proportionate end and a supernatural end for human beings and angels is not the natures themselves just as such and insofar as they are distinct from God. Rather, supposing the distinction of the natures from God, it resides in the divine wisdom, goodness, and freedom as envisioning, loving, and choosing an end for angels and men beyond the proportion of their nature.

The distinction of ends, natural and supernatural, is a greater distinction than that of the natures themselves. It presupposes the distinction of natures, but then distinguishes ends in such a way that God is introduced into the world in a way one could not predict or expect on the basis of creation alone, when that means merely “something distinct from God.”

The Concrete Realization of Our End

The *tertia pars* lays out the conditions of the realization of our end, which are Christ and the sacraments of Christ. De facto, the Incarnation is presented as occurring on condition of sin; it depends on the logically prior divine permission of sin. The distinction between the divine positive willing of the good and the divine permitting of evil is no real distinction in God, although, should creatures sin, it entails a real distinction in creation between creatures as they should be and creatures as they in fact are. That is, the realization of sin, the failure of created freedom, introduces a distinction between fallen and sinful creation and creation as willed by God. It is the only distinction that does not depend on God. It depends on God only in that the creatures who sin depend on God. But sin itself is not willed by God in any way, either directly, as an end or a means, or indirectly (ST I, q. 19, a. 9, ad 3). Whatever is, of course, is good, and so willed by God. That the distinction between fallen and originally willed man can occur at all therefore depends strictly on the analysis of moral evil as a privation. All other distinctions, distinctions involving natural evil, and distinctions involving punishment and healing grace and

¹⁴ For texts and a brief account of the quarrel over the application of the notion of obediential potency to man's end, see Aertsen, 290–92, 364–66. For a defense of the intelligibility and faithfulness to St. Thomas of Cardinal Cajetan's use of the notion, see Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010), 101–65.

forgiveness after sin, depend originally on the divine wisdom, goodness, and freedom.

Observations

From the simplicity of God and the Trinity of Persons within the unity of the divine nature, we come to many composite natures, to a more than natural end for the rational nature, and to the strange condition under which that end is achieved, the mission of the Son, according to which we behold a created reality not only sustained by the divine power but a created nature in which a divine person subsists. The actual complications of reality go far beyond that of the distinction and multiplicity of creatures, given the supernatural character of man's end, grace, the permission of evil, and the Incarnation of the Son.

In the progression from names and perfections to operations and thence to persons, the distinctions of divine persons are the first real distinctions. They are presupposed to the subsequent distinction of creator and creature, but unlike all other real distinctions, they do not depend in some way on freedom, and they are the only real distinctions that are not a function of choice, divine or angelic or human.¹⁵ That there be any distinction of natures, on the other hand, is a function of the divine choice.¹⁶ The distinction between good and evil moral actions, another real distinction, depends on the angelic and human will. One may say that the distinction between good and evil is a function of the divine wisdom and goodness; it does not, however, distinguish anything real until there exist evil actions, which, supposing the divine permission, are a function of created will and in no way—directly or indirectly—of the divine will.¹⁷

Given the Incarnation, it can even be said that the will of a divine person responds to created personal freedom.¹⁸ This is a *novum*, for even with the reality of sin the divine will should not be said to “respond” to created, personal will, so much as to have willed consequences to foreseen free choices even when such choices are defective. “Before ever a word is on my

¹⁵ To be sure, the fact that the distinction of the divine persons is not an object of divine choice does not render the distinction opposed to the divine will or mean that the persons are a result of an “impersonal” nature. I thank Christopher Malloy for this precision.

¹⁶ Recall that according to *Summa theologiae* I, q. 15, a. 2, corpus and ad 3, the divine ideas are multiplied only according to the actual existence of creatures. Therefore, I say not simply that the *distincta*, but that the distinctions, are a function of the divine choice.

¹⁷ See *ST* I, q. 19, a. 9.

¹⁸ See Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 75.

tongue, you knew it through and through,” and “all my days were made known to you before one of them came into being” (Ps 139). Given the Incarnation, however, the human will of the Son of God freely responds to the will of Mary and Joseph, of Peter, of Zacchaeus, of Pilate. The Son of God responds, via his human will. The condition of the possibility of “theo-drama” is the Incarnation, not the creation of finite freedom all by itself.

