

Philosophy as Religion and the Meaning of ‘Providence’ in Middle Platonism  
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1. Introduction

It has been well and often observed that Platonism, as it emerged at the end of the Hellenistic era, is distinguished by its ‘religious’ character; even that it might in some sense be considered *as a religion*.<sup>1</sup> The observation is typically linked to particular themes within Platonism: the immortality of the soul and its fate after death, for example; or the description of god in terms which suggest a reciprocal, ‘personal’ relationship with him as our benefactor and father, and a proper object of our love. But a stronger case still suggests itself at certain points in the Platonists’ own second-order commentary on their project. Plutarch represents the cosmos as a ‘temple’, and in doing so assimilates philosophical inquiry to initiation into the mysteries; Theon of Smyrna actually works out an elaborate correspondence between degrees of initiation and stages in the philosophical curriculum.<sup>2</sup> That this is not simply the metaphorical appropriation of religious language is suggested by the fact that Platonists do in fact read, and so claim common cause with, ‘conventional’ religious traditions, understanding them as forerunners and guides in the attempt to do just what Platonism is doing.<sup>3</sup>

And yet it also easy to feel that there is at the very least some tension in what we expect from a ‘religious’ account of god and what we very quickly find in the more detailed philosophical analysis offered by Platonists. The god whom we are supposed to love as a beneficent father is revealed to be an impersonal, transcendent and eternal form, the form of the good; his thoughts are of forms too, not of us; he is variously assimilated to the Pythagorean One, and the Aristotelian self-thinking intellect; he is so

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Dörrie (1976), (1981). Plutarch’s ‘religious’ character has been especially remarked on: e.g. Dillon (1986); Brenk (1987), (1988); and see discussions in Hirsch-Luipold (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Respectively, Plutarch, *On Tranquillity* 477CD, and Theon, *On the Utility of Mathematics* 14.18-16.2 Hiller. The image of the cosmos as temple is also found in Dio Chrysostom (*Oration* 12.34); but I am not aware of anything comparable to Theon’s elaboration of its implications in non-Platonist sources of the era.

<sup>3</sup> See Boys-Stones (2001), ch. 6; and Frazier (2005) for Plutarch in particular. Numenius envisages a philosophical methodology which involves confirming research results against what can be inferred from the ritual practices of ancient nations (fr. 1a des Places); Apuleius viewed initiation into mystery cults as part of his philosophical search for truth (*Apology* 55).

far above our own categories of understanding that he is precisely *not* anything we can think of him (or perhaps better: it) at all.<sup>4</sup>

This paper is an attempt to show that there is, in fact, no tension here. Platonist metaphysics, I shall argue, unfolds into an account of the world and of our place within it which quite naturally justifies a description of it in religious terms – an account, indeed, which goes a long way even to justify the description of it given by conventional religion. (Platonism is not, then, as it were *another* religion, but a pre-eminent reflex – and vindication – of the religion that was already there.) This fact is obscured by an assumption that ‘religious’ language is used precisely as an alternative to rational explanatory account – perhaps because its objects defy philosophical explanation. There is, however, one case where this assumption can be put to the test. It concerns the term ‘providence’ (*pronoia*) – a term which, since it suggests the personal concern of god for us, is often taken to belong to the ‘religious’ description of god, and seems to operate in contrast to what metaphysicians might say.<sup>5</sup> We can test our assumptions about the Platonist understanding of ‘providence’ because we are fortunate enough to possess an extended fragment from a work by the second-century Platonist Atticus which involves a finely-nuanced debate over the operation and scope of providence. The terms of this debate allow us an unusual opportunity to see what a Platonist of this period thinks essential in the idea of providence, and to trace the rational structures by which a particular conception of it can be defended. The results

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<sup>4</sup> All of these thoughts are exemplified in the account of god in Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* ch. 10. Note that my discussion of Platonism assumes for the sake of simplicity a system (such as that of Atticus) in which the first cause, the form of the good, is identical with the demiurge; but everything that it says applies *mutatis mutandis* to more complex hierarchies, such as that of Numenius, in which the Good is prior to the demiurge (and no-one in the pre-Plotinian tradition thinks that there is a principle prior to the Good).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Bozonis (1976); Ferrari (1999). I do not want to argue backwards from Neoplatonist discussions in this paper, but it is worth noting that one would not be tempted to the assumption in the first place if one did start from them. Plotinus, for example, insists that we not think of divine providence in anthropomorphic terms (I take it that this is point of *Enneads* 3.2.1.10-15; cf. 3.2.1.44-5), and in general on distancing the idea of divine providence from acts of discursive ‘reasoning’ (3.2.2.8-9; 3.2.3.4-5; 3.2.14.1-6). Similarly Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* i. 414.7-416.5 Diehl (cf. Torraca 1993): providence is simply goodness in action (ἐνέργεια γὰρ ἡ πρόνοια τῆς ἀγαθότητος, 415.8-9).

will be surprising to anyone who thinks that a metaphysical principle cannot present itself to us as the proper object of service and worship.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Atticus against Aristotle

Atticus wrote about providence in a book, known to us through extensive quotations by Eusebius, which warned against using Aristotle as a guide in the interpretation of Plato.<sup>7</sup> Providence, he says, is just one of the areas in which Aristotle's thought could not be more different from that of Plato – and an unusually important area, one on which our whole happiness depends (fr. 3.9-11 des Places).

