

From Providence to Grace: Thomas Aquinas and the Platonisms of the Mid-Thirteenth Century

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Thomas between His Two Platonic Traditions

“WHAT IS TIME?” So begins Augustine’s famous treatise in Book XI of the *Confessions* with its equally famous insight: “If no one asks me, I know what time is; but if I would like to explicate it for them, I do not know.”¹ It is much the same thing with less universal words, such as “Thomism.” Whether urged as a model or isolated for criticism, the friends and foes of Thomism, even when using the term in the minimalist sense, would be hardpressed to explicate the core of Thomas’s own most programmatic issues, much less the often crooked paths of their later reception.² Which claims were most central to Thomas’s thought? Two of the once most common answers to the questions as to the essence of Thomism were “realism” and “grace building on nature.” One problem with those two answers is that, at least in the common understanding of these terms, realism and a grace building upon nature suggest positions quite at odds with Thomas’s own thought: positions, too, that would hardly be able to show Thomas’s relationship to the Platonic tradition. The thesis behind the following reflections is that the programmatic

¹ Augustinus, *Confessionum libri XIII*, lib. XI, xiv.17 (CCL XXVII, 202, l. 8–9).

² Among the many recent attempts to situate Thomas anew in the history of his reception, cf. especially Romanus Cessario, *Le thomisme et les thomistes* (Paris: Cerf, 1999); Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas. Versions of Thomism* (Oxford et al.: Blackwells, 2002); Brian Shanley, *The Thomist Tradition* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002); and Aidan Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas. An Introduction to His Life, Work, and Influence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

nature of Thomas's own thought and of what most deserves to be retrieved from it will become clear only if his interpretation and transformation of the Platonic tradition is clarified as well.

The topic of the realism/idealism dichotomy cannot be dealt with here at any length; two observations must suffice. First, if "realism" entails the stress on the passive or receptive dimension of knowledge, and "idealism" implies a stress on the spontaneous or productive dynamic of human knowledge, then Thomas was more of an idealist than a realist, precisely due to his criticism of what he understood as Platonism. From his first disputed questions in 1257 on, Thomas articulated his own idealism by appropriating what he understood as Aristotle's turn away from Platonic realism, and this was indeed the way many of Thomas's earliest supporters read him.³ Because human beings have not always already received the truth (a position that Thomas opposes to Platonic epistemology with its always already given passivism), and because they expect to gain that truth that they could have neither from illuminations received from above nor passively from the senses below, they need that kind of *intellectus agens* that produces what is not yet given. With an emphasis hard to classify as traditional, Thomas argues that human truth is *made* by the human judgment, itself unlike anything received from without.⁴ In a necessary but dialectical tension to internalized sense, the *intellectus agens* fulfills in its own limited and self-limiting way the task *facere omnia*.⁵ The same spontaneity that makes human truth also sets limits to that cognitive relationship. It is this stress on finite spontaneity that Thomas uses to offer novel insights on pedagogical methodology⁶ or to argue for the soul's need of the body.⁷ In his later Christology Thomas will mention twice how reflection upon the full humanity of Christ and his *intellectus*

³ Cf. the genuinely Thomist epistemology of an early fourteenth-century continental school documented in 1936 by Martin Grabmann, "Mittelalterliche Deutung und Umbildung der aristotelischen Lehre vom *Nous poietikos* nach seiner Zusammenstellung im Cod. B III 22 der Universitätsbibliothek Basel. Untersuchung und Textausgabe," in Grabmann, *Gesammelte Akademieabhandlungen* (Paderborn: F. Schoeningh, 1979), Vol. I, 1021–22.

⁴ Cf. Thomas's first programmatic *quaestio disputata* as a regent master, especially *De veritate* I, 9 (Rome, Ed. Leonina XXII 29 sq.).

⁵ Like the pair *intellectus agens/intellectus possibilis*, Thomas traces the phrasing of their paired operations *facere omnia/feri omnia* back to *De anima* III 4 and 5.

⁶ Cf. Wolfgang Schmidl, *Homo discens. Studien zur Paedagogischen Anthropologie bei Thomas von Aquin* (Vienna: Verlag der Oesterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1987).