It is to be observed that the divine freedom plays a crucial role at five places in the ever richer array of distinctions, aspects, persons, etc. in their ordered descent and ascent: first, for the creation of anything whatsoever that is really distinct from the divine nature; second, for the array of created natures actually obtaining; third, for the call of man to a supernatural end, the vision of God; fourth, for the permission of sin; and fifth, for the Incarnation of the Word.

The assertion of the first freedom is express and prominent in *ST I*, q. 19, aa. 3 and 4. The assertion of the second is implied at q. 47, a. 1, ad 2. The assertion of the third is to be found by implication wherever the gratuity of the end or superaddedness of grace and the gifts is asserted.¹⁹ The assertion of the fourth is deployed already in *ST I*, q. 19, a. 9, ad 3.²⁰ The assertion of the fifth freedom is express at *ST III*, q. 1, a. 2.

Freedom and Necessity in the *Exitus* and *Reditus*

In the remainder of this essay I will concentrate mainly on the first and third moments of the divine freedom, but they are all important ways in which St. Thomas modifies neo-Platonism, and modifies it in order, as it were, to Christianize it. Neo-Platonism unmodified and indeed insufficiently modified by Christianity has the following features. First, it is a metaphysics in which the One necessarily overflows, in which the world necessarily proceeds from the One. Plotinus:

The One has no such end [to which it moves], so we must not consider that it moves. If anything comes into being after it, we must think that it necessarily does so while the One remains continually turned toward itself.²¹

¹⁹ *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4; q. 56, a. 3; q. 62, aa. 1 and 2; I–II, q. 62, a. 1; q. 68, a. 1; q. 106, a. 1, ad 2; q. 109, aa. 2 and 5; q. 112, a. 1; q. 114, a. 2.

²⁰ The possibility that the angels may take such permission is asserted at *ST I*, q. 63, a. 1, and actuality of the angelic taking of the permission at *ST I*, q. 63, a. 3. The possibility that man may take such permission is to be found in *ST I–II*, q. 18, aa. 1–4, and again at qq. 75–80; and the actuality of man’s taking the permission is found at *ST I–II*, qq. 81–83, where Adam’s sin is taken as a fact.

²¹ Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978–1988) V.1.6.11.16–19. Numbers following chapter numbers in citations

And:

[The second] must be a radiation from it [the One] while it remains unchanged, like the bright light of the sun. . . . All things which exist, as long as they remain in being, necessarily produce from their own substances . . . a surrounding reality directed to what is outside them, a kind of image of the archetypes from which it was produced.²²

In the great treatise on the freedom of the One, Plotinus is concerned to deny that the One is subject to coercion or some law extrinsic to it in producing the world or that the world occurs by chance. Rather, in choosing himself, the One chooses himself as the producer or, perhaps better, the production of all things. But it is not to be thought that another choice of himself could have been made; what is, is best and so must be as it is.²³ Proclus takes the same view of the necessity of the first principle's production.²⁴ For Christian neo-Platonism, this view is an invitation to say that God necessarily creates the world.

Second, in unmodified neo-Platonism, what emanates from the One necessarily returns and returns perfectly to the One. Plotinus:

[T]his is the soul's true end, to touch that light [of the One] and see it by itself, not by another light, but by the light which is also its means of seeing. It must see that light by which it is enlightened.²⁵

For Christian neo-Platonism, this translates into the view that God must call his rational and intellectual creatures to the divine beatitude of the vision of God. Correlatively, this is the view that there is an innate, natural desire in man for the vision of God, in the same way that Plotinus thinks

to the *Enneads* are to the line numbers (ll.) in Armstrong's edition. I will use Armstrong's translation exclusively when citing the *Enneads*.

²² Ibid., V.1.6.ll.29–34. In this passage, Plotinus denies that the second comes from the One by “any inclination or act of will”; he means, by any act of will that could be distinct from the One. In VI.8 he identifies the One with such an act.

²³ See Ibid., VI.8.13.ll.28–29: “[I]t is not possible to apprehend him [the One] without the will to be by his own agency what he is.” And ll.33–34: “For what could he have wished to be except this which he is?”

²⁴ Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, trans. (with commentary) E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 29–33, Propositions 25, 26, 27; idem, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, in *Proclus on the Causes of the Cosmos and its Creation*, ed. and trans. David T. Ruina and Michael Share, vol. 2, bk. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), at 29e1–2; 229, on the eternity of creation, and 230, the standard illustrations of sun and fire.

²⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads* V.3.17.ll.34–37. See VI.8.15. For Proclus, see *The Elements of Theology*, 35–37, Propositions 31, 32, 33; and Jean Trouillard, *L'Un et l'Âme*, 84ff.

there is an innate, natural desire in man to return to the One.²⁶ This issue, to be sure, has been more prominent than the first; it is the issue of whether Henri de Lubac's *Surnaturel* is thinkable as a Christian dogmatic position. It would seem that it is not; for if the desire is innate, it is unconditional, and if it is unconditional, it proves the possibility of the vision of God.²⁷

Third, in Plotinus and Proclus, what emanates from the One is a kind of plenum, a "greater world than which cannot be thought," for the Good is ungrudging, and whatever it can produce it does produce. Fourth, in Plotinus at any rate, if not in Proclus, it is a metaphysics where evil is necessarily enacted by finite freedom. I return to this briefly in the next section. Fifth, because the world is a plenum, because the world itself is the fullest revelation of God possible, there can be no such thing as "special revelation" or such revelation as is comprised in the Incarnation. I have explored the third and fifth issue elsewhere. Here, I concentrate on the freedom of creation and the distinct freedom of the rational and intellectual creatures' call to a supernatural end—the two moments of the divine freedom that were embraced in the phrase "double gratuity."

The second issue, that of our end, is perhaps easier to focus than the first. An innate, natural desire for the vision of God really does destroy the supernatural and un-owed character of the destiny we have been assigned in the providence of God and the gratuity of grace which moves us to the end, and so is contrary to Catholic teaching. That it denies the gratuity of grace is massively demonstrated by Lawrence Feingold. Its contrariety to Catholic doctrine finds expression in Pius XII's *Humani Generis*. Its existential or dramatic import is easy to see, too. To say I cannot be happy unless I see God face to face, and this by my nature, paradoxically destroys the quality of Christian final happiness, which depends precisely on its unexpected character, its quality as a gift that need not be given but that, beyond all that we could naturally hope for, has been given.²⁸

The difficulty of the distinction of ends, natural and supernatural, depends on two things. First, there is the fact that what is first given to the Christian mind is the supernatural end. Second, there is the way in which this fact is given to us. The full and perfect knowledge of our supernatural

²⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.9.9.

²⁷ See Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God*, xxiii–xxxvii.

²⁸ I think de Lubac is correct that his formulation escapes the condemnation of *Humani Generis* but only, as it were, on a technicality, in that he can say that while God could create some intellectual creature not ordered to the vision of God, so satisfying the letter of Pius XII, God has in fact created human beings such that by their nature they are so ordered. His position nonetheless does not escape the existential or dramatic consideration I allege.

end is given only with Christ. The New Testament, furthermore, gives us to say not only that its realization *de facto* is through Christ and by our inclusion in Christ, but also that the presupposition of this end is *creation* in Christ (Col 1:16).²⁹ Because we are created in Christ, it cannot be that we are not called to the supernatural end of conformation to Christ. If we are created in and by and for Christ, if creation is so conceived as to make one thing in fact with the order of redemption according to which our final destiny is to be taken up into the Trinitarian relations as sons of God conformed to Christ by the Spirit, it can seem that it is not possible to think that the gift of creation is logically distinct from the gift of grace and sonship. Only slowly do we come to understand that we do not see any *necessity* connecting our end to Christ and our beginning to creation in Christ. We see the “one thing” that being created, being created in Christ, being redeemed by Christ, is. Only slowly do we see that, even so, being called to intimacy with God is not necessarily given with the divine will to create precisely as such. And given such an invitation, only slowly do we see that Christ, the Incarnation of the Word, is no necessary way to the attainment of our supernatural end, even under the condition of sin.

The Fathers, after all, do not discuss the gratuity of our end. It is implicitly asserted at the Second Council of Orange. For magisterial teaching bearing on this issue clearly and distinctly focused, however, we must wait for the condemnation of Baius and the teaching of modern times contained in *Dei Filius* (First Vatican Council) and *Humani Generis*.³⁰

Even so, “not seeing a necessity” is not enough. In itself it permits, but does not require, the assertion of gratuity, double gratuity. The positive assertion of gratuity requires a demonstration. Only when a consideration of man as having a nature meets man as created and called by God does such a demonstration become possible. St. Augustine knows of the gratuity of our end, but it does not occur to him expressly to measure it against a natural end, because he does not think in terms of natures.³¹

²⁹ I mean, of course, the incarnate Christ. See Pierre Benoît, O.P., “Préexistence et incarnation,” *Revue Biblique* 77 (1970): 5–29.