Atticus' headline position, at least as it is often cited, is that Plato ascribes providence to god and Aristotle does not. If this were an accurate report, then it would look as if Atticus' point must be that there is something about the nature of Plato's

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<sup>6</sup> Previous literature on the Platonist notion of providence, in addition to works cited in n. 1, includes Dörrie (1977) and Dragona-Monachou (1994). The present paper seeks something like a definition of providence, and limits itself to texts which are useful to this end; further Middle Platonist discussions include Plutarch, *On Delay in Divine Punishment*; also *Abandoned Oracles* 414F and *On the Face in the Moon* 927B for the role of providence in philosophical explanation; Philo of Alexandria, *On Providence* (fragments) (and see discussion in Frick 1999). For providence in the narratives of Plutarch's *Lives*, see e.g. Vernière (1983) and Swain (1989); Drews (2009) (411-642, esp. e.g. 456-7, 588) makes the topic central to a reading of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*. Providence is regularly associated with two further topics: the reward and punishment of virtue and vice (to the fore in Atticus fr. 3, and the theme of Plutarch, *On Delay in Divine Punishment*; cf. Philo, *On Providence* fr. 2 = Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 8.14), and the creation and maintenance of the world (cf. esp. Atticus fr. 4 des Places; Plutarch, *Face in the Moon* 927A; Philo, *On the Creation of the World* 10). In light of my discussion in what follows, I take it that the 'metaphysical' explanation for this, and other associations, is that cosmic *orderliness* is at issue (esp. Philo, *On Providence* fr. 2.1: the challenge is how to maintain a belief in providence in the face of apparent disorder; cf. later Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.2.2) – and that there is a substantial convergence of what is good and what is well ordered in Platonist thought. In this case, to be 'provident' (to be the cause of good for something) is to be a cause of orderliness.

<sup>7</sup> On Atticus in general (about whose biography we know next to nothing), and the title and purpose of his anti-Aristotelian work, see Karamanolis (2006), ch. 4, esp. 151-6. I have given a translation of the full text of fr. 3 des Places (concerning providence) as an appendix to this paper. As noted above (n. 6), fr. 4 also deals with providence, in relation to Atticus' belief that the cosmos has a beginning. This is another view that is sometimes taken to be a mark of faith rather than reasoned argument: see e.g. Trabattoni (1987). I have argued against this in Boys-Stones (2011).

demiurge that makes him capable of a form of other-concern which is lacking in Aristotle's first principle. This has some superficial plausibility, because Aristotle's first principle notoriously is a self-thinking thinker, self-obsessed as it were in principle. Plato's demiurge, by contrast, is characterised in terms of his unbegrudging nature, and his desire to share the perfection he enjoys (*Timaeus* 29e).

On closer inspection, however, Atticus' argument turns out to be rather more nuanced than this. Two things in particular call into serious doubt the idea that he rested his case on a contrast like this between the Aristotelian and Platonist gods. The first is that Atticus himself put no weight at all on the metaphysical character of Aristotle's god – in other words, there is no sign that this is what struck him as the problem with Aristotle; the second is that Atticus almost certainly allowed that Aristotle's god *is* capable of providential activity after all – but *only* denied that he exercises it towards human beings.

If Atticus does not attack the metaphysical character of Aristotle's god, or reckon that the problem with Aristotle's theory of providence lies with an 'impersonal' view of the deity, is this because Atticus' assumptions about Aristotle's god are very different from our own? Probably not. There is some evidence that Atticus takes Aristotle's god to be the 'first unmoved mover' of *Metaphysics* Λ, just as we would tend to do: it must be this that he has in mind when he talks (in fr. 8 des Places, quoted below) about a single principle in Aristotle which is responsible for movement throughout in the cosmos. But in this case, it is likely that Atticus also thinks of this god as the self-thinking intellect of Λ.9 – a determinedly 'impersonal' deity. This is all the more likely, because we know that, for his own part, Atticus identified god with the form of the good (fr. 12 des Places). If Atticus puts no weight here on any difference between Plato and Aristotle on the intrinsic nature of god, the obvious conclusions are (a) that he sees no relevant difference between them, and (b) that he himself believes in a god who can be squarely located within the territory of the metaphysician.

If this is right, then it turns out already that Atticus does not assume that the language of 'providence' makes any determination of the intrinsic nature of god (beyond, presumably, his being a cause of good). It certainly does not suggest a 'religious' perspective on god *as opposed to* a metaphysical perspective. But what, in that case, is the worry that Atticus has about Aristotle, a worry which causes him to

write at such length and with such passion? It turns out that it is not *even* that Aristotle's god fails to exercise providence.<sup>8</sup> It is rather that Aristotle's god only exercises providence towards the heavenly bodies – or, to be more accurate, that his gods (*including*, then, the heavenly bodies themselves) keep providence to themselves. Atticus makes the point insistently throughout fr. 3:

(57-9:) Both alike [Aristotle and Epicurus] think the gods have no concern for men, and provide the unjust with the same freedom from fear of the gods . . . (71-2:) We are looking for a providence that is distinguished by its concern for us . . . (81-5:) This extraordinary sleuth of nature, this unerring judge of matters divine, placed human affairs under the very sight of the gods and let them go unheeded and uncared for, organised by 'nature' rather than god's reason . . . (96-8:) He does not allow that there is anything outside the cosmos, and does not bring the gods into contact with things on earth . . .

By contrast, says, Atticus, Plato ensured that god 'cares for everything, including men' (3.22-4).

The surviving works of Aristotle, as it happens, say nothing at all about providence, so the fact that Atticus does not simply help himself to the position that he does away with it altogether must indicate that he accepts a widespread belief about Aristotle, a clearer allusion to which Eusebius helpfully weaves into his introduction to the present passage (fr. 3.3-8):<sup>9</sup>

Moses and the Hebrew prophets, and indeed Plato, who is in agreement with them in these matters, have set out their views on universal providence with great clarity. But Aristotle brings the realm of the divine to a halt at the moon . . .

*This*, then, is the real object of Atticus' disagreement, and the reason why he thinks that Aristotle is a dangerous guide to Platonic theology. It is not after all that Aristotle's god

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<sup>8</sup> *Pace* Karamanolis (2006), 160.

