

László Bene: Constructing Pagan Platonism: Plethon's Theory of Fate and the Ancient Philosophical Tradition

1. The question of Plethon's Platonism

The Stoic theory of fate and the debates it has given rise to in ancient philosophy have been at the focus of interest in recent research.¹ We are currently in a better position to assess how Medieval and Renaissance treatments of fate and human autonomy relate to ancient strands of thought. I set out here to examine Plethon's theory of fate against the background of the ancient philosophical tradition. The particular problems I wish to address are the following. What is the relationship between Plethon's doctrine of fate and the corresponding ancient Platonic theories? What are his possible motives for adopting a deterministic position? What kind of Platonism does he propound, and how is it related to ancient Platonism? Before turning to the details of Plethon's doctrine of fate, let me first spell out the last question in some detail.

Plethon famously attacked Aristotle and embraced Plato as his primary philosophical authority in a work which initiated a long-standing dispute between Platonists and Aristotelians in Byzantine and Renaissance philosophy.² That seems in itself to justify his standard classification as a Platonist in scholarly literature. However, given that Platonism is a rich tradition comprising several varieties, there is room for the question as to what 'Platonist' means in his particular case. Various suggestions have been formulated concerning his precise philosophical affiliations.³ For instance, Karamanolis argues that Plethon draws on certain Middle Platonists as used by Eusebius.⁴ He points out that Plethon's fundamentalist Platonic ideology according to which Plato's philosophy contains the complete truth, and, therefore, any deviation from it qualifies as error or even apostasy, is reminiscent of Numenius and Atticus. In his view, Plethon's particular objections to Aristotle's suspicious 'innovations' are largely based on Atticus' anti-Aristotelian polemics, and his argument that Plato accords better with Christian doctrine than Aristotle is borrowed from Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* in which our *verbatim* fragments from Numenius and Atticus are preserved.⁵

1 For a comprehensive and influential account of Stoic determinism and its Platonic and Peripatetic critics up to the 2nd/3rd centuries AD, see Bobzien 1998. There is an expanding literature on Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic treatments of fate, providence and human autonomy. Relevant studies include Boys-Stones 2007, Eliasson 2009, Linguisti 2009, Frede 2011. Most importantly, Platonic treatises on the subjects mentioned have recently been translated into modern languages and commented upon. See, for instance, Plotinus 2007, Proclus 2007, Ammonius and Boethius 1998.

2 The treatise *On the Differences of Aristotle from Plato* (henceforth: *De differentiis*, 1439) provoked an answer from Georgios Scholarios, later Gennadios II, patriarch of Constantinople, in his work *Contra Plethonis ignorationem de Aristotele*, to which Plethon reacted once again in *Contra Scholarii pro Aristotele objectiones*. The debate continued in Italy between George of Trapezunt, Bessarion and others over the following decades. For more on this see Mohler I, 346–398, Monfasani 1976, 201–229, Woodhouse 1986, 365 ff., Copenhagen and Schmitt 1992, 87–90 and 140–143 with further literature. For Plethon's *De differentiis*, see Lagarde's edition with a commentary (Plethon 1976), and the English translation by Woodhouse 1986, 191 ff.

3 My overview focuses on Plethon's relationship to ancient Platonism. On the Byzantine context of Plethon's Platonism, see Siniosoglou 2011, Part I, esp. 62–124. Although Byzantine Platonism was an important precondition for Plethon's philosophy, his theory of fate seems to be highly unconventional, see section 7 below.

4 Karamanolis 2002, particularly 264–267.

5 Plethon's appeal to the agreement between Plato and Christian dogma seems to me merely instrumental rather than reflecting his sincere conviction, see section 7 below.

Others regard the Neoplatonic Proclus as the main influence on Plethon. This connection was first made by Plethon's bitter enemy, Georgios Scholarios.⁶ Scholarios' aim was to discredit Plethon in terms of religion as he saw in Proclus the exponent of a pagan Platonism revolting against Christianity. A number of modern scholars see this connection as largely justified from a philosophical point of view as well.⁷ Tambrun compares the relevant Proclan and Plethonic doctrines in detail,⁸ pointing out both affinities and significant divergences. Her thorough analysis leaves us with the impression that Plethon was a post-Proclan Platonist who worked out a hierarchical ontology accommodating the gods of pagan mythology, but, at the same time, dispensed with numerous distinctive features of Proclus' system.

A third view of Plethon's philosophical affiliations is implied in Siniosoglou's ambitious thesis according to which Plethon's philosophy is a consequent articulation of 'the essence of Platonism', which is understood in terms of a definite theoretical and existential identity, intrinsically pagan and incompatible with Christianity.⁹ In more narrowly historical terms, Siniosoglou suggests that Plethon relied not only on overtly anti-Christian Platonic writers such as Celsus, Porphyry or Julianus but also made use of the techniques of dissimulation developed by Neoplatonists living under Christian rule (including Proclus) who maintained their pagan Platonic identity but avoided explicit confrontation with Christianity.¹⁰ In his view, Platonism managed to survive throughout the Byzantine period owing to these kinds of techniques, providing the soil for Plethon's radical Platonism.

The above overview suggests that Plethon draws on various layers of the Platonic tradition. If this is the case, what criteria does he use in selecting his positions and arguments from the rich pool of Platonic ideas? To what extent does he feel obliged by the doctrinal constraints placed on him by the ancient Platonic tradition or by Plato's authority? In relation to the issue of fate and human freedom, these questions are particularly pressing, given that Plethon propounds a deterministic theory which recalls Stoic doctrine in many respects. Arabatzis has suggested that certain versions of Stoicism were formative of the doctrinal core of Plethon's philosophy, and has in particular examined the Stoic background of Plethon's doctrine of fate.¹¹ Other scholars have also discerned Stoic influences in Plethon.¹² However, the question as to what follows from this for Plethon's Platonism is rarely raised. In this connection, Karamanolis refers to the ancient Platonist practice of filling the gaps in the Platonic 'system' with Stoic or Aristotelian elements.¹³ It is less than satisfactory to state, however, that Plethon follows suit when he lifts the Stoic doctrine of fate since in this case there was no gap to be filled. On the contrary, as I shall presently argue, Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophers did have an established doctrine of fate which they worked out largely in opposition to the Stoics. What is more, they were in a position to support their theory with solid evidence from Plato's dialogues. The fact that Plethon sides with the Stoics

6 Gennadios Scholarios, *Letter to Joseph the Exarch*, text in Plethon 1858, 424. Cf. Woodhouse 1986, 73.

7 Alexandre in Plethon 1858, LIX–LXIV, LXXX f.; Woodhouse 1986, 72–78. Nikolaou 1982, however, argues that Plethon's doctrine of the 'vehicle of the soul' is largely independent of Proclus.

8 Tambrun 2006, 153–168.

9 For the elements of Siniosoglou's 'archetypal Platonism', that is, epistemological optimism, denial of divine ineffability and transcendence, deterministic metaphysics and utopianism, see Siniosoglou 2011, ix–xii and 403–408.

10 Siniosoglou 2011, 54–62.

11 Arabatzis 2005 and 2008, 312–317.

12 For references, see Arabatzis 2008, 308.

13 Karamanolis 2002, 260 f.

against the mainstream Platonic tradition reopens the issue of his attitude toward Platonism as a whole.

With these questions in mind, let us turn to the problem of fate. I shall come back to the question of Plethon's philosophical allegiances in the last section of my paper.