³⁰ See Denzinger Schönmetzer (*Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 32nd ed.: hereafter DS) 3005 (*Dei Filius*), DS 3891 (*Humani Generis*). Second Orange (DS 337) and Pelagius I (DS 443) make the beatitude of man depend on grace. Pius XI, in *Casti Connubii* (DS 3714) has it that grace is the principle of supernatural life; this is indirectly asserted at Second Orange (DS 373 and 377), where grace is opposed to a purely natural principle.

³¹ Nor, of course, has the distinction between the natural and the supernatural orders been worked out, the work of the first part of the thirteenth century. See Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. J. Patout Burns (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 13–19.

The first issue, too, the gratuity of creation, is of crucial import. Denying the gratuity of creation changes the quality of the drama just as much as does denying the second. The difference between neo-Platonism and Christianity is sometimes downplayed in one fashion or another, but I think wrongly. Notwithstanding Jean Trouillard, it is very difficult to extricate Plotinian emanation from the necessity commonly associated with it.³² Notwithstanding A. Hilary Armstrong, Christianity can by no means be satisfied with holding that the only necessity we need be concerned to deny is the necessity that depends on a principle extrinsic to God.³³ For his part, Eric Perl does not downplay the difference, but rather thinks the ordinarily supposed Christian alternative to emanation cannot be stated without contradiction.³⁴

To think the difference small compromises the unconditionality of the gift of being and destroys the astonishment the Christian experiences of our being here at all, which cannot be elicited if it cannot be played off against the possibility, really thinkable, that we had never been. The Christian character of the astonishment is parasitic on the apprehension that we need not be here at all in any sense or under any aspect or description whatsoever. To say we must be created, even when the necessity is said to be a necessity of love, will therefore change the quality of our gratitude. If I am in any sense necessary to God, then it seems strictly to follow that, did I not exist, God would be other than he is. Plotinus denies this,³⁵ but

³² Jean Trouillard, *La Procession Plotinienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 69–80. Trouillard thinks opposing the operation of nature to personal initiative is “un peu facile” (76), and that we ought to think of emanation as beyond necessity and contingency (80). See also his “Procession néoplatonicienne et création judeo-chrétienne,” in *Néoplatonisme: mélanges offerts à Jean Trouillard* Cahiers de Fontenay nos. 19–22 (Fontenay-les-Roses, 1981), 1–30, esp. at 10.

³³ A. Hilary Armstrong, “Plotinus and Christianity,” in *Platonism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Stephen Gersh and Charles Kannengiesser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 115–30, at 121–22, where he thinks the alternative to Plotinus is a “bare” and arbitrary act of will. See also his “Two Views of Freedom: A Christian Objection in Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.8[39]7, 11–15?” in *Studia Patristica*, XVII, Part 1 (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 397–406.

³⁴ Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 49–51. For Perl, the One should not be said to overflow so much as to be Overflowing; the One is not a Producer so much as Production. And if we say the One overflows of necessity, this should not be understood to mean that the One submits to some law distinct from or extrinsic to itself. Perl undertakes in this book to show again and again the identity of doctrine of Plotinus, Proclus, and Dionysius.

³⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads* V.1.6.11.23–27.

one wonders with what coherence, if it be the case that the One produces by choosing *himself* as the source of all that he produces.³⁶

At the conclusion of this section, I wish to emphasize that the differences between Christian tradition and neo-Platonism on these two issues are not, for the Catholic Christian, merely speculative, such that we can incline to one or the other as we weigh the arguments. Rather, they are doctrinal. The necessities included in the neo-Platonic view are contrary to defined Catholic doctrine. This is easiest to see with regard to the freedom of creation. Irenaeus and Augustine provide very clear statements of God's freedom in creating.³⁷ There is the implication of the condemnation of Pelagianism for the gratuity not only of grace but of our end. Explicit magisterial assertions of the gratuities are, however, late. Why the doctrines in question are articulated so late in Christian tradition is another question, but in part, one suspects the role of neo-Platonism itself.

Henological Necessity and Ontological Freedom

It is now time to show how this difference between neo-Platonism and Christianity, between Plotinus and St. Thomas, flows from certain basic principles.