<sup>9</sup> The elision of Aristotle with Epicurus in fr. 3.51 *ff.* would also have involved less argument and qualification if Atticus could have said, simply, that both denied providence outright.

is too metaphysical, and it is not that he fails to be provident. The problem is that his providence is only enjoyed in the heavens. But this qualified position is invaluable evidence for what ‘providence’ is taken to mean. If we can understand what sense Atticus might have made of the doctrine that providence only extends as far as the moon, we will be well on our way to understanding what the very term ‘providence’ means in the context of his debate with Aristotle.

### 3. Providence ‘as far as the moon’

The claim that Aristotle held that providence reached as far as, but no further than, the moon is, it should be emphasised, extremely well attested in later reports of Aristotle and his school – by friends, foes and doxographers alike.<sup>10</sup> (There is no question that Atticus is adopting a controversial or polemical stance in assuming that it holds of Aristotle.) And although ancient commentators do not gloss it for us, and modern commentators have despaired of understanding it all,<sup>11</sup> there may be quite a straightforward explanation for it – and one which touches very closely on the present topic. If we assume that ‘providential’ activity will minimally involve the providential agent in being a cause of good to some beneficiary, then the explanation might lie precisely in the metaphysical framework provided by Aristotle for the transmission of benefit from the first principle.

It is presumably safe to assume that the ‘providence’ which flows from the first unmoved mover to the heavenly bodies is simply a matter of the orderly movement that the first mover imparts to them. Thanks to him, the first sphere of the heavens rotates

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<sup>10</sup> See references in Moraux (1984), 571 n. 33; and, for discussion of the different treatments of the claim within the Peripatetic tradition, Sharples (2002), 22-36 (and cf. 1983, esp. 144-52). The only Peripatetic text which clearly rejects the view is the ps.-Aristotelian work *On the Universe* (although even it argues that the effects of providence are somehow weaker below the heavens: 6, 397b30). This work, conversely, *accepts* the idea that the cosmos is a unified, ensouled organism (5, 396b28-9; at 396a32 *ff.* the cosmos is likened to a city in a way which invites comparison with Atticus fr. 8 as quoted below in the text). For reasons which will become clear, this seems to me no coincidence.

<sup>11</sup> Moraux resorts to suggesting that the claim is a product of confusion in the doxographical tradition (1984: 571). As Sharples notes, however (2002: 30), the view that providence stops at the moon is so well established that even someone as uncomfortable with it as Alexander does not question for a moment that Aristotle had been committed to it.

and carries the ‘fixed stars’ in their regular cycle; and this is a movement in which all the other heavenly bodies (carried on spheres driven by this first sphere) subsequently partake. We can say, then, that the first unmoved mover is the single, teleological cause of this movement for all the heavenly bodies, and that they are, to just this extent, beneficiaries of his providence.<sup>12</sup>

Below the heavens, however, things get more complicated. It is true that the first unmoved mover is *also* the ultimate explanation for the existence of movement below the moon; but he is *not* responsible for the particular movements that there are. For example, the sublunary realm as a whole is stationary, and does not share in the westward motion of the heavens at all; and nothing *in* that realm moves according to a pattern laid down by the first unmoved mover either. (No species of animal, for example, exhibits regular westward-drifting behaviour; or, if any such species exists, they do not exhibit this behaviour because of the first unmoved mover.) Instead, what happens below the moon is explained by the combined influence (not even of any sphere or spheres but) of *the heavenly bodies*. As these pass closer and move further away in their various combinations, they bring (or remove) warmth in patterns which account for the cycles of nature, the changing seasons, and the quality of different airs, waters, and places. (The clearest example of this process, noted on several occasions by Aristotle, is the cycle of seasonal regeneration and decay as the sun draws closer to the earth or moves further away from it.)<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, because of this, the celestial bodies are held to be responsible for the natures of the creatures and plants born in different places at different times.

Aristotelians are far from alone in appealing to this sort of mechanism to explain sublunary activity. Indeed, as a description of the efficient causes involved, it amounts to something like a scientific consensus, one which was shared by Platonists too. But

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<sup>12</sup> The movements of the heavenly bodies require, of course, more complexity than this: additional spheres add – and transmit – their own movements too. See *On the Heavens* 2.12; and *Metaphysics* Λ.8, with Lloyd (2000), esp. 256-66. The essential point, however, is that the first unmoved mover is not simply the cause of movement to the heavenly bodies, but is a non-accidental cause of the very movement they have.

<sup>13</sup> See esp. Aristotle, *Generation and Corruption* 2.10; *Meteorology* 1.2-3, 9; *Metaphysics* Λ.6. A more detailed account of this kind of theory is to be found in Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* (esp. 1.2); see Pérez Jiménez (2012) for traces in Plutarch (cf. also perhaps Apuleius, *Florida* 10).

Platonists made a further claim about this system which Aristotelians were not in a position to make. Platonists claimed that the celestial system is to be conceived as a *unified entity* with a single *formal* cause. Platonists in fact talk of the whole cosmos as a unified living organism, which is a copy in matter of the realm of the forms as a whole (itself referred to in this context as the unique and all-encompassing ‘intelligible animal’),<sup>14</sup> and governed by its own soul, the ‘world soul’. Atticus himself believes that the existence of this unifying principle can be established by something like an argument from design (Atticus fr. 8 des Places):

For if there is not a single animate power ‘pervading all’ and ‘binding everything and keeping it together’, the universe could not be arranged in a reasonable or beautiful way. It would be as short-sighted to hope that a city could ever come to be well arranged without a unifying principle as it is to think that one could advance an argument to preserve this universe, supremely beautiful as it obviously is, which did not bind it together and harmonise its parts by having them share in one common thing. Aristotle, then, said that there was something like this, which pervades everything as a principle of motion; but he would not allow that it is soul – even though Plato had shown that soul is the ‘principle and source’ of motion for all moving things. . .