2. The issue of fate in Plethon

The only section of Plethon's *opus magnum*, the *Book of Laws* (henceforth: *Laws*), which was circulated in his lifetime is the treatise *On Fate*, written prior to 1439.¹⁴ The issue of determinism surfaces in *De Differentiis* (1439), and in Plethon's reply to Scholarios (1448/49).¹⁵ An exchange of letters between Plethon and his former disciple, Bessarion, then Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, contains important clarifications of Plethon's position (and respectful criticisms of Bessarion).¹⁶ As far as Plethon's doctrine is concerned, my discussion will be based on these source texts.¹⁷

Fate was among the issues raised by Plethon which continued to be discussed among Byzantine scholars both at home and in Italy in the second half of the century. Scholarios touches upon Plethon's determinism only briefly in his *Defence of Aristotle* (1443/44), but intended to refute his doctrine of fate either in a polemical work against the *Laws* or in a separate treatise.¹⁸ This plan was not carried out perhaps because this task appeared less urgent after Plethon's death.¹⁹ In any case, Scholarios' student, Matthaïos Kamariotes, wrote two treatises in which he argues against Plethon's theory of fate from the standpoint of religious orthodoxy.²⁰ Theodore Gazes, a Greek émigré in Italy, wrote an Aristotelian refutation of Plethon's account of fate and human action.²¹ Laonikos of Chalkokondyles, a disciple of Plethon, used the notion of necessity to explain historical events.²² Plethon's treatise *On Fate* was translated into Latin and dedicated to Nicolaus of Cusa.²³ Ficino, who

14 The *Laws* was only found after Plethon's death and was burned by Georgios Scholarios due to its paganism. The surviving table of contents testifies that the work contained further chapters relevant to fate and related issues (esp. I.29–30 II.4–5. III.1). On the destruction of the book, see Woodhouse 1986, 357–363. Plethon's death is usually dated at 26 June 1452. Monfasani (2005) argues for a later date. For the dates of the works mentioned in the main text, I rely on Woodhouse 1986. For Plethon's *On Fate* I use the text in Alexandre's edition of the *Laws* (Plethon 1858).

15 Plethon, *De differentiis*, ch. VIII in Lagarde's edition (Plethon 1976), ch. XVIII in *Patrologia Graeca* 160, ch. 33 in Woodhouse' numbering, *id.* 1986, 203 f. Plethon, *Contra Scholarii pro Aristotele objectiones*. *Patrologia Graeca* 160, 1007A–1008A and 1018A–C, ch. 33 in Woodhouse' numbering, *id.* 1986, 304–6.

16 *Epistles* 18–21, Moehler III, 455–468. Mohler suggests that the letters were written after 1440 (*ibid.* 455). Bessarion rejects universal determinism in his work *In calumniatorem Platonis* where he argues that both Plato and Aristotle left room for human autonomy (Mohler II, 180 ff.).

17 For modern discussions of Plethon's doctrine of fate, see Masai 1956, 186–199 and 238–244; Bargeliotes 1975; Woodhouse 1986, 203f., 262, 234–236, 304–306, 332–334; Siniosoglou 2011, 306–323; Hladký 2014, 144–150.

18 Demetracopoulos 2007, 335 ff. Demetracopoulos argues that the manuscript which he calls *Florilegium Thomisticum II* (Marc. gr. classis XI, 18, coll. 1042, saec. XV), is a copy from Scholarios' notes which he compiled from Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles* III as a preparation for the refutation of Plethon's theory of fate.

19 Scholarios wrote a series of treatises on providence and predestination in which he maintains the orthodox Christian position. For a concise overview, see Beck 1937, 151–157.

20 On Matthaïos Kamariotes, see Beck 1937, 108–11 and Demetracopoulos 2007, 326–322.

21 Text in Mohler III, 239–246.

22 See Siniosoglou 2011, 322–323, with further references.

23 Kristeller 1970.

maintained a Platonic view of human autonomy which was compatible with Christian doctrine, in all probability studied and critically annotated Plethon's treatise on fate.²⁴

The theory of fate is important from a systematical point of view as well. This doctrine is intimately bound up with Plethon's theology, as a number of his arguments for determinism appeal to God's sovereignty, unchangeable nature, providence and unfailing knowledge of future events. The theory has an ontological aspect since fate is understood in terms of the necessity of all events, and the latter is underpinned by arguments from causality. Plethon's determinism also has a bearing on his account of human nature and on ethics in that self-determination is explained in terms of the correct relationship between reason and irrational desires, and punishment is assigned a corrective-educative role.²⁵ The doctrine of fate seems to be a central tenet of Plethon's philosophy which cannot be ignored if we are to form a balanced view of his philosophical allegiances.

3. Fate and human autonomy in ancient Platonism

The problem of fate as such emerged in Hellenistic philosophy. The debate was triggered by the Stoics²⁶ who provocatively maintained that "everything happens according to fate" or, in other words, "according to antecedent causes".²⁷ Stoic determinism also has a teleological aspect in that fate coincides with divine providence, and brings about the best possible order in the universe. The theory of fate implies that our actions are predetermined down to the smallest detail before we are born. At the same time, the Stoics were committed to compatibilism. In their view, the all-embracing causal nexus does not exclude the fact that certain things "depend on us" (ἐφ' ἡμῖν) since the principal cause of any act of assent (leading to action unless prevented by external hindrances) is the human mind which has an individual profile, whereas the circumstances merely serve as auxiliary causes.²⁸

Platonic philosophers attacked the Stoic theory of fate from the start, arguing against the universal scope of fate and casting doubt on compatibilism. In Middle Platonist circles, the doctrine of 'conditional fate' became the standard view from the first half of the 2nd century AD onwards. According to this theory, the first principles from which the events derive are exempt from fate, whereas the consequences flowing from them are subject to its laws.²⁹ Moreover, in contrast to divine providence which embraces all things, fate does not extend to the higher levels of the ontological hierarchy. The Middle Platonists appeal to

24 Keller 1957, 364–366.

25 Plethon, *On Fate* 66 (God is not determined by anything), 68 and 70 (foreknowledge, providence and unchangeability); 64 (necessity and causality); 72 (reason and desire); 76–78 (punishment).

26 There were other forms of determinism in Greek philosophy before the Stoics. Aristotle sets out and refutes an argument for logical determinism in *De interpretatione* ch. 9. Diodorus Cronus, a Megarian or 'dialectician' philosopher of the 4th/3rd century AD, propounded the 'Master argument' for determinism (Epictetus, *Dissertationes* 2.19.). The idea of determinism was present in early atomism too (Leucippus fr. B2 DK, Democritus A1, 105 f. DK, A 39, A69, A83), later attacked by Epicurus (*Letter to Menoecus* 133 f.; *On Nature* 34.21 f and 26–30).