⁷ For example, *ST* I, q. 76, a. 5; q. 79, a. 3.

agens had led Thomas to change his Christology to allow for finite knowledge and gradual, experiential learning in Christ.⁸

The second observation is this: Thomas articulated his “anti-Platonic idealism” not only with reference to Aristotle, but by appropriating selectively the texts of three Platonic authors: Proclus, Boethius, and Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. Thomas identified, *albeit* slowly, the Platonic provenance of the *Liber de causis* and *On the Divine Names*.⁹ Having once held both works for Aristotelian in character, Thomas begins his commentaries on these works only *after* recognizing their Platonic provenance; and yet Thomas’s hermeneutic here is one chiefly of retrieval, not of suspicion. He does intend to brush the texts somewhat against their grain,¹⁰ but he is seeking in admittedly Platonic texts positive help for what he understands as his anti-Platonic (anti-receptionistic) program. After completing his commentary on Dionysius, perhaps sometime in the mid-1260s, Thomas continues to use the *Corpus Dionysiacum* intensely, citing this authority no less than 400 times¹¹ in his subsequent work on the *Summa theologiae*. The Proclan dimensions of the *Liber de causis*, recognized by Thomas after William of Moerbeke’s translation in 1268 of Proclus’s *Elementatio theologica*, continue to help Thomas to define the human being within a hierarchically conceived cosmos as the horizon of time and eternity, the border zone dividing the animal from the angelic and sharing attributes of both. This Proclan view of our place in the cosmic order strengthens Thomas’s convictions about the necessary finitude of human knowledge and freedom.

In contrast to his reading of Dionysius and the *Liber de causis*, Thomas never seems to identify the Platonic character of Boethius. Characteristic of Thomas’s Boethius-reception is his anthropological and idealistic

⁸ ST III, q. 9, a. 4 and q. 12, a. 2. Only on one other issue, namely the initiation sacrament of the First Covenant, did Thomas mention twice how his views had evolved. The Basil *quaestio disputata* cited above will argue that, unlike the later circle around Meister Eckhart, Thomas recognized the *intellectus agens* as by its very nature and purpose too finite a constructive principle to ever be the subject of beatitude, which could reside only in the fulfilled *intellectus possibilis*.

⁹ For a comprehensive list of Thomas’s explicit remarks on those he terms Platonists, cf. R. J. Henle, *Saint Thomas and Platonism: A Study of the Plato and Platonicii Texts in the Writings of Saint Thomas* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1956).

¹⁰ Thomas reserves a good half of the *prooemium* to his commentary on *De divinis nominibus* for a critique of its Platonism, even while extolling the significant authority of the work.

¹¹ R. Schenk, *Die Gnade vollendeter Endlichkeit. Zur transzendentaltheologischen Auslegung der thomanischen Anthropologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1989), 280, n. 869.

transformation of the principle, “Whatever is known is known in the mode of the knower.” Where Boethius had been speaking of God’s eternal knowledge of temporal events, Thomas speaks more often than not of our very human, temporally qualified knowledge of eternal realities.¹² But this new paradigm of the finite mode of the human knower could easily have been inscribed into the Proclan sense of the human place in the hierarchical order of things.¹³ Even if Thomas would have recognized it as Platonic, the Boethian text could easily have supported Thomas’s larger epistemological and anthropological projects. With its redaction and recontextualization of materials handed down, reception is always more than a function of its traditions. Hermeneutical circularity is evident here, as it is spontaneity that makes authentic receptivity possible, even where that spontaneity is working chiefly on the materials of an initial and incomplete stage of receptivity. Although it is not a task that can be pursued here, there is a need for Thomistic studies to examine the history of the early reception of Thomas’s epistemology to localize the advent and progressive dominance of the “realistic” interpretation of Thomas’s epistemology.