*A fortiori*, the heavens have a unified structure; and in fact the Platonist view is that the ‘mind’ of the world soul is embodied in the orderly rotation of the heavens, which thereby play a special role in preserving order *throughout* the cosmos.

Aristotle and his followers, by contrast, deny that there is any cause for the *overall* structure of the heavens. This goes with the denial of transcendent forms: there is, for Aristotle, no ‘intelligible animal’, no paradigmatic model for the cosmos as a whole, and no world soul.<sup>15</sup> Rather, order as it were ‘trickles down’ from the first

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Atticus fr. 34 des Places, referring to Plato, *Timaeus* 30c-31a; cf. 39e.

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, for example, notes Strato’s denial that ‘the cosmos was alive’ as a case of Peripatetic disagreement with the most important views of Plato (*Against Colotes* 1115B). (Aristotle’s assertion that there is ‘only one *ouranos*’ at *Metaphysics* Λ.8, 1074a38 is not, of course, a claim for the unity of the heavens, but for the singularity of the cosmos.) Compare in this light ps.-Justin, *Dialogue* 6, where (in a survey of differences between Plato and Aristotle)



unmoved mover. I have noted that the first unmoved mover explains the westward motion common to the heavenly bodies; but it does not explain why there are as many such bodies as there are – or the number of the spheres; it does not explain the particular additional motions associated with individual spheres, or for the combined effect that all these spheres moving together might have (via the movements they impart to the heavenly bodies) on anything below them. The first unmoved mover does not explain this – and nor does anything else. And it is because *nothing*, that is, no single or unified cause, is responsible for the overall structure of the heavens that *nothing* (no single or unified cause) is responsible for what happens beneath the heavens. But this means that *nothing* (no single or unified cause) is responsible for there being, for example, rivers and trees and human beings; let alone for the complexity of behaviours that these things exhibit. One way of thinking about this is to consider how different life on earth might have been if there had been just one more star or planet in the heavens, or one more sphere affecting the movements of the stars and planets. There must certainly have been different individuals in this case, or at the very least individuals who were different in some respect to those who now exist; and quite likely different species to boot. Consider next that there is no reason, and certainly no reason that lies with the first unmoved mover, why there is not one more sphere than there happens to be.

It is worth noting that the claim does not have to be that we derive no benefit from the celestial gods, or the first unmoved mover. An Aristotelian might well argue that, given the orderly movement of the heavens, order was always going to ensue down here as well. It may not, in this case (and despite Atticus' assertions to the contrary), be a matter of chance *that there is sublunary order*; but more than this, one could, in consequence, think of the particular benefits that we happen to derive from this order as *some* reason for us to be grateful to god. One of the more spirited attempts made within the Peripatetic tradition to qualify the claim that providence stops at the moon says in fact that we are benefitted by the heavens – albeit accidentally (κατὰ συμβεβηκός) (Aetius 330.8-15 Diels; tr. after Sharples):

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we are told that Plato has forms where Aristotle has gods. The roots of this obscure claim might lie precisely in the idea that Plato's cosmos is constructed according to an eternal paradigmatic system – where Aristotle's is the incidental result of the activity of a republic of divine individuals (the stars and planets).

Aristotle says that it [the cosmos] is neither ensouled throughout nor endowed with sense perception nor rational nor intellectual nor governed by providence. For the heavenly things share in all of these, since spheres which are ensouled and alive surround [the world]; but the things in the region of the earth [share in] none of them, and have a share in good order accidentally, not in a primary way.

And Atticus himself seems to be aware of this line of argument: it must be the idea he refers to in 3.59-60, 'that we receive some benefit from the gods although they remain in their heaven'. But not even the Aristotelian thinks that benefit received thus accidentally is going to count as providence.

#### 4. The Transitivity of Providence

Our evidence for the difference between Platonists and Aristotelians in their views of providence is fully explained, then, by referring it to differences in their respective metaphysics, specifically their aetiological theories. It is because the first god of the Platonists is the cause of order for the cosmos as a whole, something in turn made possible by the posit of forms which are available to this god as a model for the unified complexity of the cosmos as a whole, that they are able to claim that god's providence extends to 'everything, including men' (fr. 3.22-4). The causal complexity required to explain the sublunary cosmos in the Aristotelian system, by contrast, is achieved by an accumulation of causes which are individually creatures of divine providence, but in aggregation a product of chance.

But Platonists go a step further than this. One might still be concerned that, while the demiurge is responsible for the cosmos as a whole, it is hard to see how he can be responsible for the welfare of *individuals* – except incidentally, insofar as the species

is well conceived, for example;<sup>16</sup> but, as we have seen, incidental benefit is not the same thing as providence. This is where the world soul becomes important.

I noted above that Platonists believe that cosmic order importantly involves the heavens as a mechanism designed to transmit benefit to every individual generated within the cosmos. As such (and as I have already indicated), the heavens are the principal organ for the work that the *world soul* does in preserving the harmony of the world, and specifically in governing the generation of individuals within it. In other words, sublunary individuals are not in fact the *immediate* objects of the creator's providence – and could not be so, given the metaphysical constraints on the demiurge. But they are the immediate and non-incidental objects of the providential care of the world soul, and that in turn is part of the providential dispensation of the world for which the demiurge is responsible.