27 Diogenes Laertius 7.149. For further texts, see Bobzien 1998, 56 f..

28 For Stoic causal and teleological determinism, see Bobzien 1998, 28–43; for compatibilism, *ibid.* 234–329.

29 For conditional fate, see Pseudo-Plutarch, *On Fate*; Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man* 34, 36–37 and 43; Alcinous, *The Handbook of Platonism* 26; Calcidius, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* 142–190. On the traditional interpretation, the 'first principles' are certain human choices from which other things follow. Boys-Stones 2007 argues that they are the metaphysical principles of which the cosmos at large and individual agents consist.

contingency in order to make room for human autonomy.³⁰ Human agency decides between alternatives which are equally capable of being realized. In this scheme, human actions (or at least some of them) are not determined by antecedent causes. The Middle Platonic and the Peripatetic understanding of fate have much in common, although the latter seems to go further in the direction of a distinctly libertarian understanding of human agency.³¹ Neoplatonists adjust the traditional Platonic understanding of fate and autonomy to their more refined ontology. An important Neoplatonic innovation is the reconciliation of divine foreknowledge with the genuine contingency of human actions.³² Notwithstanding these innovations and the subtle differences between individual thinkers, Neoplatonic philosophers maintain the fundamental positions of the school. In particular, they limit the scope of fate to the physical world, and stress that the incorporeal nature of the soul guarantees rational autonomy.³³

These Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic theses seem to have a solid basis in Plato's texts. Plato admittedly did not have a theory of fate, but his treatments of responsibility in the context of providence and theodicy prefigure later Platonic doctrines in many respects. In the 10th book of the *Laws*, he develops arguments to demonstrate that the cosmos is ruled by intelligent and beneficent self-moving soul(s), that is, by god(s),³⁴ and goes on to argue that god exercises providence over human affairs.³⁵ The issue of autonomy is raised in this context. Plato makes the Athenian stranger, the protagonist of the dialogue, argue that individual human souls are, like the cosmic soul, self-movers, that is, the causes of the changes they undergo are internal to them. God in his providential capacity does nothing more than allocates the self-moving souls to their appropriate places within the universe. Souls as self-movers qualify as autonomous agents bearing responsibility for what happens to them.³⁶

Another particularly relevant Platonic text is the myth of Er in the 10th book of the *Republic*. Let me draw attention to two points in this complex and rich myth of otherworldly judgment and transmigration. Firstly, the mythical figures of Necessity and her daughters, the three Fates, and the guardian spirit overseeing the fulfillment of the form of life the souls choose for themselves³⁷ cannot be understood in terms of an all-embracing causal power, precisely because their activity is contingent on the prenatal choice of life the souls make, which in turn involves randomness to a minimal extent.³⁸ In fact, Plato combines the elements of necessity, chance and rational choice in a subtle way. Secondly, it cannot be reasonably doubted that within this combination the most emphatic component is autonomous human agency.³⁹ Socrates' mythical account culminates at the moment when the prophet of Lachesis warns the souls that are about to choose their future form of life that "responsibility lies with that who chooses; god is not responsible" (617e3 f.). Thus, human autonomy turns out to be indispensable for divine goodness and justice. The two aspects of the myth highlighted here

30 Alcinoüs *Didascalicus* 26.3; Pseudo-Plutarchus, *On Fate* 571b–c; Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man* c. 34.

31 Alexander of Aphrodisias embraces an understanding of human action which implies that human agents are capable of acting independently not only of external circumstances but also of their own internal dispositions. See Alexander, *On Fate* 12, 180, 4 f. and 20. f. Bruns.

32 On divine foreknowledge in late Neoplatonism, see Tempelis 1997, Ammonius and Boethius 1998, and section 5 below.

33 Eliasson 2009; Linguisti 2009.

34 Plato, *Laws* 893b–899d.

35 Plato, *Laws* 899d–905c.

36 Plato, *Laws* 903d3–905c4.

37 Plato, *Republic* 616c4, 617b4–d2, 617e1–3.

38 The order in which the souls choose among the 'patterns of life' is decided by lots, *ibid.* 616e6f.

39 *Ibid.* 617e1–5; 618b6–619b6.

justify both the limitation of the scope of fate and the emphasis on the independence from fate of the rational soul in later Platonism.

The ancient Platonic and Stoic ideas just mentioned will provide us with useful points of reference for interpreting Plethon's theory of fate and human freedom.

4. Causal and modal aspects: Plethon's necessitarianism

Plethon deduces determinism from two causal principles both in his treatise *On Fate* and in *De differentiis*.⁴⁰ According to the first principle, everything that comes to be comes to be from a cause. This principle is already explicitly formulated by Plato, and is almost universally accepted in Greek philosophy.⁴¹ The second principle, upon which Plethon's argument turns, maintains that every cause brings about its effect necessarily and in a determinate way.

Beyond doubt all things are determined. For if any event were to occur without being determined, either it would occur without its cause, and there would therefore be something which came into existence uncaused; or the cause which produced it would be operating in an indeterminate fashion, subject to no necessity, and there would therefore be a cause which did not produce its effects in a necessary and determinate fashion (ἀνάγκη ... ὀρισμένως). Neither of these alternatives is possible.⁴²

The claim that causes produce their effects in a necessary and determinate manner deserves closer examination. In her edition of *De differentiis*, Lagarde connects this principle with the Pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis* 982C, and with Aristotle's *De generatione et corruptione* II.10, 336a27-28. The first passage, which Plethon adduces as a Platonic proof-text for his determinism in a letter to Bessarion,⁴³ does not seem pertinent, as it treats the agency of the intelligent celestial souls (that is, gods) rather than causality in general, and does not invoke necessity in a technical sense.⁴⁴ The Aristotelian passage formulates a general causal principle: "for by nature the same [cause], provided it remain in the same state, always produces the same [effect]".⁴⁵ This statement comes closer to the problem at stake. It can be

40 Plethon, *On Fate* 64; *De differentiis* ch. VIII., 46 Lagarde, ch. 33, 203 Woodhouse. See also Plethon's *Reply to Scholarios*, *Patrologia Graeca* 160, 1007B–C, ch. 33, 305 Woodhouse; *Ep.* 19, Mohler III, 461, 18–28.

41 Plato, *Timaeus* 28A4–6; cf. Parmenides fr. B8, 7 ff. DK; Leucippus fr. B2 DK. The Epicureans invoke an atomic 'swerve' in order to explain the formation of compound bodies and account for human autonomy. Their critics protest against the 'uncaused motions' they postulated. See Cicero, *On Fate* 23; Epicurea fr. 280 Usener. In addition, Plutarch sets out an argument against determinism coming from an unnamed philosopher according to which our choice between two equivalent alternatives can only be explained in terms of 'adventitious motions' arising in our soul; he also reports Chrysippus' reply who insists that different effects must have different causes (*On Stoic Contradictions* ch. 23, 1045B–D).

42 Plethon, *On Fate*, 64, translation by Woodhouse.

43 Plethon, *Ep.* 21, Mohler III, 466, ff.

44 982b5–c5: "The necessity of the soul that possesses intelligence is far the most powerful of all necessities. For it is a ruler, not a subject, and so ordains its decrees. When a soul reaches the best decision in accordance with the best intelligence, the result, which is truly to its mind, is perfectly unalterable. Not even adamant could ever be mightier and more unalterable. Truly, three Fates hold fast whatever has been decided through the best counsel by each and all of the gods, and guarantee that it is brought to pass." Translation by R. D. McKirahan.

45 τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχον ἕει τὸ αὐτὸ πέφυκε ποιεῖν. Translation by H. H. Joachim, modified. The principle is invoked in a proof for the plurality of motions on the cosmic level. Aristotle argues that generation and perishing, being opposites, must have opposite causes, and, consequently, more than one motion has to be

argued that it has deterministic implications, although this is a possibility which in all probability did not occur to Aristotle himself.⁴⁶ In any case, neither passage provides Plethon with the conceptual tools to construct his argument for determinism.