A Platonic Tradition behind the Theological Text

If we turn to that other notion frequently associated with “Thomism,” the claim that grace builds on nature, we must first notice that the axiom, so important to Thomas, is phrased by him more broadly. *Gratia (prae-)supponit, extollit, perficit naturam*; at the same time, it is often added: *gratia non tollit, non destruit naturam*.¹⁴ Grace presupposes nature and does not destroy it or do away with it, even while perfecting it; the how of such graced perfection and the character of so imperfect a nature must remain here for the moment open questions. Every “building upon” presupposes its foundation, but not every kind of presupposition culminates in our relying or building upon the strengths of presuppositions; presuppositions do not always prove themselves to be reliable. The axiom implies that the destruction of nature that *de facto* is avoided by grace’s efforts to perfect it might well have been expected *de iure*. Grace betters and steadily even seeks to perfect nature, which it presupposes; and it can also correct it,

¹² The history of this “gewaltsame Auslegung” of *De consolatione* would make for an organic complement to Ralph McInerny, *Boethius and Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), which focuses on the commentaries by Thomas on two of Boethius’s other works.

¹³ Cf. Proclus, *Tria Opuscula*, Helmut Boese, ed. (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1960), 168.

¹⁴ Cf. Schenk, *Die Gnade*, 286–442.

but it does so without eliminating its fallibility.¹⁵ As will be seen, grace responds to the weakness of nature as well as to its strength.

The neo-Platonic provenience of the axiom has been largely overlooked. As studies by J. B. Beumer,¹⁶ B. Stoeckle,¹⁷ and (with reservations) M. J. Marmann¹⁸ have shown, we first meet the explicit theological axiom in the thirteenth century in the context of Bonaventure's criticism of its Dionysian application. The commentary by Bonaventure written around 1250 on the second book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* takes up the question as to whether humans, like angels, are ranked from their start into different orders of hierarchical preference; a main source for speaking of angelic orders had been, of course, along with Gregory the Great, Dionysius's work *On the Celestial Hierarchies*. Bonaventure envisions the argument that if humans are graced in different degrees, which he seems willing to grant, then this might seem to suggest that they are not equal by nature either, but by a diversity of natural talents already of such distinct hierarchical orders as to determine the differences in graced existence—ideas that he rejects. The anticipated objection would run as follows: This angelic kind of hierarchical order also belongs to human beings by grace. But since *grace presupposes nature*, so, too, must a hierarchical order of grace presuppose a hierarchical order of nature; for, if there were not a hierarchical order of nature, there would be no such order of grace." The Minorite Bonaventure first tells us what his existential stake in the question is: "In human beings, however, even when we can determine certain advantages in matters of nature as well as in those of grace, nevertheless the two often fail to correspond to one another. Where nature is better, grace is often less; and who today is rightly called the lesser (minor) might well be the greater tomorrow."¹⁹

¹⁵ Cf. the perspective remarks in Hans Urs von Balthasar's double article, "Analogie und Dialektik" and "Analogie und Natur," both with the subtitle, "Zur Klärung der theologischen Prinzipienlehre Karl Barths," in *Divus Thomas* 22 (1944): 171–216 and *Divus Thomas* 23 (1945): 3–56. Unfortunately, this highly refined theory of analogy was replaced by a blunter theory of theological discourse in Balthasar's "Krisis" with the Barth monograph of 1951.

¹⁶ J. B. Beumer, "Gratia supponit naturam. Zur Geschichte eines theologischen Prinzips," in *Gregorianum* 20 (1930): 381–406 and 535–52, especially 390f.

¹⁷ B. Stoeckle, *Gratia supponit naturam. Geschichte und Analyse eines theologischen Axioms* (Rome: Herder, 1962).

¹⁸ Michael J. Marmann, "Praeambula ad gratiam. Ideengeschichtliche Untersuchung ueber die Entstehung des Axioms 'gratia praesupponit naturam'" (Diss., Regensburg 1974); cf. J. Auer, *Das Evangelium der Gnade*, 2nd ed. (Regensburg: Pustet, 1980), 189ff.

¹⁹ *In lib. II Sent.* IX 1, 9, co. (ed. Quaracchi 1885, II 257 A).