This is where things start to get interesting for the question of the relationship between humans and god. For something else that we can infer from Atticus' debate with the Aristotelians is that it is common ground between them that providence can be *transitive*. What I mean by this is that, under the right circumstances, providential benefit can be received from its source through intermediaries – the 'right circumstances' being that those intermediaries are themselves immediate beneficiaries of providence from the same source, and are acting as such.<sup>17</sup> We can presumably see this principle at work in the Aristotelian system in the assumption that *every heavenly body* is the beneficiary of the providential activity of the first unmoved mover. The first unmoved mover, after all, is only the *immediate* cause of the movement of the first heavenly sphere; all other spheres benefit from its activity only insofar as they are moved in turn by this, first sphere. It seems, then, that we are being invited to think that the first sphere is passing on or enacting the providence of god himself: that the first

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<sup>16</sup> By 'individual' I mean here specifically the transient individuals of natural, sublunary species. The heavenly bodies, which are ensouled individuals, but everlasting, and crucial structural features of the cosmos, may perhaps be helpfully viewed as *sui-generis* individuals for which the demiurge is the immediate cause.

<sup>17</sup> In other words: if *a* shows providential care for *b* and *b* shows providential care for *c*, then *a* shows providential care for *c*. (By the definition of providence I have reconstructed for Platonism, *a* shows 'providential care' for *b* just when *a* is non-accidentally a cause of good to *b*, in virtue of being good itself.)

unmoved mover is somehow understood to be *immanent in* its own activity as a transmitter of order.

Applying the principle to the Platonist system ought to allow us to say that, when the *world soul* is acting providentially towards us (human individuals), then equally the *demiurge* is acting providentially towards us; that the providence of the demiurge is *immanent in* the activity of the world soul. And there is evidence that Atticus assumes just this, at the very beginning of the quotation in fr. 3. Atticus here is looking for texts that prove Plato's view that we are beneficiaries of divine providence, and he finds two. One is a famous passage from the *Timaeus* which will be instantly familiar as a description of the demiurge. But before this, he cites a rather less well-known passage from the *Laws*, which a moment's thought will show must be a reference to the world soul (3.16-24 des Places):<sup>18</sup>

Plato sees all things in relation to god and as derived from god, for he says that god 'holds the beginning and middle and end of all things, and accomplishes his purpose directly as he revolves' [*Laws* 715e-716a]. And again he says that 'he is good, and there is in the good no envy about anything, and he made everything outside himself as good as possible . . . bringing it to order from disorder' [*Timaeus* 29e-30a]; he cares for everything, including men, and has taken the trouble to bring as much order as possible to everything.

One does not need to be aware of the context of the *Laws* quotation to see that it has the world soul in mind (although the world soul is as a matter of fact the highest god considered by the *Laws*). The reference to this god 'revolving' (περιπορευόμενον) puts the matter beyond doubt: as we have seen, the world soul governs through the revolutions of the heavens. (The demiurge does not move at all, or have the parts to do

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<sup>18</sup> Opsomer (2005) argues for a general tendency among Middle Platonists to give the world soul itself demiurgic responsibility, and one might wonder whether this is what is reflected in the present passage: in other words, whether Atticus in fact *only* has the world soul, *qua* demiurgic, in mind. But it happens that Atticus is the one person for whom we can be sure this is not the case. The question with Atticus is not whether he gives the world soul demiurgic functions, but whether he posits a (non-rotating!) divine soul which is *prior* to the world soul and associated with the demiurge (cf. Opsomer 2005: 74-6).

so.) So it is a striking fact about this passage that Atticus encourages us to have both the world soul and the demiurge in mind, but does not allow us to differentiate *at all* between the providential benefit we receive from one god or the other. And this makes sense if we are to think that it is in fact (via the principle of transitivity) *the very same providential activity*. The providential activity of the demiurge is immanent in the work of the world soul.

If this is right, of course, then it should already start to become clear why the question of how ‘metaphysical’ or remote the demiurge is understood to be from an ontological perspective is irrelevant to the question from a religious perspective of how ‘personal’ or reciprocal a relationship might be possible with him. Our relationship with the demiurge can be *just as personal as our relationship with the world soul*.

That might still sound a little remote and abstract – although already the world soul, insofar as it encompasses the heavens as the locus for its thinking and providential care for us thereby encompasses traditional objects of Greek piety, the heavenly bodies and the gods associated with them. But in any case, the principle of transitivity allows the agency of divine providence to come even closer to us than that. Indeed, our most direct testimony to the principle applies it to the activity of *daimones*, identified by a number of Platonist sources as the immediate objects of particular religious cults.<sup>19</sup> The following passage is a quotation from another second-century Platonist, Celsus. Celsus is here defending the worship of *daimones* from the Christian position that to worship subordinate *daimones* denies the supreme claims of God on our service. But ‘why should we not worship *daimones*?’ responds Celsus (quoted at Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.68, tr. after Chadwick):

Are not all things indeed administered according to god’s will, and is not all providence derived from him? And whatever there may be in the universe, whether the work of god or of angels, or of other *daimones* or heroes, do not all these things keep a law given by the greatest god And has there not been

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Plutarch, *Abandoned Oracles* 416C-417A, 435A; Apuleius, *On Socrates’ God* 13-14, 148-50. Bernard (1994: 364-7) observes that the case for *daimon*-intermediaries is made by Apuleius in his emphasis on the *impassibility* of the celestial gods – as compared with the *passibility* which *daimones* share with human beings. The observation holds for Plutarch too.

appointed over each particular thing a being who has been thought worthy to be allotted power? Would not a man, therefore, who worships god rightly worship the being who has obtained authority from him?