For the necessities in Plotinus, we can repair to an article by Leo Sweeney, "Basic Principles in Plotinus' Philosophy." The principles are three.

³⁶ Ibid., VI.8.20.11.14–19 and VI.8.14.11.41–42. For the One as origin of all else by first choosing itself to be such, see Trouillard, *Procession*, 80; John Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 83; Georges Leroux, "Human Freedom in the Thought of Plotinus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 292–93; and Maria Luisa Gatti, "Plotinus: The Platonic Tradition and the Foundation of Neoplatonism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, 30.

³⁷ See *The Teachings of the Church Fathers*, ed. John R. Willis, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), no. 84. There are not so many clear witnesses here as one might expect. On the other hand, moreover, there is this from Gregory of Nazianzen: "But since this movement of self-contemplation alone could not satisfy Goodness, but Good must be poured out and go forth beyond Itself to multiply the objects of Its beneficence, for this is essential to the highest Goodness, He first conceived the Heavenly and Angelic Powers" (Oration 38, *On the Theophany or Birthday of Christ*, ix, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff [New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1984], 347). The very nature of God as goodness requires the production of creatures, and this seems as Plotinian as one could want. It is worthwhile to note that John Damascene's paraphrase of this passage in the *Orthodox Faith* II, 2, removes any note of necessity, and makes it rather a statement of suitability, of *convenientia*.

First, “to be real is to be one.”³⁸ This means that nothing distinct from the One can be adequately distinct from it and still real. Accordingly, as distinctions are real, one proceeds into unreality. This means further that the principle of contradiction, a principle of being, after all, does not have universal empire. What follows from the One both is and is not the One.³⁹ Second, “whatever is genuinely real must by that very fact cause subsequent realities, which turn back to their source”⁴⁰ in love and desire. The emanation of being from the One cannot not happen, and the One is at once the Good, “good *to* others by producing them automatically and necessarily, good *for* others as the object of their seeking.”⁴¹ The return, further, is to the One itself in itself. There is no end for creatures that is not “supernatural.”⁴² Third and last, “whatever is prior is of greater reality than that which is subsequent.”⁴³ And this gives us a universe not of two, but of many grades, at least those four great grades of the One, Intellect, Soul, and nature.

The first principle is the most important.⁴⁴ Here is a nice expression of it:

Everything which is brought into being by something else is either in that which made it or in another thing, if there is something after what made it. . . . The last and lowest things, therefore, are in the last of those before them, and these are in those prior to them, and one thing is in another up to the First, which is the Principle.⁴⁵

This first principle finds very clear expression, moreover, in Proclus’s *Elements*, Proposition 30: “All that is immediately produced by any principle both remains in the producing cause and proceeds from it.” And Proclus explains:

In so far . . . as it has an element of identity with the producer, the product remains in it; in so far as it differs, it proceeds from it. But being like it, it is at once identical with it in some respects and different from it:

³⁸ Leo Sweeney, “Basic Principles in Plotinus’ Philosophy,” in *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 250. This article first appeared in 1961 in the *Gregorianum*.

³⁹ Ibid. For Proclus, see Jean Trouillard, *L’Un et l’Âme*, 8.

⁴⁰ Sweeney, “Basic Principles,” 251.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 252.

⁴⁴ Sweeney sends us to *Enneads* V.5.5.ll.11ff., VI.6.1.ll.1ff and ll.19ff., VI.9.1.ll.1ff.

⁴⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads* V.5.9.ll.1ff. And see, toward the end of the chapter, ll.30ff.

accordingly, it both remains and proceeds, and the two relations are inseparable.⁴⁶

Dodds comments:

It will be noticed that Pr[oclus] does not in the present passage attempt to determine *in what sense* the lower is “in” the higher, and in what sense outside it; but elsewhere (*in Tim.* I.210.2) he has the interesting phrase *heautois men proeléluthe, menei de tois theois* [while they proceed to themselves they remain in the gods]. If this be pressed, it must mean that the separateness of the lower is an illusion resulting from a partial point of view, and it follows that the sensible and the intelligible cosmos are both of them appearance, and only the One fully real. This doctrine was never accepted by the Neoplatonists, but they often seem to be on the verge of falling into it.⁴⁷

It may be added further that between the first and the second principles there is the tension of how the One, which as the Good necessarily produces what is good, necessarily produces also what is bad because in some way separate from—not one with—the One. In this sense, evil is built in to the universe necessarily. The sin of the soul in descending and completing the universe manifests in its ambiguity the original procession from the One itself.⁴⁸

When we turn to St. Thomas, we see that it is true that he shares with Plotinus the conviction that whatever wealth creatures have is already in God. The creatures themselves, however, are not in God. The first principle of Plotinus that Sweeney picks out, by contrast, means that in some way they are in God. “Every effect is distinct from and yet *identified with its cause*.”⁴⁹ This is a function of neo-Platonist henological commitment.