We find, however, a passage in the Neoplatonic Ammonius (435/445-517/526 AD) which contains a formulation which is strikingly close to Plethon's second causal principle. In the introduction to his exegesis of Aristotle's treatment of *futurum contingens* in *De interpretatione* ch. 9, Ammonius argues that the problem is relevant, among other branches of philosophy, to metaphysics as well:

You will also find that this study extends to first philosophy. For the theologian too will investigate how the things in the world are governed by providence, and whether all that comes to be arises in a definite manner and of necessity (ὠρισμένως καὶ ἐξ ἀνάγκης), like what holds in the case of eternal things, or there are also some things which occur contingently, whose coming to be one must ascribe to causes which are, obviously, particular and at each time different.⁴⁷

Ammonius is setting up a dilemma between the acceptance of universal necessity of all events and a view accommodating certain contingent occurrences as well.⁴⁸ Plethon's dilemma is the same, except for some minor variations in terminology.⁴⁹ In the argument for the determinist option, Plethon goes on to describe the relationship between the cause and the effect in the very same terms (ἀνάγκη ... ὠρισμένως) by which Ammonius characterizes "becoming" or the events taking place in the cosmos (ὠρισμένως καὶ ἐξ ἀνάγκης) in the first horn of his dilemma. In my view, Ammonius' text must have been among Plethon's inspirations with regard to his second causal principle. This suggestion is corroborated by the fact that Plethon's argument in favor of fate primarily revolves around the question of divine foreknowledge, the problem Ammonius addresses in a lengthy digression after the passage

posited in order to account for them. Another pertinent Aristotelian passage is *Physics* II.4, 195b36–196a3: "Some people wonder even whether there are any such things [sc. luck and the automatic] or not. They say that nothing comes to be as an outcome of luck, but that there is a definite cause of everything (πάντων εἶναι τι αἴτιον ὠρισμένον) which we say comes to be as an automatic outcome or as an outcome of luck." Translation by W. Charlton. In spite of the similarity of the wording to Plethon's second causal principle, the problem Aristotle is dealing here with is in fact closer to the object of Plethon's first causal principle, namely, the question of whether there are events without a cause, see the example adduced at 196a3–5.

46 He contrasts necessary and *non-necessary* being in *De generatione et corruptione* II.11.

47 Ammonius, *On Aristotle On Interpretation*, 131, 4–10, translation by David Blank.

48 The terminology of 'definiteness' or 'determinateness' (ὠρισμένως) is primarily used by Ammonius in relation to propositions. He repeatedly states that in contradictory pairs of future contingent propositions truth and falsity are not distributed definitely (e.g. 131, 2–4; 140, 13); for further occurrences and discussion see Sorabji's Introduction in Ammonius 1998, 8–13. The idea ultimately goes back to Aristotle's claim that in contradictory pairs of future contingent propositions "it is necessary for one member ... to be true or false –not, however, this one or that one, but however it chances" (*On interpretation* 19a36–38). Ammonius also frequently employs the term ὠρισμένως in connection with divine foreknowledge (e.g. 132, 11–13; 134, 25). There is a passage, however, in which the term is used to characterize the way in which a cause produces its effect. If someone goes out in order to see a friend but on his way happens to buy a book, the latter event merely supervenes on the original intention, and there is "no proximate cause which did this in a definite manner" (142, 26 f.).

49 The dilemma is first stated in terms of a contrast between determination and fate (ὠριστά τε καὶ εἴμαρται) on the one hand and chance (ὅπως ἂν τύχοι) on the other, but in the argument fate and necessity are treated as equivalent (οἱ τὴν περὶ τῶν ἐσομένων ἀνάγκην τε καὶ εἴμαρμένην ἀναιροῦντες, Alexandre, 64). The problem is rephrased in terms of necessity and contingency in *Ep.* 19. Mohler III, 21 ff., cf. *Ep.* 21, Mohler III, 466, 21 ff.

just quoted.⁵⁰ The important thing, nevertheless, is that in terms of doctrine Plethon does not follow the Neoplatonic Ammonius who is at pains to preserve genuine contingency. On the contrary, he embraces the determinist thesis which Ammonius opposes both in his independent discussion of divine foreknowledge and in the exegesis of Aristotle's text. We can conclude, I think, that Plethon merely exploited Ammonius' text as a source for the determinist position.⁵¹

There is sufficient evidence that Plethon relies not only on the determinist position which is entertained as a theoretical possibility and firmly rejected by Aristotle and his commentators, but also on the robust theory advocated by the Stoics.⁵² It is part of the Stoics' theory that fate is inescapable and unalterable. At the same time, Alexander of Aphrodisias, a Peripatetic philosopher (2nd century CE) whose polemical treatise is among the main sources of the Stoic doctrine, reports that the Stoics claimed to preserve contingency:

The possible and the contingent is not done away with, if all things come to be according to fate, on these grounds: (i) It is possible for that to come to be which is not prevented from coming to be, even if it does not come to be. (ii) The opposites of the things that come to be in accordance with fate have not been prevented from coming to be (for which reason they are still possible even though they do not come to be).⁵³

Apparently, the Stoics consider the necessity of human actions and personal responsibility as incompatible,⁵⁴ and, for this reason, insist that certain events which actually take place are not necessary in the technical sense of the word.⁵⁵ Alexander is not impressed by their argumentation, however. He protests that the Stoics must admit that events that cannot take place otherwise than they in fact do are necessary.⁵⁶ From the perspective of an external critic such as Alexander, the Stoic thesis, according to which fate is all-embracing, inescapable and unalterable, boils down to the claim that all events are necessary. Plethon accepts the latter interpretation of the determinist theory of fate, but, unlike the ancient writers who describe the Stoic doctrine in these terms, he wholeheartedly subscribes to it.

This can be seen from his exchange of letters with his former pupil, Bessarion. In a restatement of his doctrine of fate, Plethon points out that the two causal principles he appeals to entail the abolition of contingency (τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον). He also criticizes the Aristotelians who, in his interpretation, locate contingency "inclined to both sides" (ἀμφίροπον) in the

50 Ammonius, *On Aristotle On Interpretation*, 132, 8–138.11.

51 Michael Psellus literally quotes the Ammonius passage in a text devoted to the issue of divine foreknowledge (*Opuscula* II, 155), although one does not have to assume that Plethon knows it secondhand, as he seems to be well-versed in the Neoplatonic commentators of Aristotle, cf. Woodhouse 1986, 68.

52 Plethon, unlike Aristotle and Ammonius, formulates his doctrine in terms of 'fate' (εἰμαρμένη) in his treatise on the subject. In a letter in which he sets out to answer the doubts raised by Bessarion concerning his theory of fate, he appeals, along with Plato's authority, to the Stoics, and quotes Cleanthes' celebrated verses on destiny (πεπρωμένη), see *Ep.* 19, Mohler III, 462, 22–27.

53 Alexander, *On Fate* 10, 176, 14 ff. translation by R. W. Sharples.

54 Cf. Cicero, *On Fate* 39, 41; Augustinus, *On the City of God* V.10.

55 In Chrysippus' system of modalities there are propositions which are true but not necessary, and propositions which are false but possible, that is to say, his theory accommodates contingency (even if he does not use a single term for this concept). On modalities in Chrysippus, see Bobzien 1998, 112–119.