‘This,’ concludes Origen, ‘is how Celsus thinks one man can “serve many masters”.’ But his sarcasm denies Celsus’ point, which is that, since *daimones* are the ministers of the demiurge, it is *his* providence that they enact. (For precision, we could add that the *daimones* in fact have their commission *via* the celestial gods, or the world soul whose thinking they collectively enact;<sup>20</sup> but, since the world soul is in turn exercising the providence of the demiurge, it is nonetheless still the providence of the demiurge that the *daimones* are exercising, as Celsus says.) It is not only compatible with the recognition of God’s supremacy and providence that we should worship the *daimones*, it is entailed by it. In worshipping the *daimones* we *are* worshipping the demiurge.<sup>21</sup>

The same thought can be found elsewhere in our evidence for second-century Platonism. Indeed, so important is the principle of transitivity for establishing our relationship with god that a terminology was invented for it. A number of Platonist texts talk, namely, about ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ providence: ‘primary’ providence belonging to the demiurge, and secondary providence to the world soul (or to the heavenly bodies in which it maintains cosmic order). Compare, for example, Apuleius (*On Plato* 1.12, 205-6):

The first providence is that of the supreme and most exalted of all gods, who not only set in order the celestial gods, whom he dispersed through all the part of the cosmos to preserve and adorn it, but who also made it the case that by nature that those mortals who surpassed other terrestrial creatures in wisdom would achieve unending days, and who established laws for the arrangement and preservation of everything else (laws which are constantly required) and passed them to the

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Apuleius, *On Plato* 1.12, 205-6 as quoted below; also *On the God of Socrates* 6, 132-4, where the *daimones* are likewise ministers of the celestial gods.

<sup>21</sup> See also Finamore (2006), esp. 37-9, with Apuleius, *Socrates’ God* 132-4. Could this be an explanation for the fact that Apuleius can (claim to) use a carving of *Mercury* as an icon in his worship of Plato’s ineffable first god (*Apology* 61-4)?

keeping of other gods. Taking up this providence, the gods of secondary providence kept it so assiduously that everything, even what the heavens show to mortals, holds fast to the immutable station ordained by the Father. He reckoned *daimones* (which we [sc. Romans] can call *Genii* and *Lares*) to be ministers of the gods, and guardians of men and their intercessors in case they should want anything from the gods.

This language has often been noted and described as a Platonist ‘doctrine’, but little attempt has been made to explain what it is a doctrine *about*.<sup>22</sup> I suggest that it expresses the important idea that providence can be passed down the line from the demiurge to the world soul. In saying that the world-soul is ‘secondary providence’, Platonists do not mean that the world soul exercises its own providence, which is secondary; the point is rather that the world soul *secondarily exercises* the very same providence, namely the providence of the demiurge.

As to *daimones* (whose immediate divine superior, as I noted, is the world soul, not the demiurge) – two of our texts in fact talk about a ‘tertiary providence’, which applies precisely to their work – presumably, just when they are understood faithfully to enact the providential work passed on to them from the celestial gods, or the world soul at large.<sup>23</sup> (The reason why some of our sources make a point of saying that there are two providences, while some that there are three, will also be explained on this account: it is that only some Platonists, including those who talk about *three* exercises of providence, believed that there were *daimones* who were reliably good and, to that extent, part of the permanent mechanism for the transmission of providence. Others were not so sure. Apuleius for example believed that *daimones* could be beneficent, but were no more certain to be so than human souls, which for him occupy, in fact, the

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<sup>22</sup> For discussion and references, see Boys-Stones (2007), esp. 436 with n. 25 (my own suggestion there, at 445-7, was that the language was essentially rhetorical, and intended to herald a higher form of providence to that acknowledged by the Stoics). Cf. also now Drews (2009), 596 (which has the merit of seeing that ‘secondary providence’ plays a role of mediation).

<sup>23</sup> See ps.-Plutarch, *On Fate* 568E; Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man* 43, 126.15-21 Morani.

same ontological class.<sup>24</sup> So he can talk about *daimones* doing god's service, but does not tend to assume that, as a genus, they will always be exercising his providence.)

### 5. Philosophy as religion

What this discussion has shown, then, is that Platonism systematically vindicates religious observance: it recognises the traditional gods and approves their worship – (with only one significant correction, perhaps, to traditional sensibility, which is that all divinities, at least all whose worship is approved, are beneficent, and none is malign). Indeed, it does more than this: it assimilates all such deities into an inflection of monotheism: a theory of deity according to which the properly divine aspect of all divine beings, their ability to be causes of good, is the immanent activity of one god, namely the first principle. As Celsus suggests, the worship of any god is worship of the supreme deity; conversely, that we encounter this supreme principle *in his subordinates*. Not that they stand proxy for him, but that he is immanent in them.

And the remarkable thing is that *it is metaphysics that does this*. The question of whether the Platonist god is 'metaphysical' or 'religious' is misplaced. Even the question of whether a 'metaphysical' description of this god can be squared with 'religious' language sincerely used of him is misconceived. On the one hand, there is nothing remotely anthropomorphic about the first principle; but it turns out, on the other, that that is no bar to our having a personal and reciprocated relationship with him. (E. R. Dodds, discussing the negative theology that results from Platonist metaphysical interpretations of the *Parmenides*, quotes the remark of Dean Inge that 'one cannot worship the alpha private'.<sup>25</sup> In fact one cannot really worship anything else.)

But all of this is only in the end to say in effect that Platonism has an analysis of causality which is *supportive* of conventional religious practice, or gives it philosophical justification. I started out with a slightly different question: how can the philosophy itself *be* the religion?

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<sup>24</sup> Apuleius, *On the God of Socrates* 13, 147-8 (but see all of 13-16). Plutarch thinks that *daimones* and souls are merely different states of the same entity: *Abandoned Oracles* 431B.

<sup>25</sup> Dodds (1928), 141: see Inge (1918), vol. 2, 115. Similarly Dillon (1986), 217, of Plutarch: 'One does not dance, I think, in honor of the Good, or of the One.'