Bonaventure then supplies us with a direct answer to the objection: "That argument is not convincing which claims that, if there be no hierarchical order in nature, there could be no hierarchical order in grace. For it is not at all necessary that grace match (*adaequare*) nature, nor is it necessary, that the order of grace presuppose (*praesupponere*) any order in nature, although grace presupposes nature in the sense that an accident presupposes a subject. And because our grace corresponds to the grace of the angels, even though our nature is not of the same species as their nature, thus, if by this (the correspondence in grace) there be in us, too, a distinction of (graced) orders, then this (alone) is to be understood as corresponding to the angelic orders. . . ." ²⁰ Bonaventure seems less likely to be polemicizing here against Alexander of Hales's assertion of a merely temporal precedence of nature before grace ²¹ than to be recalling the widespread critique of the Dominicans rallying around their Parisian *confrater*, Stephanus de Varnesia (Etienne de Vernizy/de Venizy), who in 1241 and perhaps again in 1244, ²² together with other proponents or defenders ("et assertores et defensores" ²³ of ten theses), was censured first by the theology faculty and the chancellor of the University (Odo of Chateauroux), then more directly and sternly by the bishop of Paris (William of Auvergne). ²⁴ The censure may well be viewed together with a wider reaction around 1241 against the new Aristotelian influence felt at the university, since several of the theses suggest a tendency to reduce salvific-historical theology to philosophical-sapiential theology: a trend that was destined to be criticized again in the second wave of anti-Aristotelian reaction, now inspired and not just followed by Bonaventure, beginning in the late 1260s. Among the condemned theses were positions of a negative but also rationalist theology, such as that the divine essence necessarily cannot be given in beatific vision to any created mind

²⁰ *In lib. II Sent.* IX, 1, 9 obi. 2 et ad 2. (loc. cit., 256 sq.).

²¹ Cf. Stoeckle, 105f.

²² On the questions of the date(s) raised by V. Doucet and others cf. J.-G. Bougerol, "A propos des condamnations parisiennes de 1241 et 1244," in *AFH* 80 (1987): 462–66.

²³ For the possibility that these might have included Hugh of St. Cher, cf. H. Dondaine, "Hugues de S. Cher et la condamnation de 1241," in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 33 (1949): 170–74.

²⁴ William J. Courtenay, "Dominicans and Suspect Opinion in the Thirteenth Century: The Cases of Stephen of Venizy, Peter of Tarentaise, and the Articles of 1270 and 1271," *Vivarium* 32 (1994): 186–95; and Juergen Mietke, "Papst, Ortsbischof und Universitaet in den Pariser Theologenprozessen des 13. Jahrhunderts," in Albert Zimmermann, ed., *Die Auseinandersetzungen an der Pariser Universitaet im XIII. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter), 52–94, especially 63–66.

(thesis 1), that there are eternal truths apart from those anchored personally in the Godhead (thesis 7), that the single essential dimension of the Godhead should be given greater weight than the Trinitarian Persons (reflected in theses 2 and 3), that the beginning of creation should not be considered temporally (thesis 8), and the first angelic and human sins were inevitable (thesis 10). The Dominican general chapter of 1243 had asked the members of the Order to respect the decision of 1241. Stephan himself seems to have complied, since he was allowed to incept and serve as a master in Paris, and since he is mentioned by name in few of the surviving manuscripts;²⁵ but the issue apparently resurfaced around 1256, just as Thomas was in Paris finishing his commentary on the *Sentences*. The general chapter of the Dominicans meeting that year at Paris and the provincial chapter of the Provence felt the need to reiterate the appeal for the brethren to comply with the earlier decision.²⁶ Around 1279, one of Bonaventure's prize students, William de la Mare, introduces the issue in the correctories dispute, claiming that Thomas Aquinas flagrantly maintains what was condemned as the ninth thesis in 1241.²⁷

This ninth thesis of the censure, however, reflects a Dionysian origin more immediately than an Aristotelian one. It also is close to the position that Bonaventure criticized less than ten years later: "that those, whose natural gifts are better, will by necessity also have more of grace and glory."²⁸ The critics of the 1240s spell out their contradictory belief, leaving open the possibility of a more individualized, more salvifically historical, and yet also more arbitrary- or mythological-looking form of divine providence than fits well into a sapiential theology: "We reprove this error, because we firmly believe that God will give grace and glory to each one according to what He has elected and preordained."²⁹ The censure addresses much the same issue that Bonaventure will address in his commentary. There, Bonaventure weaves into his problematization of the Dionysian notion of hierarchy the pretendent axiom *gratia praesupponit naturam*. Here, as in the slightly later formulations that will continue with the words ". . . et non destruit eam," the reference seems to echo

²⁵ Cf. Courtenay, "Dominicans and Suspect Opinion."