56 Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Fate* 9, 174, 30–175, 8; 10, 177, 27–178, 7. For this type of criticism of Stoic theory, which questions the Stoic understanding of modal notions, see Bobzien 1998, 129–131.

will.⁵⁷ At a later stage of their exchange, Plethon distinguishes between necessity interpreted in terms of what cannot be otherwise (τὸ μὴ ἐνδεχόμενον ἄλλως σχεῖν) on the one hand and necessity understood in terms of force (βία) on the other.⁵⁸ He argues that the workings of reason are even more necessary than the violent necessity of desire.⁵⁹ Which sense of ‘necessity’ does he have in mind here? The necessity of reason is opposed to the violent kind of necessity of desire, but, at the same time, both reason and desire are said to be necessary, presumably in the same sense of the word. Plethon’s point must be that our actions are necessary in the modal sense, that is, we cannot act otherwise than we actually do.

Plethon’s rejection of contingency and his necessitarianism stands in sharp contrast to the Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition which saw contingency as requisite for human autonomy. What is more, he goes beyond the Stoics themselves in maintaining that all events are necessary in the technical, modal sense of the word. It is not clear as to whether he was inspired by the necessitarianism of radical ancient thinkers such as Diodorus Cronus. I would instead assume that he draws on the (more or less hostile) Platonic and Peripatetic portrayals of the Stoic position which equated Stoic causal determinism with necessitarianism. He once again uses these texts as sources and appropriates the view which the Platonists traditionally opposed. He does not seem to be particularly bothered by the anti-Platonism or by the radical character of the position he is adopting.

5. The argument for determinism from divine foreknowledge

In addition to the demonstration based on the two causal principles I have examined, Plethon’s primary argument for determinism seems to be his appeal to divine foreknowledge and divination.

Furthermore, if future events have not already been determined, there could be no foreknowledge of them not only by men, but also by any of the gods, since it is impossible that there be knowledge of what is absolutely indeterminate; for it would not be possible to decide which member [of the contradictory pair] is true, and to say either that such-and-such will happen or that it will not. As it is, the gods surely do know future events, since they also determine them [...].⁶⁰

The important premise of this argument is that knowledge essentially depends on the nature of its object, that is to say, only determinate objects can be known. In this framework, the existence of divine foreknowledge and divination entails that future statements (presumably including future statements concerning particulars) have a definite truth value, and that future events are fixed in advance. Simply put, divine foreknowledge seems to be incompatible with indeterminism, and this can be adduced in favor of the determinist thesis.

Alexander of Aphrodisias discusses the issue of divine foreknowledge in connection with the Stoic theory of fate (*On Fate* 30). The Stoics postulated that the knowledge of the gods extends to all future events, and they argued that this is only possible if future events are predetermined, that is to say, if everything happens according to fate.⁶¹ Alexander is at one

57 Plethon, *Ep.* 19, Mohler III, 461, 21 ff.

58 Plethon, *Ep.* 21, Mohler III, 466, 21–24.

59 *Ibid.* 466, 24–467, 3.

60 Plethon, *On Fate*, 68, my translation.

61 Chrysippus appeals to divination (which depends on divine foreknowledge) in the following argument for determinism: oracles could not be true if not everything happened according to fate; but divination exists; consequently, everything happens according to fate (reported by Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 4.3.1–2).

with the Stoics in assuming that divine foreknowledge (and divination) stands or falls with the complete causal determination of events: if future events are predetermined, then it is possible to know them in advance, if they are not, then there cannot be foreknowledge. Alexander commits himself, however, to the existence of contingency, and argues that foreknowledge is impossible in relation to contingent states of affairs. Future contingents cannot consequently be known by the gods either: what is impossible is impossible for the gods, as well. The same dilemma could have partially motivated the Middle Platonic view according to which fate is a *law* which comprises the infinity of the particular cases in a general form and that, in this way, renders them determinate and suitable objects of divine knowledge.⁶²

In his commentary on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, Ammonius states the same dilemma which occupied Alexander (135, 1 ff. Busse). If the gods have a definite knowledge of future events and exercise providence over them, the contingent character of the events will be abolished; on the other hand, if future events are contingent, no divine providence and foreknowledge will be possible. Ammonius is in a position, however, to avail himself of a solution to this problem which was suggested by Iamblichus and which became standard in Neoplatonic circles.

[...] we answer in accordance with the teaching of the divine Iamblichus and we shall think it right to distinguish the various degrees of knowledge by saying that knowledge is intermediate between the knower and the known, since it is the activity of the knower concerning the known [...] and it sometimes knows the known in a way better than the nature of the knowable thing itself, sometimes worse, and sometimes on the same level.

[...] they [sc. the gods] know the contingents in a manner better than the contingents' own nature, which is why these things have an indefinite nature and can both occur and not occur, while the gods, who have preconceived the knowledge of the contingents in a manner better than their nature, know these things too in a definite manner.⁶³

The central idea is that the character of cognition depends, not so much on the nature of the object known, as on the nature of the knowing subject. In this way, divine knowledge can be extended to the contingent temporal world, without compromising the eternal and necessary way of being of the gods.⁶⁴ Through this move, the Neoplatonists manage to preserve both their theological tenets, particularly, divine omniscience and providence on the one hand, and unchangeability and eternity on the other, and the genuine contingency of the sublunary world which is deeply rooted in the Platonic and Peripatetic traditions.

It is extremely unlikely that Plethon was unaware of the standard Neoplatonic way of reconciling divine foreknowledge and contingency. In my view, he ignores this possibility on purpose in the treatise *On Fate*. In any case, when Bessarion reminds him of this doctrine,⁶⁵ he is quick to dismiss it:

62 Pseudo-Plutarch, *On Fate* 570A.

63 Ammonius, *On Aristotle On Interpretation*, 135, 14–19; 136, 11–15, translation by D. Blank.

64 Proclus concisely states the standard Neoplatonic solution: "The gods themselves know what is generated without generation, what is extended without extension, and what is divided without division, and what is in time eternally, and what is contingent necessarily." *In Tim.* 1, 352, 5 ff. Diehl, translation by R. W. Sharples; cf. *id.*, *On Providence*, 64. In the Latin tradition, this kind of solution was known in Boethius' version, *Consolatio V.* prose 4–6. On the Iamblichean solution and Ammonius, see Tempelis 1997 and Sorabji's studies in Ammonius 1998; on Boethius' version, Craig 1988, ch. 3.

65 Bessarion, *Ep.* 18, Mohler III, 458, 9–13. Bessarion refers to Proclus' *Elements of Theology* (see prop. 124) and to Ammonius' treatment of contingency in his commentary on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*.

[...] those who attempt to refute the argument according to which God’s foreknowledge is abolished together with the abolition of fate, do not succeed in their refutation, when they say that God knows what is indeterminate in a determinate manner. For if ‘indeterminate’ were some relation such as ‘double’, which is, being a relation, double in relation to one object but – although it remains one and the same thing – half in relation to another, those who speak in this way would perhaps seem to make some kind of sense. But since, if anything, ‘indeterminate’ is non-relative, what they say is rather as if they maintained that God knows a cow as a man or a man as a star. What kind of knowledge is it that consists in knowing something different about the object of knowledge from what it actually is?⁶⁶

Whatever the philosophical difficulties of the mainstream Neoplatonic solution, Plethon’s irreverence is striking, as the doctrine in question was initiated by the “divine Iamblichus”, and was maintained by respected Platonists such as Proclus and Ammonius. The treatment of divine foreknowledge reveals, once again, that Plethon uses his possible sources selectively (not to say tendentiously). He extracts from Platonic authors, and possibly from Alexander of Aphrodisias, the Stoic doctrines and arguments that are being criticized, and he himself adopts the Stoic position. The argument from divine foreknowledge is particularly interesting because in this case Plethon ignores later developments within the Platonic tradition, and consciously returns to an earlier phase of the debate in which divine foreknowledge of particular events and their genuine contingency were considered as incompatible alternatives.⁶⁷

6. Freedom and the external determination of human reason

The question of moral responsibility, to which the final part of the treatise *On Fate* is devoted,⁶⁸ is a notorious difficulty which all determinists have to face. The objection Plethon attempts to answer goes as follows. If everything is predetermined and happens through necessity, human beings will not be either masters of themselves (κύριοι ἑαυτῶν) or free (ἐλεύθεροι), and, given that bad people are necessarily bad, divine punishment cannot be just.⁷⁰

In reply to this objection, Plethon interprets freedom (ἐλευθερία) in terms of “living as one wants to”, and insists that “well-being”, the state which everyone wants to achieve, does not require the agent to be exempt from causal determination and from necessity. Freedom should be contrasted with slavery rather than with necessity.