I have presented evidence that the world soul, and *daimones* too (at least those *daimones* who were good in nature), were agents of divine providence: that is, that they were non-accidental causes of benefit in virtue of the providential benefit that they received in their turn. But given the way in which this mechanism works, there seems to be no principled reason why *we ourselves*, we human beings, could not become agents of providence as well – namely when we become virtuous. Virtue is standardly defined for Platonists as ‘likeness’ (or ‘assimilation’) to god’: ὁμοίωσις θεῶ. The formula is sometimes taken to be a simple exhortation to a particular kind of activity which is, or is like, an activity engaged in by god: for example, the contemplation of forms. But the focus of surviving discussions of the virtues is much less on what you should *do*, and much more on how you should *be*. The idea – obviously inspired by the account of justice in *Republic* 4 – is that we ought to acquire the right state of soul, and the right kind of actions will follow.<sup>26</sup> I take it, then, that ‘coming to be like god’ really involves acquiring a state in virtue of which one is a cause of good order and benefit just as god is.<sup>27</sup> But if we think that this state of being is our *telos*, the fulfilment and enjoyment of a capacity which is the larger part of god’s providential gift to us,<sup>28</sup> then – if the principle of transitivity holds – the virtuous human being would turn out to be an *agent of providence* and even, as such, a manifestation of god.

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<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* 29.1, 182.15-19 (and similarly Apuleius, *On Plato* 2.5, 223): ‘Virtue is a divine thing: it is the perfect and very best state of soul [διάθεσις ψυχῆς], which makes a man graceful, harmonious and constant in what he says and does, by himself and with respect to others.’

<sup>27</sup> Alcinous, *Didaskalikos* 28.3, 181.42-4, specifies that the assimilation is to ‘the celestial god’, not the ‘hyper-celestial god’. If, as I suppose, he means by this that we should aim to be like the world soul as opposed to the demiurge, the point might be motivated by a concern to head off a mistaken view of the ideal life as one which involves transcending immediate concern for particulars. In fact, Alcinous thinks, the good that the virtuous person does, in virtue of being good, needs to be directed *immediately* towards other individuals within the cosmos, just as is the good that the world soul does. (We, after all, do not have the intermediaries for this work that the hyper-celestial demiurge has.) It is true that this reading involves a particular view of Alcinous’ divine hierarchy, a topic which is a matter of some controversy: but note that my principal argument about the implications of human assimilation to the divine is not affected in any case. If I am right that every god in a given Platonist system exercises *the very same providence*, then the result is the same whichever god one is conceived as coming to be like.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 550E; Maximus, *Oration* 38. Neither talks about ‘providence’ in so many words, but both say that virtue is the greatest of the gifts we receive from the gods.

This might sound like an overblown and unlikely claim, but some Platonists of the period express just this as the purpose for the descent of souls to human lives in the first place. There were followers of Taurus, we are told, who thought that the gods sent souls to earth so that, through them, they might become manifest there themselves:<sup>29</sup>

For this is the will of the gods: to manifest themselves as gods *through the souls*; for *they are on display* through the pure and unstained life of souls (ταύτην γὰρ εἶναι τὴν βούλησιν τῶν θεῶν, θεοὺς ἐκφαίνεσθαι διὰ τῶν ψυχῶν· προέρχονται γὰρ εἰς τοῦμφανές οἱ θεοὶ καὶ ἐπιδείκνυνται διὰ τῶν ψυχῶν καθαρᾶς καὶ ἀχράντου ζωῆς).

And this thought should not strike us as surprising, from the moment we saw that *daimones* may be agents of providence: as I noted above, *daimones* are generally understood by Platonists either to be numerically identical with human souls, or at least to occupy in the same ontological class as human souls. If they, when they are good, can be agents of providence, there seems to be no good reason why humans, in the cases (however rare) when they too are good, might not be also be agents of providence.<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting too that when Celsus justifies the worship of *daimones* on the ground that they are ministers of the creator, he mentions *heroes* in the same breath. But if a hero differs from a *daimon* it is precisely by being (or having been) an extraordinary human

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<sup>29</sup> The whole testimonium is a quotation from Iamblichus, *On the Soul* at Stobaeus, *Eclogue* 1, 378-25-379.6 Wachsmuth = Taurus fr. 34T Gioè. Previous commentators have baulked at the literal meaning of the claim: Festugère, for example, paraphrases: ‘pour donner en spectacle la vie divine’ (1953: 219 n. 6). Gioè (2002: 375) repeats Dillon’s comparison with the Christian thought that God made us ‘for his own honour and glory’ (1980: 359) (neither gives a reference for this thought, but cf. e.g. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 7.6): but there is no suggestion that the gods are seeking any form of benefit for themselves.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Bonazzi (2012) on the ‘daimonic’ character of the philosopher. (Atticus actually refers to Plato’s ‘daimonic nature’ in fr. 3.26-7 des Places.) Plutarch thinks that the perfect(ible) part of a human being, the intellect, is a ‘daimon’, and that we are more ‘daimonic’ the more virtuous we are (*On Socrates’ Daimon* 591DE); similarly Apuleius, *Socrates’ God* 150-2, and esp. 157, where Socrates’ wisdom and virtue is such that he appropriately *worships his own intellect* (*animus*).

being, that is, extraordinarily *virtuous* – that is, ultimately successful in philosophy. Plato, indeed, is described as a *heros* by Apuleius.<sup>31</sup>

A perfectly virtuous human being, then, is a minister of the gods, and of the first god; their ‘assimilation to god’ is such as to make their activity *god’s activity*, their lives manifestations of *god’s life*, and in this, of course, to find their own perfection. But since virtue can only be acquired through philosophy, and is identified with the perfect practice of philosophy, then to do philosophy coincides exactly with what it is to be (in this very strong sense) a minister of god and to find one’s perfection through assimilation to god. So whether one thinks of religion in terms of divine service, or (in ‘eschatological’ terms) as a matter of pursuing one’s own ‘salvation’, it turns out that philosophy, and *especially metaphysics*, really is the pre-eminent manifestation of religion.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *On Plato* 2.8, 229. The successive transformation of humans into heroes and *daimones* is mooted by Plutarch at *Abandoned Oracles* 415B and stated in the *Life of Romulus* 28. A third-century inscription commemorating a (Platonist?) descendent of Plutarch called Aristobulus praises him for possessing ‘every virtue’, and describes him both as a ‘perfect philosopher’ and as a ‘hero’ (*IG VII 3425 = Syll.*<sup>3</sup> 844B). Back in the first or second century, the anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus* is happy to take Socrates’ remarks at 151c-d rather literally as evidence that Socrates’ good will made him ‘like god’ (coll. 58-9).