²⁶ Cf. Courtenay, 188.

²⁷ Cf. the remarks by William in P. Glorieux's edition of Richard Knapwell's *Le Correctorium Corruptorii "Quare"* (Kain: 1927), art. 21, 91–95.

²⁸ "*Nonus, quod qui habet meliora naturalia, de necessitate plus habebit de gratia et gloria*" (*CUP* I, nr. 128, pg. 170–72, here 171); cf. Bonaventura: "Cum enim non oporteat gratiam adaequari naturae, non oportet ordinem gratiae praesupponere ordinem in natura . . ." (II 237 B).

²⁹ "Hunc errorem reprobamus, firmiter enim credimus, quod Deus secundum quod preelegit et preordinavit, dabit unicuique gratiam et gloriam" (*ibid.*).

Dionysius's *De divinis nominibus* even more than his work *On the Celestial Hierarchies*.

In his work on divine names, near the end of the long, internal treatise "Unde malum" in book IV, Dionysius concludes his defense of divine providence's "coexistence" (so to speak) with—and toleration of—voluntary human failings. He rejects explicitly the "empty-headed" opinion that providence, should it exist, would have to eliminate all evils, including those caused by human liberty, thus forcing rational creatures to always make the right choices. Dionysius counters that it does not belong to providence to destroy nature, but rather to preserve the nature of each; in this sense, to "save" it. John Sarracenus's translation of Dionysius's free-will defense differs little at this point from Eriugena's or Hilduin's: "Etenim corrumpere naturam non providentiae. Unde, sicut providentia uniuscujusque naturae est salvativa. . . ." With but very minor revisions, Robert Grosseteste's translation, too, will follow the lead of his predecessors here, as indeed in most places.³⁰

In the context of his argument, Dionysius applies his principle that providence is *salvativa naturae* (*physeos sostike*) to that nature which is "self-moved" (*to autokineton*), an expression used by Proclus as a technical term for free human choice, referring both to the autonomous source of its own activity (*self-moved*) and the source of its own inconstancy and its all too variable virtuosity (*self-moved*). What is "self-moved" takes its place in the hierarchy of beings between unmoved movers with all their constancy and reliability, on the one hand, and, on the other, what is so inconstant as to be moved by others and only by others. Providence rightly provides even for what is between these two groups, preserving the *per se mobilia* as *per se mobilia*, that is, conserving their tendency toward inconstancy and occasional moral failure. To force them to constant virtue would be to destroy them as *per se mobilia*.

In 1272, Thomas Aquinas used William of Moerbeke's 1268 translation of Proclus's *Elementatio theologica* to identify Proclus as the authority ultimately behind the supposedly Aristotelian *Liber de causis*. William would translate Proclus's three *opuscula* on theodicy only in the 1280s, several years after Thomas's death. Only in 1895 did Josef Stiglmayr and Hugo Koch demonstrate simultaneously the general dependence of the Pseudo-Areopagite upon Proclus³¹ by comparing the Dionysian treatise "Unde malum" (in book IV of *De divinis nominibus*) with Proclus's opus-

³⁰ Cf. Philipp Chavallier, ed., *Dionysiaca* I (Paris: Desclée, 1937), 312.

³¹ Cf. Josef Stiglmayr, "Der Neuplatoniker Proclus als Vorlage des sogenannten Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Uebel," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895): 253–73, 721–80; and Hugo Koch, "Proklus als Quelle des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Boesen," *Philologus* 54 (1895): 438–54.