66 Plethon, *Ep.* 19, 463, 4–12, my translation.

67 Another way to reconcile divine foreknowledge with contingency and human autonomy was propounded by Origen who argues that foreknowledge does not *cause* the events foreknown and does not render them necessary (*Against Celsus* II.20; *Philocalia* 23 and 25). On Origen’s solution, see Craig 1988, 80. Bugár (2006) suggests that Origen’s strategy of severing the logical and the causal orders goes back to a remark by Carneades (Cicero, *De Fato* 14.32). Plethon seems to reject Origen’s approach as he connects divine foreknowledge with causation. In his view, the gods know the future events by being their cause, by arranging and determining them (*On Fate*, 68–70 Alexandre), rather than by being affected by them. The notion of causal knowledge has Stoic roots, cf. Wallis 1981, 225. Causal knowledge is recognized by Ammonius (*On Aristotle On Interpretation* 132, 13 ff.), but he qualifies divine agency in such a way as to leave room for human autonomy.

68 Plethon, *On Fate*, 70–78.

70 Plethon, *On Fate*, 70.

If, then, someone defines freedom in this rather than in that way, namely, in terms of being hindered or not to live as one wishes to (τῷ κωλύεσθαι ἢ μὴ κωλύεσθαι τινα ζῆν ὡς βούλεται) – everyone wishes to fare well and to be happy – , then everybody who fares well will be free, no matter whether or not he is subject to rule.⁷¹

This interpretation of freedom resembles the traditional Stoic understanding of this notion which becomes central in Epictetus.⁷² Let me quote a characteristic statement of this view:

He is free who lives as he wills (ἐλεύθερός ἐστιν ὁ ζῶν ὡς βούλεται), who is subject neither to compulsion (ἀναγκάσαι), nor hindrance (κωλύσαι), not force, whose choices are unhampered, whose desires attain their end, whose aversions do not fall into what they would avoid.⁷³

In Epictetus' view, one can avoid frustration and fulfill her desires only if she manages to confine them to what is under her exclusive control (that is, to certain aspects of her mental life), and thus refrains from pursuing external things which might enslave her. This notion of freedom ultimately goes back to Socrates who argued, according to Xenophon, that freedom can be achieved by self-control (ἐγκράτεια), the rule of reason over irrational desires, which is the only way to make sure that one is not "hindered (κωλύεσθαι) in doing what is most honorable" or "forced (ἀναγκάζεσθαι) to do what is most dishonorable".⁷⁴ We might admit that this kind of freedom is compatible with determinism. There is a problem, however. The internal freedom is a normative ideal which cannot serve as the basis for moral responsibility.⁷⁵ This is obvious, since moral responsibility must extend to every rational agent, while freedom is the privilege of a select few. Furthermore, Plethon seems to disregard an important aspect of the Stoic doctrine, namely, the emphasis on the contrast between internal and external. Plethon maintains that external determination and freedom are compatible, whereas Epictetus interprets freedom, in line with the Stoic tradition, in terms of autonomy as opposed to heteronomy.⁷⁶

The latter difficulty can be brought out more clearly by examining Plethon's treatment of self-mastery. Plethon suggests that human beings are masters of themselves (κύριοι ἑαυτῶν) to the extent to which reason is capable of controlling irrational desires.⁷⁷ In his view, the fact that different people may react differently to the same situation reveals the individual differences of their minds which can be explained in terms of nature and training (φύσις, ἄσκησις). Plethon's view is that the individual nature of reason is bestowed on us by the gods. Training, by which we shape ourselves, depends on our opinion (δόξα). The latter is,

71 Plethon, *On Fate*, 74–76, translation by Woodhouse.

72 Epictetus, *Diss.* IV.1.1; cf. IV.1.128; II.1.23–2. Cf. Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 34; *De officiis* I. 69 ff.; Persius: *V. Sat.*; Philo, *Quod omnis probus* 59 f., cf. 97; Dio Chrysostomus, *Or.* 14.17.

73 Epictetus, *Diss.* IV.1.1, Oldfather's translation.

74 Xenophon, *Memorabilia* IV.5.3–5 and 7. The phrases above are taken from IV.5.4, translation by E. C. Marchant, modified. It should be noted that in the Stoics' monistic psychological theory irrational desires involve mistaken judgements formed by reason itself, while Xenophon seems to contrast reason and desire in a less sophisticated manner.

75 Bobzien 1998, 330 ff. argues that normative freedom (ἐλευθερία) and the autonomy requisite for moral responsibility ('that which depends on us', τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν) are distinct notions that serve to articulate different philosophical problems.

76 Bobzien 1998, ch 7.

77 Plethon, *On Fate*, 70–74.

however, likewise implanted into us by the gods.⁷⁸ In short, Plethon argues for the external determination of reason rather than for its autonomy. ‘Being master’ traditionally refers to the fact that an activity originates from the agent herself and is completely under her control, as opposed to succumbing to *external* influences.⁷⁹ In contrast, Plethon limits ‘self-mastery’ to the intrapsychic relationship between reason and irrational desire.⁸⁰ This analysis is less than satisfactory in the present connection, as it fails to address the question of the threat posed by external determination to moral responsibility.⁸¹

The fact that Plethon allows for, or rather insists on, the external determination of the mind is all the more surprising as the major ancient philosophical schools vindicate human autonomy in some form. The Stoics solve the problem of moral responsibility by claiming that the external circumstances and the representations conveying them to the mind are merely auxiliary causes of assent, the act that launches the psychic process leading to action, which means that its main cause must be *internal* to the agent.⁸² It is vital to Stoic compatibilism that human action is autonomous, that is, not necessitated or induced by external factors. The Peripatetic Alexander of Aphrodisias, while he propounds a novel libertarian notion of ‘that which depends on us’, is presupposing all along, in the footsteps of Aristotle, that the principle of action is internal to human agents.⁸³

As for the Platonists, we saw above that they emphasize the independence of the human soul from external (particularly to physical) influences. Plato himself suggested that the soul, due to its self-moving nature, is the ultimate origin of motion both on a cosmic scale and in the individual organisms, and used this doctrine to establish moral responsibility. In a letter to Plethon, Bessarion takes up this thread, and, invoking Simplicius’ authority, urges that choice and volition (προαίρεσις) must be regarded as being in one’s own power (αὐτεξούσιος) and in no way necessitated, otherwise the self-moving quality (τὸ αὐτοκίνητον) of the soul and thereby its essence is abolished.⁸⁴ Bessarion’s objection to Plethon’s determinism is embedded in his more general critique of Plethon’s theory of causality. Bessarion draws attention to the (Neo)platonist doctrine of self-constitution. According to this theory, the dependence of intelligible entities on higher causes is not to be understood in terms

78 Plethon, *On Fate*, 72.

79 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1113b32, *id.*, *Eudemian Ethics* 1223a5; [Aristotle], *Magna Moralia* 1207a19–25; Epictetus, *Diss.* I.11.37; IV.12.7; Plotinus *Ennead* VI.8.13, 10; 15, 9; Porphyry, *Quaest. Hom. ad Odysseiam*, I.5.46; Simplicius, *Commentary on Epictetus’ Enchiridion* 64, 16; 67, 29.