⁴⁶ Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 35. See Proposition 35: “Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts upon it.”

⁴⁷ Dodds, commentary on Prop. 30, in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 217.

⁴⁸ See for example Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.8.5.ll.17–18. See John M. Rist, “The Problem of ‘Otherness’ in the *Enneads*,” in idem, *Platonism and Its Christian Heritage* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), VIII, which originally appeared in *Le Néoplatonisme. Colloque international du C.N.R.S., Royaumont, juin 1969* (Paris: Editions du C.N.R.S., 1973), 77–87, at 84 (commenting on *Enneads* III.8.8): “[H]e says that the One somehow desired to possess all things, and it would have been better if this had not been the case. The only thing that this can mean, if Plotinus’ consistency is to be saved, is that if things other than the One are to exist, evil must ultimately exist.” Cf. St. Thomas, for whom there can be no naturally evil angel, *ST I*, q. 63, a. 4.

⁴⁹ Leo Sweeney, “Doctrine of Creation in the *Liber de Causis*,” in *Divine Infinity*, 289–307, at 306. Sweeney is speaking of Proclus, but this is true of Plotinus too.

St. Thomas, by contrast, must be described as an “ontologist.” For him, the first name of God is “He Who Is.” Sweeney:

In a position where reality is coterminous with being, real distinction is almost a law of reality: for *A* and *B* both to be real, *A* must have its own being, and *B*, its own. If *A* is *B*, then one or the other loses its own entity and is unreal.⁵⁰

Here, the world is not God and God is not the world, both are (analogously) real, and they are adequately distinct.

The difference can be expressed in terms of otherness. Things are other than the One, but the One is not other than the things; it is not constituted by otherness.⁵¹ If the One were other than things, they and the world of them could not exist. Neither is God constituted by otherness; that is, he does not need to be other than the world in order to be himself in the way the world needs to be other than God in order to be the world.⁵² In fact, however, not only is the world other than God, God is other than the world.

For St. Thomas, *ens et unum convertuntur*, and there is no One beyond being that can escape the law of non-contradiction. Real distinction between the First and what proceeds from the First is therefore symmetrical. This means that distinction must be a function of principles wholly within being, as it is not in neo-Platonism.⁵³ Material individuals of the same kind are distinct in virtue of primary matter, and kinds are distinct in their essences or natures. The adequate distinction of natures within the world that St. Thomas finds in Aristotle is adjusted to be able also to express the difference between God and the world. God is beyond the world, but not beyond being. The natures or essences of created things are limits, measures, whereby one kind must in some way or ways not be another kind in order to be itself, as God, whose essence is infinite, need not be. Still, no created nature is the divine nature, and the divine nature is not any created nature.

This has consequences. Let us take up Aristotle’s definition in the *Physics* according to which nature is a principle of motion and rest in that to which it belongs essentially and not accidentally,⁵⁴ or, in the Latin St.

⁵⁰ Sweeney, “Basic Principles,” 250.

⁵¹ Perl, *Theophany*, 25. See also Eric Perl, “‘The Power of All Things’: The One as Pure Giving in Plotinus,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1997): 301–14, at 308; and Rist, “The Problem of ‘Otherness.’”

⁵² Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 33, 36.

⁵³ Proclus, *Elements*, Prop. 92.

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Physics*, II.1; 192b22–23.

Thomas worked with: *principium motus et quietis in eo in quo est primo et per se et non secundum accidens*.⁵⁵ Natures, in an ontology, will be specifically adequately distinct. “Essentially and not accidentally”: that is, the nature will be predicated of the individual according to the predicable relation of species, composed of genus and difference, and not as an accident (for instance, as “medical” is said of Peter). “Motion and rest”: for corporeal natures, the motion and rest can be understood as materially conditioned; more broadly, the nature is a principle of operations (motions), where operations are defined by their objects, and where the possession of the objects is the successful deployment of the operation (rest). Moreover, the hierarchically ordered ensemble of operations delimits an end coordinate and specific to the nature. It may be that, generically, the angelic and human natures are ordered to a knowledge of the true, of being. Human nature, however, is specifically ordered but to an analogical knowledge of immaterial being, on the basis of the knowledge of its proper object, the abstract quiddity of material objects.