culum, *De malorum subsistentia*. Unfortunately, Koch concludes his analysis with IV 32³², ending just before the beginning of the question as to how there could be evil at all, if providence exists. Stiglmayr proceeds only one line further, breaking off before reaching the sentence that will later prove to be so suggestive: that providence does not destroy nature but saves it. The texts of Proclus paraphrased here by Dionysius seem to include passages from another opusculum, the sixth *aporia* of Proclus's *De decem dubitationibus circa providentiam*. William of Moerbeke seems not to have noticed the parallel; at least his translation of Proclus's opuscula makes no effort to approximate the language of Dionysius's established translators.³² And yet the free-will defense of providence and the vocabulary reconstructed by Helmut Boese for the sixth *aporia* suggests its close reading by Dionysius: Providence (*pronoia*) saves (*sozousan*) nature (here *to genomenon*, not *ten plusin*), preserves especially the free choice of human beings as self-movement (*autokinesis*), including its natural tendency to be inconstant in virtue.³³ "We are not saying that providence, which first brought freedom of choice into the whole of things, now rules in order to do away with this freedom, but rather to save-and-preserve it." It is this statement by Proclus in its implicit citation by Dionysius that will be transformed into a key axiom about grace.

Alternative Platonic Traditions in Alternative Theological Readings

Thomas and his contemporaries needed to define their relationship not just toward the Platonic tradition as a whole but toward two alternative forms of Platonism, represented by the difference between the heritages of Augustine and Dionysius. Although both figures were considered to be authorities worthy of a favorable reading, wherever possible, thinkers of the thirteenth century define themselves on many major problems by their greater proximity or distance to one of these two traditions. It is outside the scope of this paper to articulate the unresolved *aporiai* that an often ambivalent Plotinus left as an inheritance to his followers³⁴ or how,

³² On the translations and commentaries conceivably available to William, cf. H. F. Dondaine, *Le corpus dionysien de l'université de Paris au XIII siècle* (Rome: Editiono di Storia e Letteratura, 1953) and P. Chevallier, *Dionysiaca I-IV* (Facsimile of the 1937 edition of Desclee de Brouwer [Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog 1989]).

³³ Cf. especially nos. 39, 60–63.

³⁴ Cf. Schenk, *Die Gnade vollendeter Endlichkeit*, 121–30: These productive problems revolved around the theodicy-related issues of God or the One (architect of evil? aware of evil? personally provident? provident of each or merely of the whole? cognizant? punitive?) and what at least seems to be related to this One (good and

in the process of dealing with these problems, Porphyry and Proclus had developed distinctly alternative forms of Platonism.³⁵ Through Augustine and Dionysius, respectively, this bifurcation of the Platonic tradition passed into medieval Christian thought and formed the matrix within which every theologian of the mid-thirteenth century needed to locate himself. Prior to any question of Aristotle vis-à-vis Plato, it was a question of one line of the Platonic tradition vis-à-vis another.

Where Augustine stressed the immediacy of God to the soul and of the soul to God, Dionysius will stress the necessity of mediation and that not only by Christ, but by multiple and manifold mediations, of which Christ was but one. Liturgical ritual is more important to Dionysius than it was to Augustine. For the former, we touch divine things only through the mediation of the symbols, never in pure concept, whereas for the latter there was the greater possibility of direct, intellectual, and interpersonal knowledge of God. Dionysius trusts the self to follow its own eros, while Augustine had harbored greater suspicion, corresponding, however, to a greater and more dramatic hope for a conversion of will from an emphasis on the self to the other-than-self. This lends to Augustine's thought a dramatic and dialogical dimension together with an emphatic sense of the self, with its abilities to do much better and much worse than it has. By contrast, the dialogical dimension together with the sense of the self is understated in Dionysius; the possibilities of conversion and a transformation of subjectivity are far more muted.³⁶ For Augustine the human's place in the world order can change; we can know more or less, come to love more or less; come to realize or lose our final hope. Dionysius shows little interest in such dramatic possibilities of change; there is less tension for him between the "is" and the "ought." As Bonaventure suspects, the order of grace in Dionysius coincides inevitably with the order of nature. From Dionysius we hear the voice of a resigned benevolence; Augustine manifests the greater hope, matched at times to a greater and more urgent severity. Where Augustine

material? matter as a second eternal principle? evil as absolute privation? evil a concern for the wise? evil for sake of the good of each or of the whole? freedom or necessity?).

³⁵ Cf. Schenk, *Die Gnade vollendeter Endlichkeit*, 130–253. These issues are again raised in the context of theodicy. They relate both to the notion of Godhood and to the fluid (Porphyry) or fixed (Proclus) limits of human knowledge, will, and destiny.