80 “Men are masters of themselves not in the sense that they are ruled by absolutely no one, neither by other beings nor by the gods themselves, but in the sense that they have within themselves their sole ruling principle, namely their intelligence (τὸ φρονεῖν), and their other elements are ruled by it.” Plethon, *On Fate* 72, translation by Woodhouse.

81 Plethon dispenses with the problem of divine justice by arguing that punishment coming from the gods is divine assistance aimed at correction rather than retaliation (*On fate*, 76–78). This is based on Plato’s penology set out in the *Gorgias* and in the *Laws*, but it is hardly adequate as a solution to the difficulty at stake, as it evades the problem of personal responsibility. If divine punishment benefits the wrongdoer, the question as to whether he deserves it becomes less pressing.

82 Chrysippus’ argument for compatibilism invoking the distinction of causes is better preserved in the Latin sources than it is in the Greek ones (Cicero, *De Fato* 40.2–43, Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 7.2). See, however, Plutarch, *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* 1055f–1056a and 1057a–b, with Bobzien 1998, 271–274.

83 Alexander, *On Fate* ch. 15, 185, 12–22, cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1110b15–17; 1111a22–24; 1113b17–21.

84 Bessarion, *Ep.* 18, Mohler III.457, 23–30. Bessarion’s short remark recapitulates a long argument in Simplicius’ *Commentary on Epictetus’ Enchiridion* (8, 37–14, 24 Dübner, see particularly 13, 49–14, 2). For self-motion as the essence of the soul, see Plato’s *Phaedrus* 245e–246a and *Laws* 895e–896a.

of deterministic one-way causation since souls and intellects qualify as self-constituting entities (αὐθυπόστατα), that is, they cooperate with their principles in bringing about their own nature.⁸⁵ Self-constitution tells against Plethon's doctrine of fate (in particular, against the thesis of the external determination of the soul), even if Bessarion does not state this in so many words.⁸⁶ Plethon replies to this objection that self-motion and self-constitution must be comprehended in a restricted sense.⁸⁷ He argues that so-called self-movers can be analyzed into a part which moves and another part which is moved. In the case of the soul, which as a whole qualifies as a self-mover, the impulse, the will, and the emotions "are moved by our thinking part (τὸ φρονοῦν) and they are ruled by it, whereas it [the thinking part] itself is moved from the outside."⁸⁸ The thinking part owes its motion to the external circumstances or to God. Plethon borrows the strategy, invoking a distinction within the alleged self-movers, from Aristotle's anti-Platonic analysis of the origin of motion,⁸⁹ and additionally applies the same strategy to self-constitution. In his view, self-constitution likewise involves a part which brings about the other parts, and the former depends on God for its being. He interprets external causation in relation to allegedly self-moving and self-constitutive entities in deterministic terms, that is, he assumes that the external cause *necessitates* its effects.⁹⁰

We can conclude that the thesis according to which the soul is externally determined is Plethon's considered view. In this point, he goes against the consensus of mainstream ancient philosophical traditions, including Plato and his followers.

7. The legacy of ancient philosophy and the construction of a new pagan Platonism

One might wonder what Plethon's motives were for departing from the Platonic tradition concerning causation and human autonomy, and adopting instead an extreme determinist, or rather necessitarian, position which leaves little room for autonomous human action. It is, of course, completely natural to assume that a philosopher coming up with a provocative theory is simply elaborating an intuition the truth of which he is firmly convinced of. Furthermore, it has been suggested that Plethon's theory of fate is motivated, at least partly, by a theology of history which makes the political success of a community dependent on their faith in divine predestination. Islamic fatalism could have served as a model for such a theory.⁹¹ In addition

85 Bessarion, *Ep.* 18, Mohler III, 455, 6–456, 22. Bessarion sees a parallel between self-constitution and self-motion, both of which can be used to demonstrate the immortality and indestructibility of intelligible substances.

86 Note that Bessarion introduces the theory of self-constitution as a qualification of the principle of causality (*Ep.* 18, Mohler III, 455, 6–10), on which Plethon's theory of fate rests.

87 Plethon discusses self-motion at length in his reply to Bessarion's first *quaestio* concerning self-constitution (*Ep.* 19, Mohler III, 459, 13–460, 5, esp. 459, 23 ff.). In his reply to Bessarion's fourth *quaestio* concerning fate (*ibid.*, 461, 81–463, 19), he restates his argument against self-motion (see esp. *ibid.*, 461, 35–462, 3).

88 Plethon, *Ep.* 19, Mohler III, 462, 10–11, reading ἐξῶθεν αὐτὸ κινούμενον instead of Mohler's ἐξῶθεν αὐτοκινούμενον.

89 Aristotle, *Physics* VII.1; VIII.4–6; *De motu animalium* 1–4.

90 The object of volition (βουλητόν) and beliefs (δόγματα), which are implanted into the soul from the outside, are said to cause human action in a necessary manner (σὺν ἀνάγκῃ), *Ep.* 19, Mohler III, 461, 32–35 and 462, 30f. This is entailed by Plethon's second causal principle ('the cause produces its effects in a necessary and determinate fashion', see section 4 above), unless causal responsibility is distributed among more than one cause, possibly belonging to various types. Plethon does not seem, however, to be interested in making such qualifications.

91 Siniosoglou 2011, 222 f.

to these factors, another motive seems particularly relevant, namely, Plethon's anti-Christianism.

Human autonomy was a central concern in Christian thought from the time of the apologetes onwards. Divine omnipotence, goodness and justice can only be preserved by demonstrating that the responsibility for evil lies with man and other rational creatures rather than with their Creator. Christian writers engaging in polemics against Gnostic and astrological determinism borrowed their arguments from pagan Platonic and Aristotelian philosophers who attacked the Stoic theory of fate. In spite of their heated debates in other areas, pagan Platonists and Christians of late antiquity found themselves on the same side in the dispute on fate and human autonomy. In fact, Origen's account of human freedom, which has become very influential in subsequent Christian thought, is based on Stoic and Platonic conceptions of autonomy.⁹² John of Damascus, who sums up the patristic tradition in the 7-8th centuries, takes over the late Neoplatonic strategy to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human freedom.⁹³

The view of the causal structure of the world and of human action which emerges from Plethon's theory of fate is the negative of the image of the world and man which had come to be generally accepted among orthodox Christians in Patristic times. Plethon interprets fate in terms of an all-embracing necessitating power, he plays out divine foreknowledge against contingency and human freedom, and champions the external determination of the soul instead of autonomy. In all these issues, he is opposing crucial Christian tenets. It is plausible to suppose that Plethon abandoned mainstream Platonism concerning fate and human autonomy because of its agreement with the standard Christian view. When he decided to break with Christian doctrine and to work out a theological and philosophical alternative, he turned to the Stoics for inspiration, and advanced a causal theory resembling the Stoics' doctrine of fate as portrayed by their Platonic and Peripatetic opponents. It is not the case, however, that Plethon somehow came under the Stoics' spell and simply adopted their doctrine of fate and autonomy. When it comes to the all-important issue of human autonomy, he also parts company with the Stoics. It might be suspected that his motive for doing so is, once again, the desire to set up a position radically opposed to Christianity. In short, the main doctrinal features of Plethon's theory of fate and human freedom can be understood in terms of an anti-Christian agenda.⁹⁴