<sup>32</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the benefit I have enjoyed from discussing these ideas with audiences in Cambridge, Toronto and (with special thanks to Radcliffe G. Edmonds) Bryn Mawr; and from membership of the IAS at Princeton for Spring Term 2013 where the final draft was written.

## APPENDIX

Translation of Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 15.5.1-14 (798b-801a) = Atticus, fr. 3 des Places (numbers in brackets refer to lines in des Places' edition):

(3) Again, Moses and the Hebrew prophets, and indeed Plato, who is in agreement with them in these matters, have set out their views on (5) universal providence with great clarity. But Aristotle brings the realm of the divine to a halt at the moon, and keeps the remaining parts of the cosmos fenced off from god's care. In this view he is also refuted by the aforementioned author [sc. Atticus], who goes through the arguments as follows:

Of all the things that help one to achieve (10) happiness, the greatest and most important is faith in providence. This above all keeps human life on the right track, so long as we don't intend to be unsure 'whether by justice the race of earthborn men may scale the lofty wall, (15) or by perverse deceit' [Pindar fr. 213.1-3 Snell]. Plato sees all things in relation to god and as derived from god, for he says that god 'holds the beginning and middle and end of all things, and accomplishes his purpose directly as he revolves' [*Laws* 715e-716a]. And again he says that 'he is good, and there is in the good no (20) envy about anything, and he made everything outside himself as good as possible bringing it to order from disorder' [*Timaeus* 29e-30a]; he cares for everything, including men, and has taken the trouble to bring as much order as possible to everything.

(25) And a little further on:

So Plato. But that man who casts off this *daimonic* character, excises the soul's hope of the hereafter, and removes all reverence for superior beings right now – what has he (30) in common with Plato? How could he exhort anyone to what Plato has in mind, or give credence to his words? It is obvious that his collaboration tends in precisely the opposite direction, that his aid is for those who wish to commit injustice. For if someone were to (35) despise the gods and think them irrelevant to him on the grounds that, while alive he lives far away from them, and when dead no longer exists, then, as a human being possessed of human urges, he would readily want to indulge his desires. It is not impossible to be confident that one can commit injustice without being found out – if it is only necessary to avoid detection by humans. (40) In fact it is not always necessary that you should seek to evade notice, if you can wield power over the people who have seen you. So the way is open for injustice where people despair of providence. In his great benevolence, Aristotle holds out to us pleasure as something good, and offers us release from fear of the gods – (45) and then thinks he can provide a mechanism to prevent injustice. He acts like a doctor who neglects to give any help while the patient is still living, but when he has died tries to come up with mechanisms for saving the dead. The Peripatetic is like this. For the pursuit of pleasure itself does nothing (50) to encourage injustice like a refusal to believe in divine concern. 'What then?' someone might say. 'Do you put Aristotle and Epicurus in the same case?' Absolutely – on this matter, anyway. What difference is there as far as we are concerned whether you locate the divine

outside the cosmos (55) and allow us no contact with it, or whether you imprison the gods within the cosmos but keep them away from what happens on earth? Both alike think the gods have no concern for men, and provide the unjust with the same freedom from fear of the gods. (60) As to the idea that we receive some benefit from them although they remain in their heaven: in the first place, that is something we share with irrational creatures and inanimate objects; but then even Epicurus thinks that men get some benefit from the gods. At any rate, they say that the superior emanations that come from them are responsible for great goods in those who partake in them. (65) But it is not right to count either of them on the side of the argument for providence. On Epicurus' account, the effect of providence disappears, even though the gods devote a lot of care (so he says) to the preservation of their own goods. Likewise (70) for Aristotle, providence will disappear even if the heavenly bodies are arranged in some sort of rank and order. We are looking for a providence that is distinguished by its concern for us – and that is not available for anyone who denies that *daimones* and heroes and souls in general are able to survive. (75) In my judgement, however, Epicurus seems to have come up with a position that is more modest as well. It is as if he despaired of the gods' ability to abstain from caring for men if they found themselves in the same place: so he settled them as it were in a foreign country, and established their home outside the cosmos, and then blamed (80) their lack of concern for man on their removal, their separation from everything. But this extraordinary sleuth of nature, this unerring judge of matters divine, placed human affairs under the very sight of the gods and let them go unheeded and uncared for, (85) organised by 'nature' rather than god's reason. So Aristotle can't reasonably escape that criticism which some people level against Epicurus, namely that it was not through his own conviction but out of fear of men that he allocated the gods space in the universe – as if allocating them a seat in a theatre. (90) The evidence they adduce for his real conviction is the fact that he denies them any activity exercised towards us, which is the only thing that would make the existence of the gods grounds for a proper faith. But Aristotle does the same thing. Since he sets the gods apart, and hands faith over to sight alone – (95) a weak faculty for making judgements over so long a distance – it will perhaps seem to be only through shame that he says there are gods there. For since he does not allow that there is anything outside the cosmos, and does not bring the gods into contact with things on earth, he had either to admit that he was a complete atheist, or else maintain the reputation of apparently allowing the existence of the gods (100) by exiling them somewhere like that. To excuse the aloofness of the greater beings on the grounds of their distance from society at least presents atheism gracefully.

This is what Atticus had to say against Aristotle's rejection of the theory of providence.

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