³⁶ In this context, it is not surprising that the transformation of the later Albertus Magnus "school" into the system expressed in Theodoric of Freiberg and Meister Eckhart had been facilitated by the Latin translation of Proclus's opuscula after the death of Albert and Ulrich of Strasbourg.

strives for perfection, Dionysius accepts systemic imperfection. Dionysius does not seek to overcome the sensual medium of human knowledge; rather, he is resigned to it, and his stress on negative theology is the result. Augustine is less resignative: self-critical dialectic prepares the way for a more robustly positive theology. For Dionysius, human knowledge is necessarily in the mode of a very finite knower. Augustinian knowledge knows of no necessary boundary in the process of receiving illumination; the limits upon our present knowledge are *de facto*, not *de iure*. Dionysius sees God's love as universal, varying only according to the mode of the varied receivers needed for an ordered cosmos. Augustine stresses the particular loves of a God choosing individuals. As the Parisian faculty of theology would eventually put it in 1241, Augustine's is a God of *praelectio* and *praeordinatio*. Dionysius stresses metaphysical structures; Augustine, salvific historical events, and transformations. The one stresses *a priori* experience, the "always-already"; the other waits for the new experience of new events and new revelations, complementing and enhancing structures *a posteriori*.

This general contrast manifests itself in the particular context of theodicy by the divergent ways our two neo-Platonic theologians interpreted the traditional Platonic axiom that evil is permitted by providence only for the sake of a greater good. Dionysius understands that good as non-individual; Augustine looks for new concrete goods. For Dionysius the possibility of evil was the prior condition of the possibility of finite goods; the realization of evil was ever a danger, seldom a hope. The fragility of crystal is the condition of the possibility of its beauty; its actual fracture helps no one. By contrast, Augustine suspects that the realization of evil will in the near future promote either some new good of justice or some new good of mercy; in either case, Augustine sees this new, future, and particular good chiefly as one for individuals. For Dionysius, God permits the realization of evil, but he does not cause it; for evil does not cause the good, but is the condition or at most the occasion of some of its possibilities. For Augustine, given evil's more immediate relation to the good, God can also more directly cause it.

Correspondingly, even human freedom chooses evil for Dionysius only under the appearance of good; the mistake is more clearly in the intellect. For Augustine, human freedom can will evil with greater clarity of insight, with less illusion, with a malice far more intentional and intense. Dionysius goes beyond even Proclus in stressing the non-existence of evil as evil, while Augustine remains more in the traditional neo-Platonic interpretation of that kind of *privatio boni*, which, as a violation and robbery of our well-being, marks the stark reality of our most painful experiences.

Thomas Aquinas's Reception of the Axiom on Grace and Nature

As stated above, the interpretive reception of texts, with its redaction and recontextualization of the materials handed down, is always more than a function of its traditions. If we are attentive to how Thomas responded to the legacy of this bifurcated Platonic tradition, we will see him in the question of theodicy at first staying closer to Dionysius. Even where he cites Augustine explicitly about God's permitting evils so as to use them for the good, Thomas interprets the texts in an initially Dionysian sense. This is especially evident in Thomas's use of Dionysius's axiom on providence from *De divinis nominibus* IV, 33. In his commentary on the work, written sometime in the 1260s, Thomas follows closely in the sense of Proclus and Dionysius: "Providence preserves the nature of every given thing. And because rational creatures, according to their nature, are defectible and able to be defective and to fail through free will, it does not pertain to divine providence to impede that mobility."³⁷ What is striking is the consistency of Thomas's use of the axiom and the notion of *per-se-mobilitas* outside of his commentary. Thomas seems to have settled on the direction of his thought on this matter as early as during the lectures he heard on Dionysius by Albert between 1248 and 1252. From the time of his own commentary on the *Sentences* (1252–1257) and his first disputed questions (1257–1259), through his middle works such as the *Summa contra Gentiles*, the *Compendium theologiae*, and the first book of the *Summa theologiae* all the way up into the *Secunda secundae* of that work in the early 1270s, Thomas's use of the axiom, recorded in at least twenty citations, remains consistent: With the major premise he cites the axiom that grace preserves nature; with the minor, he interprets human nature by adducing an anthropological application of Aristotle's cosmic principle from *De caelo*: But human nature is marked by the law that what can fail, will fail. Thomas's conclusion about God's preserving the experience of human weakness is allowed to hold up even for the eschatological vision of God, when our lack of complete comprehension (1241!) and the continuance of the dialogical principle of *timor filialis* are said to remain *in patria* for this very reason.³⁸