A doctrinal comparison reveals that Plethon breaks with mainstream Platonism in the central issues of fate and human autonomy. Can we continue calling him a Platonist? I believe that this question should be answered in the affirmative, notwithstanding Plethon's departure from the Platonic tradition concerning the problems I have scrutinized in this paper. Plethon's thought is in many ways indebted to Plato and the ancient Platonists both in doctrine and in the form of speculation. His philosophy is permeated by Platonic elements such as the distinction between the sensible and intelligible reality, hierarchical ontology, the integration

92 Origen, *On principles* III.1. For an analysis, see Frede 2011, 102–124. Frede's main thesis is that the notion of a free will emerged in imperial Stoicism, and it was taken over by Platonism and Christianity through which it found almost universal acceptance. It should be remarked, however, that Christian thinkers of late antiquity, while they were indebted to the Stoics on the conceptual level, combatted their determinism. For the context of Origen's account in earlier Christian thought, see Bugár 2009.

93 Demetracopoulos 2012 has shown in detail that John's account of divine knowledge goes back to Ammonius' and Stephanus' commentaries on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*.

94 For an argument for Plethon's paganism, with an overview of the scholarly debate on whether Plethon's paganism should be taken at face value, see Siniossoglou 2011, 148–160. Hladký 2014 argues for the possibility that Plethon's *Laws* is a literary experiment rather than a pagan confession. —
The analysis of Plethon's motives to abandon Christianity lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

of pagan mythology into the metaphysical scheme, political utopianism and the conception of the tradition of ancient wisdom, to name but a few examples. Moreover, as I have mentioned above, he actually sides with Plato against Aristotle in *De differentiis*. Finally, when Bessarion invokes Plato and ancient Platonists in his objections, Plethon makes an attempt to create a Platonic pedigree for his doctrines.⁹⁵

Plethon's thought cannot be regarded, however, as a direct continuation of ancient Neoplatonism.⁹⁶ In this respect, his reaction to Bessarion's criticisms is particularly instructive. While Bessarion appeals to the 'confraternity' (θίασος) of Platonists,⁹⁷ Plethon prefaces his reply with a *diaphonia* argument in relation to the Platonic tradition.⁹⁸ By emphasizing the disagreements among Platonists, he immunizes himself against the charge of deviation from Platonic orthodoxy. Furthermore, Plethon dismisses Plato's myth of Er, adduced by Bessarion against determinism, as a narrative that cannot be taken as an exact statement (δι' ἀκριβείας λεγόμενα).⁹⁹ This contravenes the exegetical norms of ancient Neoplatonists who, from Iamblichus onward, attempted to account for every detail of Plato's dialogues in their own terms. We should also recall that Plethon does not shrink from the drastic step of rewriting Plato's text when he has doctrinal qualms with it.¹⁰⁰ Through these methods, he manages to free himself from the doctrinal constraints, which Plato's texts or their traditional Platonic interpretations might place on him, while still claiming the authority of that tradition. It has been observed that Plethon alternates between the plural first and the third persons when talking about the Platonists, and at one point even explicitly distances himself from Plato's view.¹⁰¹ I take it that these formulations are not to be explained merely in terms of tactical considerations on Plethon's part. They instead reflect the fact that Plethon maintains a greater distance from Plato and the Platonic traditions than the ancient Platonists usually do. The case of his theory of fate reveals that he is capable of almost completely detaching himself from traditional Platonic commitments.

Plethon treats the ancient philosophical tradition as a whole in a similar spirit. In the preface to his great work, the *Laws*, he promises "a theology according to Zoroaster and Plato", "an ethics according to the same sages, and also according to the Stoics" and "a physics according to Aristotle, for the most part".¹⁰² Plethon acknowledges his reliance on a complex philosophical heritage, but accords pride of place to the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition from Pythagoras to Iamblichus. He emphasizes, quite in the vein of fundamentalist Platonic ideology,¹⁰³ that the ancient sages and eminent philosophers (mostly Platonists) are in

95 For Plethon's exegetical arguments for the Platonic character of his doctrine of fate, see his *Ep.* 19, Mohler III, 462, 21–39 and *Ep.* 21, *ibid.*, 466, 8–31.

96 I differ here from both Karamanolis 2002 and Siniosoglou 2011 (for their respective approaches, see section 1 above). Unlike Karamanolis, I believe that Plethon's claims to be an orthodox Platonist cannot be taken at face value. Similarly, Siniosoglou's suggestion of the survival of ancient Platonism through Byzantine times does not help to explain Plethon's doctrine of fate and autonomy, as he manifestly breaks with the standard ancient Platonic (and, at some points, even with the Stoic) doctrines. It is not easy to find direct precursors to his deterministic understanding of fate in Byzantine thought (cf. Beck 1937, 198–206). Psellus, a prominent Byzantine Platonist, restricts fate to the physical world and insists on contingency and human autonomy (Beck 1937, 90–92; Demetracopoulos 200, 307 f. with note 18).

97 Bessarion, *Ep.* 18, Mohler III, 455, 11.

98 Plethon, *Ep.* 19, Mohler III, 458, 21–459–12.

99 Plethon, *Ep.* 19, Mohler III, 462, 33–34.

100 Pagani 2009.

101 Woodhouse 1986, 216, referring to *De differentiis* chs. 12, 23, 37 and 42 (his numbering).

102 Plethon, *Laws*, 2–4.

103 See section 1 above and Karamanolis 2002.

agreement on the most important issues.¹⁰⁴ There is, however, another important facet to his self-presentation. In the *Laws*, he sets out from a *diaphonia* argument (I.1), and, having listed “the best guides to truth”, indicates that he reserves for himself the right of adjudicating the debated issues in accordance with the views of those ancient authorities “who thought most correctly on each occasion”, using “reason, the most efficient and most divine of our discriminatory faculties”.¹⁰⁵ In this way, he creates a space for free thought, while claiming to be the heir of ancient wisdom.

As Plethon’s theory of fate indicates, his actual philosophical practice squares well with these programmatic statements. The doctrinal features of this theory cannot be explained in terms of Platonic or Stoic *influences* – a causal model of explanation does not seem to be adequate here. Ficino, who relies basically on the same ancient texts, constructs a Christian Platonism. I have suggested that Plethon’s theory of fate reflects an anti-Christian agenda. It is not the case, however, that he simply revives the pagan Platonism of late antiquity. This can be seen from the fact that ancient Neoplatonists and Christians do not clash over the issue of fate and human autonomy, whereas Plethon radically rejects their shared views. An examination of Plethon’s theory of fate leads to the conclusion that he reconstitutes pagan Platonism in a daring and sovereign spirit, freely making use of his ancient Platonic and Stoic sources.¹⁰⁶

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104 Plethon, *Laws* I.2, 32.

105 Plethon, *Laws*, I.2, 34.

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This study was written with support from the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA K-104574) and from the János Bolyai Research Scholarship. I am grateful to István Bugár and George Karamanolis for their comments on an earlier version of my paper.

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