What, then, of the divine production of the world? Is it part of the divine nature to produce other natures? This is to ask whether it is the nature of infinite will willing infinite good actually possessed to will finite goods. And the answer is of course “No.” There can be no necessary reason within the divine nature considered as an order unto its own end, the possession of itself in knowledge and love, also to will what is absolutely not required for the divine perfection and the divine felicity. So, if God wills there to be finite natures, it is by freedom, it is by will, and it is for the reasonable and suitable end of sharing his goodness with others.

Natura comes from *nasci*, to be born, as St. Thomas often reminds us. A form may appear by generation or by art. By art, beds come from carpenters. By generation, a man comes from a man—*fit enim ex homine homo*.⁵⁶ God does not birth the world. Creatures come from God as from the divine practical wisdom. If we are in the image of God, we do not have the divine form.

Distinct natures have distinct finalities, distinct ends. Determinate ends are correlated to determinate intrinsic principles or natures.⁵⁷ A created nature, in an ontology, therefore, cannot just of itself have the same end as

⁵⁵ St Thomas, *In octo libros Physicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, ed. P. M. Maggliolo (Rome: Marietti, 1954), book II, lect. 2, no. 145.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, bk. II, lect. 2, no. 154.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, bk. II, lect. 14, no. 267: “Haec enim dicuntur esse secundum naturam, quaecumque ab aliquo principio intrinseco moventur continue, quousque perveniant ad aliquem finem; non in quodcumque contingens, neque a quocumque principio in quemcumque finem, sed a determinato principio in determinatum finem.”

the divine nature. If it has the same end, it is the same nature, and there is no creation. Yes, there is a procession from God within God and so within the same nature according to which one really distinct from the Father has the same end as the Father, and that is the procession of the Word. But if human nature is to have the same end as the divine, a fact even whose possibility cannot be naturally known, it will be by superadded, supernatural gift.

The two issues of origin and end are intimately connected. Natural desire necessarily calls for a perfect return to the One, or God. But natural desire for perfect enjoyment of divinity means that the nature itself is divine. And this is to say that putatively created nature proceeds naturally, and so necessarily, from God. We are *consors naturae divinae* by reason of our substantial being, and not by reason of a superadded gift. In other words, almost perfect neo-Platonists like Henri de Lubac and John Milbank, who assert more or less clearly the necessity of the perfect return,⁵⁸ cannot coherently save their positions from the even more perfect—that is to say, unmodified—neo-Platonism of Sergius Bulgakov and, at least in Eric Perl's presentation of him, Denys the Areopagite, who assert not only the necessity of the return but the necessity of "creation" as well.⁵⁹

The point, the necessity of the assertion of double gratuity, emerges. To be sure, in one and the same act of will, which is the divine being, God wills the world, and the supernatural end of man, and the Incarnation. But that man be called to a supernatural end cannot be contained in the bare idea of man's nature. Nothing except God naturally sees God. Not even God can think up something really distinct from himself that by its nature should aspire to the vision of God. So, while the creation of man and his supernatural end may be willed in the same act of the one divine willing, they cannot be willed as one object with one intelligibility. Just as alone by God's freedom can there be another nature than his, so alone by his freedom could that nature have its point of return in him as he knows himself, in the way he possesses himself. N V

⁵⁸ For Milbank, see his *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 26, n. 10; 29, 102. Milbank is very aware of the neo-Platonist character of his position; see 28, 50–55 (Pico della Mirandola), 101.

⁵⁹ For Bulgakov, see his *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 120–21 (necessity of creation), 169–70, 187 (necessity of a supernatural end). The return is altogether necessary for the neo-Platonic way in that, according to Perl, the difference between *exitus* and *reditus* is but perspectival; see Perl, *Theophany*, 38, 40. Bulgakov asserts the necessity of creation also in *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 44–46, where one also finds expression (200) of Plotinian and Proclan plenitude—the idea that the world exhausts the creative power of God.