³⁷ *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus* IV, lc. 23 (Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1950, no. 596): "Providentia est conservativa naturae uniuscuiusque rei. . . . Et quia rationalis creatura secundum suam naturam defectibilis est et per liberum arbitrium potest deficere, non pertinet ad divinam Providentiam ut eius mobilitatem impediat."

³⁸ Cf. Schenk, *Die Gnade vollendeter Endlichkeit*, 336–56, for an analysis of texts following this pattern in *In librum I Sent.* 39, 2, 2; 46, 1, 3 sq.; *In librum II Sent.* 23, 1, 1 sq.; 34, 1, 1; 34, 1, 3; *In librum IV Sent.* 49, 2, 3; *QD de ver* 5, 3 sq.; *SCG* III,

What distinguishes Thomas from a thorough-going Dionysian, however, and what defines his way of making Dionysius his own is his approximation to Augustine on God's attentiveness to individual fates and his belief that salvific events can alter the course of *a priori* structures, although in ways less experiential than Augustine suggests. Evil is not instrumentalized but opposed by God, who opens new possibilities for life for individuals not so much through as in spite of evil.

This cautious note of Augustinian distance to a basically Dionysian theodicy means that Thomas is further than he often sounds from offering any easy "solution" to the theodicy problem, *unde malum*, than were his predecessors. The Dionysian insight into the sheer counterproductivity and the destructive character of evil along with concern for its victims forbids the theoretical instrumentalization of evil; the suffering of persons cannot be fully explained by the evolutionary needs of the cosmos. Augustinian belief in the vocation of individual persons to beatitude forbids the cosmic explanation with its free-will defense. With Kant, although less explicitly than he, Thomas seems to think that progress in theodicy is shown in preserving the *niveau* of the problem from merely apparent answers. Unlike Kant, Thomas seems to think it is precisely faith in the revelation of God's love of persons, albeit a philosophically reflected faith, which keeps the question open against the temptations of all too cosmic a philosophy or all too dramatized a faith. Thomas rejects both cosmic and dramatic instrumentalizations of evil. This attempt to find a middle ground between the two Platonic traditions of Dionysius and Augustine would lead Thomas to a position more radical than theirs, not just in this general question of nature and grace vis-à-vis God, but also in its application to the three constitutive questions of anthropology: What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope for? In comparing the human experience of knowledge, freedom, and mortality with the Gospel promise, Thomas found reason to keep open the *discrimen* of experience and faith. That was an alternative both to the tradition of Dionysius, with its tendency to reduce faith to philosophical experience, and to the tradition from Augustine, with its attempt to allow revelatory events to rewrite basic human experience and its temptation to equate antecedent and consequent will in God.

The future of what could be retrieved from this genuinely Thomistic alternative might offer Catholic theology an alternative to today's sterile antithesis of dymythologizing doctrine into our prior experience of

71 sq.; *In De divinis nominibus* IV 33 and VIII 7; *Comp. Theol.* I 142; and *ST* I, q. 22, a. 4; q. 48, a. 2, ad 3; q. 62, a. 7; II-II, q. 165, a. 1.

humanity or remythologizing as the more genuine faith allegedly new experiences of the Trinity drawn from private revelations. The retrieval of a genuinely Thomistic alternative would, however, also need to be more aware than was neo-scholastic Thomism that the nature that is presupposed by grace is not only the source of strong reason and accomplished virtue, but of the often painful and uncertain experience of a very human finitude as well. This Thomistic revival would interpret Thomas in closer proximity to 2 Corinthians 12:10 than was often the case, seeing in graced weakness the chance for an otherwise impossible strength. It would also be a retrieval that would not reject but refigure Thomas's Platonic sources. 